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THIS PIECE IS A COVERUP

By

Clayton James Webber

B. A., University of Central Oklahoma, Edmond, Oklahoma, 2006

Thesis

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Approved by:

Dr. David A. Strobel, Dean  
Graduate School

Stephen Amidon  
English, Creative Writing

Deirdre McNamer *title*  
English, Creative Writing

Robert Baker  
English, Literature

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## Chapter 1

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You know people look at me, they point at my arms, my neck, and they say, Did that hurt? Did that hurt? and I tell them, with a good artist – with a woman like yourself – the ones on the arm aren't worse than dragging a sewing needle across your skin. It was like that when I got my first one. Tattooing was still illegal in Oklahoma then, but on a Saturday morning, the summer before my senior year of high school, I went to this dingy house on the south side, sat in this guy's kitchen with his two daughters running around in their faerie wings, carrying magic princess wands and whatever, and this girl I was dating sat in the corner saying Oh my God. It's so permanent. But this guy was a real pro, like yourself, he made his own rigs, even some of his own needles, that kind of shit, and he started working on me.

I'm nervous as shit, right? I mean, I'm seventeen-years-old, I'm in this guys kitchen and the gun goes off all bzzz! like a fucking lawnmower. He's right up in my left ear with the thing, and I remember the tattoo gun was chrome-plated with a trucking girl on the side, and I looked at it, but it just got me thinking about mud flaps and semis, and I didn't want that shit plowing into my arm either, so I didn't feel much better. Anyway, the gun's going off, and now I think it sounds more like a jackhammer from four blocks away, and he buzzes the thing in his little ink cup, and I'm about ready to say, You know, man, I think I'm cool. How about we try this another time? I'll still pay you. And he goes, You ready? and all I can get out is Yeah, one of those twelve-year-old boy yeahs,

with my voice all cracking, and he chuckles, and my girl's all, Oh shit, it's so permanent, and he starts work on the outline. I'm like, That's it. And he goes, No, I just started.

I said, But this is what it feels like to get a tattoo?

He said yeah, and I was like, cool.

I thought I was a tough motherfucker, you know? Like I'd worked myself up, cause tattoos are supposed to hurt, but here I was being all hard about it, like I'll get another one right now. Why don't you just sleeve me up as long as I'm sitting here. Luckily, I only had enough for one tat and tip, cause when he got around to the underside of my arm I wasn't so tough anymore.

Of course, on the other side of things, you've got your scratchers, dumb shits who order away for a gun and the cheapest ink they can find, and they hammer at your skin like they're drilling for oil. That's the kind of shit we get inside. That first piece aside, that's the kind of work I've been used to.

I remember when I was eight, my family took a vacation to San Diego, to Old Town. There's this cemetery out near there where my granddad's buried. We took a half-day and went up to his grave, and my dad had me copy his gravestone with a piece of paper and crayon from his pocket. You know, you just lay the paper out on top of the tombstone and rub the crayon sideways, and there you go, a copy in bright green. Frederick Norris Ring. Born October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1919. Died April 18<sup>th</sup>, 1953. My parents didn't talk about him much, but I memorized that piece of paper, where the cracks in the granite were, the typeface, how the O in Norris didn't stick out much on the stone, but came through clear as anything on my copy. Thing is, I bet you could do that to my body. Take six feet of butcher paper, lay me down, and rub me over with a crayon, and

you'd get all those prison tats, all that shitty work I've had done. You could read the cracks, the scars. Just take my arm here; you'd get a perfect picture of the barbed wire, the Celtic knot, the swastika.

This one on my arm's what I was hoping you could take care of first. Nobody gets the clover on my neck, you know. They all think it's luck of the Irish crap, nothing to do with nazis or any of that. But the swastika. . .I'm tired of not being able to wear short-sleeves. So maybe we could start there.

\*\*\*

I got locked up a few weeks after the Murrah bombing. Oddly enough, I slept through it, the bombing I mean. I was smoking a lot of dope in those days. All kinds of shit. I even did up a few times, but heroin scared the shit out of me, so mostly I just smoked a lot, took the occasional bump. I'm not saying this cause I'm proud of it, but at the time, yeah, I was. We took our drugs seriously. Being able to smoke and drink and snort all night was something to be proud of. It meant you weren't a punk, a lightweight. We had no wars to fight, no real struggles in our life, so something had to set us apart, and it was our music and drugs that did it.

It probably didn't help matters any that I was a waiter at the time. When you work until two in the morning and you're not ready to go to sleep, you get in a lot of partying. I wasn't in school, and Cheever's got me more money than I knew what to do with. Seriously, between my cheap-ass apartment, my car that had been paid off since I was high school, and the fact that I ate most of my meals on the clock, I wasn't paying

dick for anything. Then, we, Brian and I, and yeah, later Carrie, had our supplemental income. We sold Family shit, dope we shouldn't have even had, and we sold it to yuppies who would pay top dollar and not ever say shit to nobody. It was a great set-up: they'd come have dinner, tip out twenty-five, thirty percent, go to the bathroom and pick up a quarter for another bill-twenty. At first Brian and I were just trying to smoke for free, but before long I was making more off the dope than the restaurant, and I was walking home with between one-hundred-fifty, to two-hundred-and-fifty dollars a night at Cheever's.

It was the renaissance. No school, work I enjoyed with people I liked. Parties all night, slept all day. I was able to spend money on Electribes, samplers, four track, and a good Macintosh to store all my beats. And I hate to say this, but selling went really well with my image. You know, dark and brooding and all that shit. Somebody wounded trying to make it on his own. How the hell was I wounded? How the hell was I to know?

In fact, the first hiccup didn't come on until the bombing, April 19<sup>th</sup>. Forty-two years and a day after my grandfather died, not that it matters, really. Not that it even crossed my mind really until now, and I kept that piece of paper in my wallet all through school and then some. But it was a trinket, really. I'd never known the guy, but him being gone was still a loss, or at least I thought so. Truth is, he may have been even more fucked up than my dad, so really I was better off.

By selling Family pot we really had to stay under the radar. So we kept with our regulars, and Brian made the occasional trip to St. Louis or Kansas City. On the night before the bombing he'd gotten back from one of those trips, where he'd traded a pound

of grass for ecstasy from some kid at St. Louis University who was in their chemistry program. That kid had a bright future ahead of him; that's for sure.

Shit, listen to me. I sound like a douche bag. I'm sorry. It's not even that I'm all proud of dealing, it's just what we did, and yeah, I am kind of proud that I got good dope. You know, nobody wants to sell dirt weed, say yeah, I got some stems and seeds for you. My point is, we did a lot of drugs. That doesn't even sound right, though, like I'm some kind of frat boy. But there it is. And on the eighteenth, they were available. Brian scored that ecstasy, I had a bag of something new that I'd traded with this DJ kid, and let me remind you this was 1995, drugs were clean, or relatively anyway.

And Carrie had gotten word on the beats. The thing you need to know is that if you were into acid jazz, trip-hop, electronica, or techno there wasn't shit for you in Oklahoma City. It was a desert, fucking grasslands. Besides Star Seven Discotheque, no club would touch it, and even then we had to share that venue with the punks and industrial kids. So we had our field parties, get our homegrown boys Pirate Audio to do their thing, dose up, and we'd dance all night.

Brian showed up with all that X, and to be honest, I was really wanting to just go home, make a night of it with Carrie, do the whole spiritual sex thing, but Brian wanted to unload all of it out west of the city, and he hated going to those things alone. He got Carrie on her side with the It's such a good party drug, and all that, and I was like, Yeah, but it's so great to screw on, but in the end she told me we'd bring the truck and crawl in the back when we started to peak. Have our own soundtrack, she said. So that won out, and we danced, and we listened, and we got all philosophical, and we made love, and it was all beautiful and I cried, and she stroked my chest, and I said being in you is like you



being in me, and we woke up in the afternoon, when the rain started, and got back to town to hear about the bombing, fifteen messages on my machine.

I'd missed it.

\*\*\*

The memorial was real nice. Neither Sam or Max had a coffin. Mom said it would be a lie to bury a box full of teddy bears and diaries, or shit like that. Dad said the funeral director only brought it up to make a few greasy bucks, and mom shot back that this wasn't a time to be angry and how could he be thinking of money at a time like this, and she was glad she divorced him because he was such a piece of shit and so on. But all that happened a whole week before the memorial. It was hard to find a time at my mom's church.

But we were able to hold the service before the first of May, and I was glad for that. It didn't seem right to start a new month with something so big and pressing unfinished. I had to dig a blazer out of an old closet at my mom's for the service, and I wore one of my ties from the restaurant. Everything was nice and classy, good fresh flowers, but nothing too big, a simple In Remembrance program with the embossed praying hands on the front cover, and everybody came out. Carrie was there or course and so was Brian, even though I hadn't seen much of either of them since Sam had died. Ever since we pulled into the city and I heard, I'd been keeping to myself, and staying with mom, who was pretty shook up about it, obviously.

The thing is, I was kind of pissed. Even with Carrie sitting right next to me in the pew I was kind of pissed, and I was thinking that I missed it; I missed my sister's death. I missed Max's death. I know what vaporized means, and that's about as gone as you can get.

My last chance to say goodbye would have been that rumble, that earthquake shake that everybody felt, wondered about, worried at; and I missed it all because Brian came back from St. Louis with this killer ecstasy and I stayed up all night with Carrie saying How beautiful, how beautiful, and all that druggie shit, with our pupils like big black spinning records. And Carrie and I worshipped each other, just like something you do when you're out of your head, and Sam and Max were dead. And I missed it.

And I'm sitting there, during the memorial service, thinking, I'm sorry, Sam. I should have grown up. I should have known to be conscious at least. I mean, fifteen messages. Boy did I miss it. Her daughter and grandson are dead, and she's got to play phone-tag, calling her druggie son over and over in tears. I really need you to call, she said. I was pissed.

And then I got stoned.

\*\*\*

I started playing a lot of chess while I was inside. You know, people only beat you if you let them. That's what I learned from chess. Skewers, pins, all that shit doesn't translate real well to, you know, your whole day-to-day existence. All that *Art of War* bullshit is just that: tactics. Whatever. But one thing applies: people only beat you when you let

them. Of course, this has its limits too. I could be as mentally prepared as Kasparov, convince myself that three guys couldn't touch me, but when that sucker-punch lands all that concentration doesn't help much, and down I go. But it does apply. I just got caught up in a *zwischenzug*, an in-between move, a few losing steps before that preparation could come into play. They're forced moves, and those are rarely good ones.

And it sure applied with Brian and Carrie. I'm not saying I got sucked into a bad crowd; they were better than what I deserved, but all that mess about me blaming them for missing Sam and Max's death, that was letting it beat me. What would I have done if I was awake? Not dick. I wouldn't have known when I felt the bombing that I was feeling a bombing. I would've thought, That was weird, and then where would I be?

\*\*\*

The night of my sister's funeral, I went back to my apartment and threw shit around. I don't mean really, like throwing a fit trashing the place, but everything I owned was half-broken and second-hand. You know the kind, saggy couch pillows flipped from spills so many times there are maps of wine and beer like the old love stains on my mattress, or the yellow film on my Tupperware. What I mean to say is, I cleaned. Kind of. What I really mean is, I took stuff that was stacked in a pile by the coffee table, and I spread it out, decided I couldn't part with whatever issue of *Mixmag* I'd ordered specially from England and restack them in my opium den next to my *Electribe*. But all that wasn't making me feel much better, so I put on some beats, dusted with a t-shirt out of my

hamper, picked up a book and flipped through the pages without reading anything, and put it back. I opened the fridge, looked at my leftovers, put them back. I looked at the dishes in my sink and thought, Not tonight.

So, I called Carrie and asked her to come over.

I called Brian and did the same.

Sure thing, Carrie said. I'll be right out.

Brian said no problem.

I put some new music on, something milder and thought Autechre probably wasn't helping my mood any, all spacey and creepy and shit. I got out a Miles LP, something from the electric days, but before "Bitches Brew" and all that craziness that jumps into your head and rattles things around. I put on Water Babies, which is a little easier to get lost in. I took the record thing real seriously, nursing the black vinyl out of its sleeve and running my burgundy record cleaner once over the black grooves. I adjusted the skate, and the base, and finished off the bowl I'd been nursing for the past few hours, but the ritual and the music weren't helping much, not to mention the bud, and it seemed that no matter what direction I faced it felt like all I was doing was staring at the wall, so I flipped through some Escher books, probably not even looking at them, until Carrie showed.

I was still upstairs moping when she let herself in called up that she brought beer on her way up the stairs. I should explain about my place. It was a two-story garage apartment, with a kitchen, laundry room, and bathroom downstairs. Upstairs, I had a windowless living room, a bedroom, and a den. The dryer didn't have a vent, so the place turned to a swamp whenever I did laundry, and the living room hovered in the mid

nineties through most of the summer, as my window units were in the bedroom and the kitchen. While I'm on that kitchen, I don't think it was just bare drywall, because I remember trying to clean up some spaghetti sauce that farted itself on the wall, and it just kind of smeared all chalky and gross. But it did have the Opium Den. My landlord, who lived in the adjoining house gave the den the immoderate nomenclature of Bedroom in his advertisement, but the room would barely hold a bed and dresser, and if it did contain both, the door wouldn't shut. So the Opium Den was born. I hit up thrift stores, and Carrie went to craft shops, even dug some old junk out of her ex-hippie mom's attic, and pretty soon we had the best place to get stoned in the greater metropolitan area. It was comfy, muted, padded. Fabric hung from the ceiling, cutting the single harsh florescent bulb to an amber moon, and we had pillows and mats and blankets layered on the floor for comfort. Under the one small window we kept a Buddha, his hands outstretched for offerings, where we kept our roaches. I also kept my music equipment in there, as I found the place rather conducive to the creative process. Ok, really, the place wasn't that fancy; the pillows were mismatched and flat, and that room especially had the constant stench of old bongwater from the floor being a little too uneven.

Anyway, I was sitting down with a book in my lap when Carrie got up the stairs, with two beers in her hands. She sat down, we hugged, we drank.

It was a nice service, she said.

Yeah, I said, because she was right. It was a nice service. All very civilized, even with my folks, until dinner. But I didn't call you over to talk about the memorial, I said.

I know why you wanted me here.

I didn't call you over here to make me feel better either, I said.

What a strange thing to say, she said and put her hand on the back of my neck, squeezing the base of my skull. Brian coming? she asked.

Yeah.

Of course he is.

We sat and drank. I sipped my beer too tight-lipped and the head fuzzed over on my hand.

Damn bottles, I said. You'd think I could get the hang of them.

You're still young.

You big beautiful bitch, I said.

I'm not that big.

You're a big bitch, I said. And then she was quiet again, and I was breakable again. Either that, or she didn't have anything snappy to say back, and she flipped through the book on my lap, one hand still on my neck. I felt a stirring, with the book moving around, its spine in my crotch, the first stirring I'd felt since the last Wednesday, and I grabbed her elbow and kissed her.

Carrie yielded. At least, that's what it felt like. Not passionate, not like that Tuesday, all love and lust and druggie comey oneness, but unenthusiastic agreement. What do you think about Chinese tonight? Chinese is fine. That kind of thing. My other hand went to her side, and I nibbled her lower lip.

I sat back, and we drank. She put her hand on my knee.

I like this album, she said.

I agreed and wondered where Brian might be. He had some business to take care of before he came over.

You want to get high? she said.

\*\*\*

I met Carrie at Star Seven Discotheque, a club that borders the slums of eastern Oklahoma City and the poor, patriotic suburb of Midwest City, which was almost single-handedly employed by the Air Force base. This is how I look at things now. You know, after reading books, cause what else was I going to do? But when I was eighteen, the occasional electronic show at Star Seven was the thing I really looked forward to. All the weird shit was ok there, all the shit even the punk clubs wouldn't put up with went down at Star Seven. When Raves hit the States, and finally Oklahoma, they hit Star Seven first. And nobody knew what to think. What, with all the lights and the dancing and the drugs. Even the smell of the place was different. I went there one night to see, I don't even fucking remember who, and I probably don't because the show wasn't that good, but there was this chick with dyed black hair cut to her chin in front and the nape of her neck in back, and she had these bright green eyes, except how would I know that; right – I was in a dusty, smokey club with the cheesy ass light show gimmick and all that.

Look, I don't lie about the important stuff, ok. Carrie really did have some incredible eyes, bright green, like Toxic Avenger green, but you know, nice looking, and a little more icy than that, kind of bright and cool all at the same time, without any of those specks of gold, or whatever, that a lot of green-eyed girls have. So when I think of Carrie, and of meeting her, yeah, I think of her eyes, even though I wouldn't have been able to see them from across the club. I'm trying to get it right, and I may as well have.

So let's say there was a cop in that night, checking IDs, which they do a lot in those kind of clubs, and I saw them then. No, that's no good either because of what happened later, with the drinks and all. Ok, enough of making stuff up. I'm no good at it. Only the truth, as much of it as I can remember, so don't blame me when there's a big glaring dark spot. I'm done with trying to make this consistent.

\*\*\*

So, I says to Brian, because I know he was there, I gotta go talk to that girl.

And he goes, The one not wearing much of anything at all?

And I say, Yeah.

And I hemmed and hawed and say, Yeah, I gotta to talk to her, and Brian lit two cigarettes and gave me one, and the DJ spun some lame beat, and I say, You know, I really got to get an Electribe, and Brian's all, Yeah, you gotta get an Electribe, you gotta talk to this girl, you gotta get a new job so you can pay your rent. And he was right, and I told him so, and he was like, so go and talk to her then, but when I looked up she was leaving the dance floor, and Shit, I blew that, and I suddenly had all the courage I would have needed to go talk to her because she was gone. You know how that works, right? All I would have had to say was, Hi, I'm Bin-E. What's your name? Or, And you are? Or something. Either one didn't seem so bad, but that's cause I couldn't say anything, even though earlier, while she was dancing and I was smoking it sounded like the lamest thing ever. To tell the truth, it does now too. But regardless, you just can't stop a girl on



her way out of a club and say, Hey, I've been watching you all night, and now that you're about to leave I had to come and grab you by the arm.

That shit's creepy. Ask any girl you know. I mean, you're a beautiful woman.

What would you say to that crap?

But I lucked out. Instead of leaving, she went to the back, at the merch stand, and I went over there before I lost my nerve again, and said, You should buy that tank top.

She said Yeah? looking at the red Star Seven logo I was pointing at. Why's that? she asked.

I said, You'll want to remember where we met.

And she laughed in my face. I mean, I can't blame her, but still it made me feel a little silly. Acting that way was not normal for me, but I had recently figured out that if I played it too cool, too platonic and chummy, did the nice guy thing, I always got stuck in the friend zone. That, and I hadn't gone completely dickless again after the thinking she was going to leave thing. I didn't miss a beat, though, even with her laugh, which was really more like one of those coughs that smacks you in the face and I said, You've got a nice smile.

She said, This doesn't usually work out for you any better than this usually, does it? Maybe you should get some new material.

Not that I expect you to believe me, I said. But I don't usually go up to strange girls and, you know, pitch woo.

And then she laughed again. Pitch woo, indeed.

But hey, good for me, and I ended up buying her the tank top, and she said I reminded her of her grandma or some old Ella Fitzgerald record, and could she buy me a beer, and I felt my lips come together in a nice thin little line and said, No, I'm alright.

What? she asked, you don't drink?

I drink.

So you're not twenty-one.

I'm eighty at heart, I said.

So she bought the beers and brought me over to her friend's table, and I tried not to let loose with any more out of favor colloquialisms.

That was boss.

You're the cat's meow.

This groove is bitchin.

Shit like that.

Carrie didn't give me her number, though. Later, she said she didn't know what to think of me. We exchanged email addresses instead, talked about how crazy that was, this new internet thing. And Oh, you don't have AOL. Good boy.

And Star Seven closed up with their customary, Ok, it's ten to two; get the fuck out. And we were still drinking beers, and I didn't worry about Brian because he made friends anywhere and Carrie's friends were all coupled up. Stumbling out of the club, I caught sight of him by his big old Suburban, my arm around Carrie's shoulder and he tipped his cigarette at me. We, Carrie and I, did the whole It was nice to meet you, and I'll be in touch, and all that.

\*\*\*

That went well, Brian said in the car.

Yeah it did. You know she's twenty-one? And her friends are fucking crazy. I mean most of them are college kids talking about psych shit, but they're all out of their skulls nuts.

You get her number? he asked.

Email.

Pussy.

Fuck you then. Pass that blunt.

We cruised I-44 in the upper eighties, downtown approaching like dawn, the city orange around us in the night.

She probably didn't give you her number because she's going home to her old man and doesn't want you fucking that up.

Eat a dick.

\*\*\*

Brian had a good nose for pot. Finding it, buying it. One time we took a trip to St. Louis together and smoked our whole stash on the eight hour car ride up. Within a half hour of being on the loop he'd met somebody and were in the green again. He also had a knack

for showing up just as a blunt got rolled, or a bowl was loaded, which is what happened the night of Max and Sam's memorial.

I had pulled my old Alf TV tray from underneath the couch and was clipping a bud from my Frankoma coffee urn that I kept on the coffee table. We didn't smoke anything with seeds, so all I had to do was separate green from stem and aerate it slightly. I tried to keep my hands off it, as I'd get all the crystals stuck to my fingers. Before Carrie and I had time to put flame to glass we heard Brian's Suburban belching up the gravel drive. Figures. It always happened and for awhile it was a popular topic of conversation, but really, it happened so often we couldn't talk about it every time, and we sure weren't going to talk about it that night.

Brian let himself in too but not because he had keys. Unless I was going to bed or remembered to or was leaving the house, I never locked the door, only the security gate, and Brian would reach in and around the corner, leading into the kitchen, and snatch a set of keys I kept hooked to the wall in the event of fire. I pictured myself burnt to a crisp with my arm sticking out the gate, reaching for air and cool grass, and I didn't like that thought. Brian reaching in for my keys worried Carrie, and she was convinced that anybody casing the joint, as it were, would have the easy way in. I thought that if somebody was going to break in, they were probably going to break in, and that nobody who robbed houses in this neighborhood bothered to case them, but logic doesn't work against worry too well.

Brian came up and did the How you been doing? thing. He looked concerned, all big brown eyes and whatever. I did the You know, thing, and he said yeah he did. Then we smoked.

This music's depressing, he said.

You've got to be kidding me, Carrie said. This is perfect.

Perfect for making yourself miserable, he said.

I said I wasn't miserable, and that it was only this track. After this, I said, it's a great album.

I don't know what you're talking about, Carrie said.

It's the trumpet. It's got this sigh to it, like it's the only instrument that can hear everything else. It's fast and it's in tune, but it's also lost and overwhelmed, I said.

Yeah, Brian agreed, taking a hit. It's like that.

You're a fucking retard, Carrie said, not without a waggish tone her voice, and she stood to get herself another beer, hopped down the stairs at a skip.

Brian asked me what the plan was, if I wanted to stay in or what. I didn't know, but I didn't think I wanted to stay in. It was nice having people with me, but that alone didn't make me any less bottled up. At some point I was going to have to sleep. We should go, I said. And I finished the bowl. We stood and Carrie came up the stairs with a beer for herself and Brian.

We going somewhere? she asked.

Not yet, I said. I was starting to feel cloudy. Brian sat back down and drank from the beer Carrie gave him. I would've liked a beer too, I said.

You still have half of yours.

I don't want to stay in all night, I said.

She said, Ok. I wasn't asking you to.

Will you get me a beer? I asked.

You're the one standing up, she reminded me. I sat down.

Come on, be my beer wench. The look.

Oh, so you'll be Brian's beer wench.

Brian popped me a light one on the side of my head. Come on, man, he said.

Don't say that. Now she won't bring me any more beers either.

I ain't either one of you asshole's wenches. You can both go fuck yourselves.

I loved that dirty mouth. I might even have said so. I know I had before. So we had another beer and put a few more in my backpack with the spray paint and got in Brian's car, and it hit me that I was getting stoned and drunk and going to the torch and this was the night of my sister's memorial, and she wasn't ever going to tell me how stupid that was again or how getting high was fun when she was in high school, and I'd never be able to teach Max how to use a tip or roll a blunt, or any of that good uncle stuff.

You ok? Carrie asked, touching my knee.

I nodded.

You don't look it.

Am I not pretty enough, I said.

You're really not that funny, she said.

I know.

Brian looked at me in the driver's mirror. Are we going or are we staying?

Either's cool.

We're going, I said.

You sure?

Yeah, fuck, what's with you people. I didn't die, I said.

Nice, Carrie said. Real nice.

We went anyway, a short quiet car ride. Brian more a cabbie than a friend, Carrie more a parent than a girlfriend. So I stared out the window, at the Paseo, now in the throes of its renovation. Prices were still low but rising. There was even talk of an Arts Festival, where the junkies used to score. The houses still looked run down, but there was new paint on some, lots were being staked, new houses would be built. There were still drugs and the occasional hooker made it this far west, but the place was up and coming, far away from what it was only five or six years ago.

We were the new dealers, Brian and I, moving a few ounces of grass a week, some pills, ecstasy, and we kept ourselves off the street. No violence in our trade, and to be honest, I didn't worry much cause I was white. Brian was a different story with his big rumbling Suburban and dark almost blue skin, but one thing he didn't look like was a crack head, so nobody paid him too much mind either.

From the Paseo we eased into Nichols Hills on Shartel, still stony silent except for the clinks of the spray paint against the beer bottles at my feet. The houses got bigger, the lawns manicured and we saw the occasional private security truck making its tour this way or that, protecting the neighborhood from the more southernly elements.

You pissed at me? I said to Carrie.

No. I'm not pissed.

So we can have some fun then? She nodded. Brian said that was what he needed, and I opened up the backpack, then a beer. Brian lit a cigarette and we turned onto the busier roads, crossed the Expressway, to the cemetery and then the torch.

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We called it the torch naturally enough because there was a big fucking fire coming out the top. The easiest way to find it was to take Classen north until you saw an oil well with an eternal flame coming out the top of the lattice work. The well itself hadn't run for years, but they never bothered to cap it off, so whoever just thought they'd make a landmark out the thing; I don't know maybe it was a testament to the industry that made our land grand, or something, but it was a hell of a place to get stoned. Or maybe it was just too little to be worth selling and too much to avoid a lawsuit if you didn't do something with it. Reminds me of that AA shit I heard when I was inside: one is too many and a thousand is never enough.

The torch itself sat back from the road, and it overlooked a drainage ditch that led to the old Belle Isle power plant and wound under Classen and through the cemetery across the street. It dead-ended into a group of pen oaks just below the torch, in a jumble of rocks and chunks of concrete and poison ivy, refrigerators and shopping carts. Whatever gets dumped or lost or carried away by the water ended up down there, along with those giant oak trees and rabbits and once I even saw a fox out there.

In the sprawl of Oklahoma City the torch was the wild place, a liberated zone as cops didn't go down there and it wasn't worth owning. It was waste and wild, and we'd all grown up in the suburbs, all figured we'd live in them forever, cause where else would we go?, so it was good to get away for a few hours, get stoned in a spot with a view.

Brian drove past the torch, and parked in a dumpy little neighborhood between nicer blocks and we walked back to the firelight. I grabbed the backpack, Carrie grabbed



the drum, and Brian pulled his skateboard out the back, finished off the beer we'd been splitting. We reached the guard rail which was really the only hint that there was something besides flat on this street, and we stepped over it and started down the descent of the wall. The only problem was getting to the place, really. As the ditch opened up into the trees and grass and ivy, a cobblestone wall framed the drainage ditch. It was about a foot, foot and a half wide, and the drop was about seventy-five feet to the smooth concrete floor. Carrie went first, heel to toe down the thirty or so yards to the end, where she jumped the last ten feet of the drop. I followed. Brian walked behind me with his skateboard over his shoulder like he was in stocks. It wasn't that hard to do unless you were fucked up, but I can't remember a time when I did it sober.

I jumped after Carrie and we walked over the uneven and cracked pavement back toward the shelter of the road, where the concrete got smooth again and the graffiti was lit up by the torch. First thing was to check the new tags, as that was our fighting, our skirmishes. Our great and patriotic struggle. Isn't that nice? We didn't fight to keep afloat financially, to find love or a safe place to sleep. We didn't fight for territory or drugs, just squares to scribble on. We spray painted buildings, walls, the sides of trucks. We left fingerprints and signatures on our city, covered those who went before. Transients with full bellies and wallets. It was a game, a lifestyle, protracted childhood. No need to grow up too fast. That's what our parents told us. One of the few things we listened to, took to heart, even after they stopped saying it and dug into the Why don't you meet a nice girl? shit and Have you thought about college? What do you want to do with your life? my folks started saying when I got serious about tagging. We were artists, scumbags, and graffiti was beautiful for reasons we understood and made up, reasons we

gave it. It was public, democratic. It was ripe, colorful, short-lived. It was our Buddhist sand mosaics. Hours of work covered the next day or week by gray paint or another tag. Competition.

My piece, of course, had been covered. Rich and solid and big, it was the obvious target down there, a portrait of a girl nonetheless. So, some bastard put a cock in her face and drew in a big hairy twat, all in good fun. Over my signature, a filing cabinet with a big E in the center, they'd used a two-tone stencil: Corn Puddin.

Get those damn blunt rolling fingers to work, I said.

Cracker better watch out, or I'll run off with your white woman, he said.

That's disgusting, Carrie said about the picture.

A bunch of heathens, I said. Have they no respect for my art, my craft, my place in this world as a constructor of beauty? Oh, the pain of the artiste. The pain of God to see his creation wrecked.

Stick this in your mouth, Brian said, and I lit up.

Always a good way to shut him up, Carrie said.

I laid out the paint cans and tips. I opened a beer, passed it on. Opened another. We smoked and I stared, and we talked. Brian skated, and I went over the mural with a mat blue coat. Carrie walked off, began to drum. I rolled a number, waited for the paint to dry. When the paint was only a little tacky to the touch, I started on the border.

I said, I don't know what to paint.

What about something for them? Brian said, skating wide slow circles around Carrie.

So someone can put a big cock in Sam's ear? She asked.

He doesn't have to do a portrait of them, Brian said.

What then? I said.

I don't know, man. Something with the buildings, clouds and rebar. I don't know.

That's fucking sick, Carrie said.

You think they did it? I asked.

Nichols and McVeigh and John Doe number two? Carrie asked. I nodded.

I don't know, she said.

You remember Samarinajead? Brian said. Well, we heard it from the garage, you know, this big rumble and the windows shook, in like this high-pitched hum. First thing, he says, 'It's the terrorists.' And Paul's all like 'No, it's probably an oilfield accident, and he turns on the news and Samarinajead is all 'See, I told you. It's terrorists.'

So you think it's fundamentalists? I said.

No. I mean, I don't know, he said.

So McVeigh's what, a cover? Carrie asked.

It just seems to me like they pull a guy out of jail – I mean he's already locked up for God's sakes – and they say 'Here, this is the guy.' It just seems fishy.

I stared at my big blue background, a swath of pinks and oranges as a border.

Took another puff.

Come on, Carrie said. If they thought it was terrorists there's no way they'd point the finger on some white boys. I mean you should know how easy it is for them to look at one segment of the population for someone to blame.

Oh yeah, Brian said. I keep forgetting all us black folks know everything about the plight of the oppressed. You know what, fuck those guys. I have nothing in common with the towel heads. Samarinajeed fucking knows; his dad went through some shit when he was living in Pakistan. And did you know the FBI didn't show up that day. They were just like, gone.

That's not true, Carrie said.

Bullshit. Something was going down, and we haven't heard the full story.

I picked up a can and my fine line tip and started on some broken windows, small and in the corner. All I could see were broken windows.

You're writing off this race thing way too easily, Carrie said. You know it was absolutely horrifying for some people to hear that it was a white, blond-headed redneck who did it. So, if they weren't interested in finding out who did this, they sure wouldn't blame it on the fucking NRA poster boy.

You think they care about people's feelings? Brian said. They just want the pressure off so they can –

Stop it, I said. Both of you.

They looked at me.

You're making me feel like my dad was right tonight, and that's some bullshit. I don't care about who did it.

You don't mean that, Brian said. I mean, I love Sam and Max, but they weren't my blood. Nobody I grew up with died in that explosion, but I lost a lot, and I want to know what happened, and you're telling me you don't care.

Come on man, I said. Just drop it.

Alright, he said and I turned back to the wall, changed tips, covered what I'd started.

I'm sorry, Carrie said.

It's ok, baby.

Yeah, Brian said. You got nothing to apologize for. I'm the one shooting my mouth off.

Carrie rapped her fingers on the drum head, with a hollow muted tang. I stared at my blue concrete canvas. Brian picked at his shoes. Oh fuck this, I said and left my cans where they stood and scrambled up the side embankment to a lip between the road and ditch, an in-between place in our in-between place. Brian and Carrie followed, and we let our legs dangle. I rolled another number, feeling kind of heavy and slow.

## Chapter 2

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When I woke up I felt like I really had smoked poison. My body ached in that hard drug kind of way, like after smoking a lot of opium or when you snort just a little too much in one night, and you know that you've done something naughty to yourself. Not sexy naughty. Junkie naughty. And Carrie and I had pushed each other to opposite corners of the bed but were tangled at the legs, and the phone was going off something fierce, and I said Fuck all and actually fell out of bed on my shoulder, waking Carrie in the middle of a dream sentence, which came out all in mumbles and a pissed off moan.

Shut that fucker up, she said.

The phone, yeah, I'm going. When I picked it up, Evan was talking a mile a minute, like he'd been mixing his shit again, and he said, I've got a big bastard fuck of some news, and I'm coming over.

I'm kind of busy, I said.

Evan said, Fuck that, we need to work. I've got something going down and I know you're off today and what about Brian do you know if Brian's working today we need to get him over here it is a weekday but if he isn't working today we could really use him.

What time is it? I said.

Shit it's after noon man what the fuck is your problem.

It's still too early for this, I said. Come over in an hour.

Make sure Brian's there I really need to talk to him and I need both of you ready to go we're going to Texas man Dallas fucking Texas we can even get some six point beer and I'll buy you boys some good raunchy porno too but just make sure he's ready.

When I got off the phone, I asked Carrie if she wanted coffee, put some sunglasses on and went downstairs. Working man's trip my ass. That DMT shit was not to be fucked with. You sleeping? I called up when I got the pot brewing and poured myself a glass of water. Carrie said she was trying to, and I told her she should try and get up, and didn't she have to work today.

Not until one, she said.

It's nearly twelve-thirty, I said.

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When Evan showed up, forty-five minutes later, fifteen minutes early, I was finally dressed, but I had taken to staring at the wall again. At least I wasn't so much depressed as uncomfortable. I'd curled myself up on the couch, my feet under my ass, and when Evan knocked on my door, what I was thinking was, this is how a teenage girl sits, one of those gothy ones, on her period. And then I went and opened the door to Evan scratching at the back of his neck.

Where's Bri Bri? First words out of his mouth.

You look like you've calmed down a bit, I said, and offered him a beer.

I'm driving we're going I don't need no beer.

Scratch that, I said.

Evan told me I was talking nonsense, but we sat down at the table in my kitchen. He was wearing his leather jacket, even though it was already in the eighties outside and even warmer in. His hair kept falling in his face as he was talking, and he used big arm gestures that came around from the back of his head to swing the dirty blond locks back. Thing was, I didn't really like working with Evan, and neither did Brian, but we needed him.

We are making some money today, he said. That didn't make me feel much better, as we were always making money, and I was pretty happy with my crummy apartment. How much you know, he asked, about what Brian does up in St. Louis?

He makes your uncle money, I said.

No, no, not that part. The contacts. You know what he gets in trade?

I don't, I lied. What's this all about?

He said, I gotta meet some guy in Dallas this afternoon. I know his sister. Evan always knew somebody's sister, and half the time he was playing something to her on the guitar. In other words, you didn't want to invite him to your party, cause it would turn into an impromptu concert, where he sang originals about ex-girlfriends and his sense of loss, weepy shit. I don't know this guy that well, he said, and I need you guys to come with you know for emotional support.

How much? I asked.

How we split everything Bin-E this is our sale I'm not trying to put one over on you guys.

No, no, how much does he want?



Two, to start off with, he said. Not a big thing, really, I thought until Evan said two pounds.

You can get that from your uncle? I said.

It's in the trunk right now, he said leading me with his head, the hair following.

This was tricky. I mean, technically what we sold wasn't ours to sell. It was the Family's, and mostly we didn't worry, cause we weren't in the Family, so it was Evan's uncle was taking all the risk, and we kept to the regulars, and yeah, Brian would go out of state and trade a few ounces for some pills or some mushrooms, but mostly I just sold quarters to my rich bar customers, and sometimes to a kid at a party. So, Dallas, yeah that was Texas, and Texas is pretty close to a whole other country, but Dallas is really only a few hours away, and fuck man, two pounds is a lot of fucking dope.

One other thing, there's a reason why people don't get killed in pot deals. Everybody dime bags it. People may not kill each other over green, but they will kill each other over money. And Evan didn't know this guy. But there he was, giving me this So, what do you think, look; This, we're gonna make a shit-ton of money, look. I asked Evan who these guys were, but all he could really tell me was that this guy's sister was real cute, though a little too virtuous for his taste.

So, you think if you hook up her brother, she'll bag you? I asked.

I think we'll make a lot of money, he said.

Sure, I said. Let's do it.

Of course we waited for another half hour, but as soon as I loaded a bowl, Brian pulled in the drive. Should have done that earlier, Evan said, scratching some more at his neck.

One thing, I said. If we go, you lay off the shit, ok? I don't want you all freaked out and us get pulled over or whatever.

Cool man cool. I haven't taken anything all day, he said..

So when are you coming down? I asked.

Man, I'll be fine, he said.

Brian wasn't too keen on the idea, but he came along, when I did the whole, Come on, man. I'm going, thing with my arm around his shoulder. It's not that I meant to be such a chick about it, but I wasn't that fucking stupid. If anybody was going to fuck it up it'd be Evan, and if anybody could fix it it'd be Brian, and I'm not sure if I'd be much good for anything, and really, I'd never seen a deal this big go down before, and that itself sounded like a reason to me. Brian would have rather not known. Kudos to him, that's probably a smarter way of thinking. All things being equal, he should have lived longer.

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We slipped into Evan's maroon Camry, Brian riding in the back, and Evan had to work a few drive reverse numbers before he could get around Brian's bitch of a suburban, but pretty soon after that, we were on I-35 cutting south. We drove south for almost an hour before leaving city, but when we finally got passed the strip malls and chain restaurants, the plains just blew up all flat and wide and nothing, and I thought, I wonder if that's what dying's like, if it's all crazy and crass and dirty, and then just nothing, just open space. Mrs. Bean, my seventh grade science teacher told us that energy wasn't

created or destroyed, that it was transferred. That means the explosion was all pent up in that Rider Truck, in the fertilizer and the nitrates, and that it was transferred into the fire that vaporized my sister. I wonder what it sounded like, if she had time to hear it.

But it also means, that her energy didn't die, that it could be transferred, and if there was something Sam, like at the root of Sam, and Max too, if there was something that was just Max, you know, like quintessential Max, then maybe that got shifted over, maybe that energy made it to something else, and maybe that feels good. Maybe that's what they mean when they talk about heaven. I don't know what I'm talking about, but that's what was going through my head when the city broke and we were on our way to the biggest deal of anyone I'd ever heard.

From my pocket I pulled a medicine bottle and from my wallet, I got a pack of Club papers and began to roll a sheet around between my fingers.

What are you doing? Evan asked.

I straightened the paper out, tore a tiny strip along the length of it, then folded the paper in half so it made a canoe.

Hey, we are doing some serious fucking shit here, Evan said. You are not toking up when we got a tit-fuck-load of grass in the trunk.

I opened the medicine bottle and tapped out some pre-cut green. It glistened, like the glare on the dashboard, and Brian spoke up too. Evan's right, man. Cool it with that shit.

Relax, I said, licking the torn edge of the paper. I need to relax, I said. I wrapped it up real good, licked with just the right amount of wet, and lit up, filling the cab with sweet dank smoke.

Evan looked at me like he wanted to punch me in the throat and said, You're acting like a real asshole, man. And then Brian told him to cool it, and I passed the joint. He hit it, once, twice, three times, sucking that fresh jay into a oily, dirty brown roach, and he tossed it out the window. Evan's right, he said. Don't act like that. And then he smiled.

Fucking prick. Not that I was pissed really. Maybe I should have been, but at least Brian wasn't scolding. Evan kept his eyes straight ahead of him for awhile after that, and I was happy to sit quietly with the head change. You know sometimes I think I could use it now. Here we are, you drilling on my arm, and I just want to talk, and I know you're like a barber or a bartender or some shit, and you listen to people like me all day, but sometimes I don't want to be like everybody else telling their shit, even if my shit's a little different from your everyday fare. Sometimes, I think it'd be good if I could just shut up and let you do your work, and I bet you'd like that too. Not like all the time – I'm sure you'd get bored if I never talked, like when you're doing the fill-ins – but I bet when you're doing some fine-line, some black and grey, you wish I'd shut up every now and then. And I think I'd like to, you know. Just shut up, let you work. But I keep talking; I don't have the head for silence any more.

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You've been to Dallas, right, for the tattoo conventions? Then I don't have to tell you how fucking massive it is, how the highways and interstates vein their way through suburb and stripmall, over and under other highways. Dallas, Fort Worth, Plano,

Richardson. All the way down. I had a cousin, lived in Plano. She was into that speedy shit, crank or whatever. But this was after I knew her, when I was inside. I got a letter from mom, saying she died. Apparently, she went out with some friends to Shady Shores, near Denton, and drowned. I didn't hear any more than that. But back in ninety-five, when we drove through Plano, she must have been seventeen, and I remember thinking we should go pick her up after the deal, buy her a tape or something, but I ended up not saying anything, since I thought Evan might try and sing to her, and I didn't want anything to do with that.

Where we were going was in north Dallas, and it was hot and windy, just like home. Dallas is a lot like Oklahoma City, except bigger, and people are bigger assholes. So Evan gets off the highway, reading off this little yellow sticky note he thumbs on the dash, next to the speedometer, takes a few more turns, and we end up on this residential street. That's it, he says, pointing to a brick and shingle number looks like it was built in the mid-sixties and been taken care of pretty well since. But he keeps driving and doubles back to a gas station, where he pulls in and makes a phone call. We'll be right there, he says, and then this dumb shit reaches under his seat and pulls out a handgun, one of those big nineteen-eleven fuckers and chambers a round.

So Brian and I start in with the We didn't sign up for this shit, talk, and Evan's all, I don't know these guys is all. Just insurance. Well fuck that, you know? If it was 'I don't know them' like that, I said, we wouldn't have come.

This is just in case, he says.

So Brian says, You planning on ripping these guys off? which hadn't even crossed my mind, cause I'm so delicate and otherwordly, I guess.

And Evan's all, Chill homey, and does a big swoosh back with his hair again, and drops that Toyota in gear; we're on our way, like it or not. Reminded me of high school, the first time I smoked dope, when this upperclassmen who gave me rides home took me to a friend's house, saying they'd always wanted a cherry. That got me real nervous. Only thing they wanted to go was get me high, but still, I was all locked up in this kid's bedroom and had to take all these shotguns through a Yankees cap before he'd take me home. Only this time, the guy I'm driving with has a gun, and whoever's at the house is looking to score two pounds of grass. Well fuck me.

Evan wheels us back to the old brick job and tucks the gun down the front of his pants, arching his back to get it settled, and the boy looked like he was sporting wood. I told him so, and he put it down the back of his pants, shook his leather jacket out to cover it. He looked over at me, jumped his eyebrows twice and opened the door.

We seriously going to let him do this? Brian asked. I was starting to think that maybe have my energy transferred wouldn't be so great after all. I mean, maybe it hurts instead of feeling good, you know.

We're fucking here. I don't know what else we're going to do, I said.

You guys pussing out on me, Evan said from outside the car. Come on, let's go make us some money.

Brian gave me one of those Your call looks, and I stepped out. He followed. Evan got his backpack out of the trunk, and we walked up the steps; Evan knocked. I was pretty surprised when a Vietnamese guy answered, all big smiles and calling us boss, like Come on in, boss. Hey, boss, you want a drink? that kind of shit.

The house itself was pretty boring, all suburban sprawl shit. Stucco archway, fireplace with pictures of his kids, a pool in the back yard. We went through the living room into the den, where he had one of those coffee tables where the glass top rests on a bed of antlers. And I thought I'd seen it all. There was another guy in there too, another Vietnamese guy named Ken. He was older, maybe mid-thirties, but he still had all his hair and some delicate crows feet that only showed when he smiled. I don't know if I ever got the name of the guy who opened the door. He was younger, like us, and he wore all black, like he was going to the club.

I wanted to say to Evan, I didn't know you was banging an Asian. Does your dick look like it's as thick as a coke can when she wraps her fingers around it? but I didn't think that'd be appropriate somehow.

Can we see what we're talking about? the older one said. Evan slung the backpack off his shoulders, unzipped the fucker, and pulled out four of those big canning jars, stuffed full of colas. The young guy took one and unscrewed it, then stuck his nose in the lip, nodded and passed it to the older one. Brian and I sat there, while the older one sniffed and looked, held the jar up to light of the window, like he was inspecting some fine wine. He pulled out a cola, and repeated the process, looking at crystals and buds, the big white hairs that mossed each flower.

You want to try some? I asked. Evan shot me a look like he didn't want me talking, but what the fuck, he asked me come down, didn't he?

I would indeed, the old one said.

I got my scissors and went to work on the base bud of a cola from the jar. I mean, I sure wasn't going to use my own stash, and why would I? Then they might not think

they were smoking what they were buying, and besides, this was their buy; they could spare the joint. When I'd amassed a small pile of clippings, I got out another Cabaret, redid the whole ritual, crumple, tear, roll, lick, smoke. While I was working I got into salesmen mode. Good high, but a lot of sativa in it, gives you a good head change, I said. I toasted the end with my lighter, rolled the joint in my fingers, until I had a good even ember all the way around. I puffed, blew on the end, gave it another puff with the lighter on the foot, and passed it to the old dude. It kind of grabs you, I warned, but it's a nice high.

Old dude hit it and passed it off to young dude and so forth around our new little circle of friends. Not bad, boss, he said. We smoked and sat and didn't say much of anything, though they asked what traffic was like, which was basically like talking about the weather. Is it still dry? Is it still ass-to-tits? My, what a nice breeze.

A few minutes later old dude said, It does kind of grab you, and we all laughed, like it was a great big joke, and we were all in on it. They brought some bad ass iced coffee around, and we dug into that, but pretty soon we didn't have much to say again, and I watched where the antlers were cut so that the table top would set level. I'm not much of a hunter, but they would've been a nice rack; I know that much.

The old guy, Ken, asked us how much we were talking here, for the two pounds. Evan said six thousand, which came to just under two-hundred bucks an ounce. To be honest, I thought that on a wholesalers market that was a little steep, but what the fuck, I'm the guy who sold nine gram quarters; my business sense wasn't too keen in those days.



The thing we'd like to know, Ken said, is did you grow this? The nameless young guy leaned, hands on his knees and Ken kept his eyes on Evan, the smile out of them. Not a hard look, but a long one. I've seen it a lot since that day; it's the poker look, a reading look. Evan gave one of those little cough laughs, then another, then nothing.

Now, why you want to go and get into that? Brian said.

I'm talking to your man here, Ken said.

Here's the thing, Brian said. We're not here to talk. You seem like nice guys, I appreciate the coffee, but we're here to make money. This is our profession, as I'm sure it is yours, if you got six grand to blow on green. So, what do you say?

When Ken gave a hard look, those crows feet were completely gone. His cheeks were smooth, caramel smooth, and those eyes cut. I think you should answer our question, he said.

That's when I jumped in. You looking to scalp us? I said. The young guy looked at me like he might laugh, and I thought, maybe just maybe Evan wouldn't go shooting at these guys and getting us all killed. I mean, I said, are you asking me and my boys to come work for you? I'm sorry, but we're fine doing our own thing. You interested, cool, but man it's not real cool to ask us down here if you're not serious about a buy.

I'm serious the old one said, eyes still on Evan. And here's something you've got to understand. Everything we get, we pull in from Canada. And what you have isn't Canadian marijuana, and I don't think this is a basement job either. So I need to know how this ended up on the open market.

We grew it, Evan said.

What kind of a lighting setup do you use, the young one broke in. Do you use substrate or are you growing hydroponically? Give it up, kids. Who are you working for.

And out came the iron. The young guy looked pissed, like he wanted to stomp on Evan's face, but then again, maybe that was me. The old guy, though, Ken was cool as he could be. His hands never got higher than the edges of his ears, but he just sat back, let Brian and I screw the lids back on the canning jars, load the backpack up with our shit, which I shouldered.

Where's our money? Evan said to Ken.

Evan, I said, cool it with that shit.

No, I want to see it, he said. I want to know they were ready to pay us.

Brian grabbed at Evan's left arm, tugged him through the living room and toward the front door. We don't need no money, he kept saying to Evan. Let's just get out. At the door, Evan pantsed the weapon again, and we ran toward the car, the jars thwacking against my back with each step, me wondering if I was going to get shot in the back, what it would be like to have pieces of glass and pot imbedded in my body. But we made it to the car, and Evan tore out of there in such a way that I thought we were getting pulled over for sure.

Well, what the fuck was that? Brian said. You brought us along for that, you little redneck asshole. Your uncle has got you chasing some dumb fucking deals. And two pounds? Those guys are right. This is so far beyond what he'd be doing for the Family that I don't even know why I've been buying it for this long. I'm done. You tell him,

you two can move whatever you want by yourselves, but I'm never going in a room like that again. Not for your dumb ass.

She said he was cool, Evan said, keeping his eyes on the road.

We may want to stash this shit in the trunk, when we get a chance, I said, but when Evan asked, Here? I said No. I hated having two pounds of grass stinking up the car, but I didn't really want to stop either. Those guys were fucking pissed, and I kept looking through Evan's rearview mirror, looking for those hard smiling eyes, like he'd just hang it head out the window or something, like some goddamn border collie.

You really serious? Evan said to Brian. You know, about being done with this.

Yeah.

Let me talk to him, I said to Evan. He's just pissed.

Bullshit, Brian said. But yeah, I am pissed. You should be too, Bin-E. He could have gotten us killed. Like for real killed.

I know about for real killed, I said.

Look, man, I know it hasn't been all that long, but you can't be playing that card forever. Alright. I'm your friend, and I'm telling you this cause I love you.

Lay off it, I said.

Fucking listen to me, dude. Don't blow this off, and don't act all jaded. It doesn't suit you. So, here's the deal. You need to –

I need, I said. I need?

We didn't say much else for the rest of the trip. We watched. We pictured getting shot, being run off the road. We worried. We didn't smoke. We drove, we got

gas, Evan crouched behind his door, pistol drawn. We got home, and I slept, content that Evan's girl only knew where he lived, and what would they want with me anyway?

Traffic was even worse on the way home. It took nearly an hour to get on I-35 again, no talking the whole way, though Evan was playing that one Nine Inch Nails tape over and over. When we got past Plano, the rush of what just happened started to slip past me, like it had happened to somebody else, or like there wasn't anything I could do about it anymore by thinking, so what the fuck, may as well, let my guard down. Not like keeping it up was doing any good, and my head started to sway. Brian sat in the back, picking at the back of my seat. Seriously, where did that come from? Like I'm milking my sister's death, I thought. Shit, she'd been gone what, a week and a half. That wasn't right. Still, I'd brought him along, down here to for Evan's wild west show with all that, I'm going; you can stay if you want, but I'm going. Of course he was going to come. Of course.

I yawned, one of those good slow ones that start in your lungs, build up your spine and block out your eyes. About half-way through I remembered to cover my mouth, being a gentlemen and following the rules of etiquette and whatnot, and Brian says, You know you look like you're shoving a dick in your mouth when you do that.

Asshole.

By the time we got back to the city, Brian and I were in our game. We still weren't letting Evan talk to us, but he's the big bad packing drug dealer, what more did he want?

Debbie Harry or Courtney Love? Brian asked.

Courtney Love, I said.

I heard she throws used tampons into the crowd at her concerts, Evan said.

Really? Brian said. Evan started nodding, but Brian went on with, Debbie's got those lips, dude. And have you seen pictures of her in that white dress. You've chosen poorly, he said like a Knight's Templar in some movie.

Alright, alright, Demi Moore or Nicole Kidman? I asked.

The game was pretty simple and pretty elastic, like stoner games should be. We did celebrities, girls we knew, bands, ugly talk show hosts – You rather bang Oprah or Ricki Lake? – and we anticipated each other's answers, guessing whether Sally Field or Angelica Houston was hotter for an old chick. We could mix and match: would you rather get a blowjob from Uma Thurman or get a whole setup from Korg? Brian asked. That depends on which Uma. We talking Mrs. Mia Wallace? Well, then fuck the Korg; I'll make beats on a coffee can.

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When Evan dropped us off at my apartment, he wanted to come in, said something about wanting to hole up for a little while, like he was hiding from the mob or some shit. She knows where I live, dude, he said. Looking back I feel kind of heartless about it, but I did not need to look at that goofy horse face for another eight hours, while he got up the nerve to go take a shit in his own bathroom. Go to your uncle's, I said. In my opinion, after all this, he owes you big.

But that's not all of it. Even after Evan left, I kept checking my downstairs window, took the key around the corner off its hook and slid it in my pockets. No way could've followed us that far, though. Not in that traffic; you couldn't hardly move. We

started making excuses to go downstairs, both of us. We drank beers faster than usual, rinsed off our plates after eating, even washed our hands. That was a novelty, let me tell you. The bad thing was that I was exhausted too. We put on a movie, nodded off, and pretty soon I'd come to, go downstairs, and see that everything looked the same as it always did. No Lexus sitting across the street with a lone lit cigarette inside or any of that gangster shit. We'd got in around six, and by ten I was going stir crazy again. And this time it was worse cause of how tired I was.

What do you think, man? I said.

About what?

Opium or hash?

Opium, he said. No contest. The hash around here sucks.

Good answer. Cause I happen to have a little opium left over, I said. I figured if anything was going to calm us down, set our heads right, that would be it. I said, What do you say? A little trip to the torch, a bowl or two, work on my mural?

A little ketamine and I'd say we're set, he said. And it just so happens. . .

Brian got a film canister and put a few buds in it, while I rifled through some drawers in my bedroom. When I found the opium, I brought it into the living room, folded a piece of spiral-bound notebook paper around it, and ground it with the side of a coffee cup we'd missed taking downstairs in our paranoid fit. When I could unfold the paper and see nothing but a fine red powder I poured the powder in the film canister, gave it few shakes like I was seasoning mashed potatoes, and we were off.

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I remember it was cloudy that night, and the city reflected off of them, and the moon shone through them, and the sky was yellow and dirty looking. We'd smoked a joint on the way over, just to get in the mood for tagging, and skittled down the walkway at breakneck speed, practically skipping. Down in that great bowl of a drainage ditch, the torch didn't seem as bright against that crazy piss-colored night sky. There was more than enough light to tag by, but usually it felt primal, cave painting by firelight, that kind of thing, but that night it was all too soft around us.

Alright, man, Brian said, Autechre or Square Pusher?

Autechre, man. Give me a hard one.

No way. Square Pusher's got the beats, he said. You got no sense of the thump. Too much white in you.

Square Pusher's just as white as I am, those limey bastards, I said.

They're white the way Elvis was white. Those two understand a beat. Your ass is white the way Perry Como is white. Otherwise, you're bass lines wouldn't sound so tired.

This was his way of cheering me up, I knew. Though he was right, my bass lines were kind of tired, a little too jungle for my taste. Not like with Carrie. She wanted to talk everything through. She wanted me to cry. And yeah, for awhile I'd wanted it to be just the two of us, Carrie and I, I mean, so I could curl up with my head in her lap and just let go. It had been bugging me, though, that I'd missed it, and when I brought out the glass, loaded a bowl of bud and opium, I decided I was going to try to talk about it with him; do the chick thing, no offense.

He let me take first hit, and I took the left half of the green and red, that incense taste mixing with the pot. Spice, I said in a big drone voice. Herbert's got it going on.

What the fuck you talking about? Brian said, taking his first hit.

It makes the empire go, I said.

Sci-fi nutjob, he said.

Hey, listen, though, I said. I've been meaning to talk to you about something. I've been kind of pissed at you.

Yeah? he said. Why's that?

It was your shit that caused me to sleep through the blast. I mean, I know it's not your fault, and shit you didn't know, and all that, but still, I feel like I missed it, and I missed it cause of what you gave me.

You're right, he said. It's not my fault, but it's cool if you want to punch me in the face. Do you want to hit me?

Nah, man, you can just give me some more shit, I said, meaning the ketamine, so we snorted some, painted in that crazy underwater world, laughed at way the other's voice sounded. You sound like a mer-man, Brian said. Mer-man the martian.

You sound like you're lost in a well, I said. Like you're lost in a well, and you've got cotton in your ears. I mean my ears.

You know, so we did that for like an hour, snorting and talking, and not doing a whole lot of painting. After awhile, we gave up on the whole idea of working on the mural, and we crawled back up to the lip, between the road and the ditch, and we smoked another bowl, and forgot about the that Ken guy from earlier, and how he called us boss before Evan pulled a gun on him, and what were we going to now that Brian wasn't



going to sling pot anymore, and what I was going to do about Carrie, cause man, I really wanted to see her, but at the same time I just didn't want to call. And instead of all that, we talked about what we were going to do, you know, when we had the time, and the torch got bulldozed or whatever. Maybe we were talking about what we going to do next week, but pretty much anything seemed like a body away, like something somebody else would do for us.

I was going to get my demo together, finally, send it off to either Warp Records or Ninja Tunes. If it was decent electronic music, and had come out in the past ten years, or so, Warp Records put it out, I said. Ninja Tunes don't have those kind of numbers, but still, they ain't nothing to scoff at, I said. Brian was a little more practical. He was tired of the garage, though in his way he liked it, the feel of fixing stuff, getting his hands in there. Certifications were his answer: LPN, CNA, CNA, all that medical shit. Then, he kind of got off on a tangent, talked about what a great brain surgeon he'd be, what steady hands he had. I'll give it to him, he was smart, smarter than me, but please, brain surgeon? I thought that train had sailed, but I wasn't going to say anything to him, you know, we were talking about other people, and maybe the Brian tomorrow could cut it.

And when I'm a fucking brain surgeon, he said, won't nobody get turned away. I'll work for Mercy or Deaconess or whatever, but only if they let me take on the pro bono stuff, you know, the working guys who can't get no help. And I'll be so good, I mean look at these hands, I'll be so good, they can't turn me away, the lives I'll be saving. Cause they're only after fucking money, and they don't care, but I'll make them that money, saving rich people's lives, fixing their cerebral shit.

Then Brian did his last line, standing up, getting really excited. And fuck those hospitals, and the insurance companies, and all those fucks. They'll beg me to work for them, and I'll tell them about my dad, how when he smashed his hand up, wouldn't nobody help him, nobody would touch him, cause he didn't have shit. But did that make him less than them? Less deserving?

And he was pacing a little and the ketamine must have worn off, cause he was moving all fast, and hitting his hand. And then he fell. Like tipped over. Like a fucking Lego man, swiveling at the heel. I climbed down to him, all screaming and shit. I mean, doing the whole thing, Talk to me Brian! Say something! And when I got down there, his legs had bent up some, and he was shaking a little, but that was it.

I kept on screaming. I screamed all the way up the walk, to the road, running down it, calling for help. I missed, I screamed. I missed it. And then with the cops, the same deal, It's all my fault; I missed it. Brian's dead, and it's all my fault. That kind of thing.

Clayton Webber

### Chapter 3

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I know, I come in here with my head shaved, and you think what, he's backsliding, am I right? You're thinking, Oh Great, now he's going to want a portrait of Adolph on his stomach, or maybe you could just put the ovens on my back, huh? No, sorry to disappoint – no more white power crap for me, thank you. Not in this life. But yeah, the head's shaved, and I want to show you something. You say that, that clover back behind my ear. I want that off today. Sure, nobody can see it when my hair's long, but it's been itching, and you've done such a nice job on my arms, my legs, that I figure it's time to get the unmentionables. I don't want to tell you about the clover, ok? It's just more of the same anyway. And what to cover it with? How about the Japanese symbol for baldness; you know what that looks like?

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You've got a small one today, so let's keep it short. I don't want to talk about my time inside, but that's jumping things a little bit anyway, isn't it? A lot of bit, really. No such thing as a speedy trial anymore. But that's even jumping things. See, when I got picked up, I don't know that the cops knew what to think of me. There I was all babbling and

drooling and screaming, and leading them down the torch, down to Brian, all the while screaming It's all my fault. I missed it again. And then they went through my pockets and found the pipe, and the opium, and the pot, and the ketamine, although I'm pretty sure they thought that was coke at first. And I get pulled in, cause what else are they going to do?

I'm sure you've never been arrested, but it's a pretty strange situation to find yourself in. Much more so when you've got more important things on your mind. I didn't have much time to think about Brian though, and they pulled me off in one car, while another was waiting for an ambulance, so I didn't even see him moved. Last I saw Brian, he was lying at the bottom of that drainage ditch, with just a little bit of blood. Just a bit, coming out his nose. I'd seen worse, like that time he pushed Joey Wonderley against the lockers and Joey popped him in the mouth. That looked bad, worse than it was. Funny how it works the way too.

But the whole ride in the car, I'm thinking about Brian, and thinking about Carrie, and his mom, and then it hits me that when this car stops, I won't be able to go home and tell them. It hits me, that they're going to want me to stick around for a little while, insist on it even. And then I'm like, Ben, you need to focus here. There is bigger shit going on than you right now. You know, that's the supposedly sober and responsible part of my brain, but the other part's going like a siren in a game show, and it's saying What the fuck is wrong with people that they think it's right to limit where another person goes. You're not out to hurt anybody – it's always a sign of danger when you refer to yourself as you – so why do they have to put you in a box. That's the symptom of a sick society that does that to people. And me, with those two voices, I don't know what to think.

I don't know what to think so bad, that I just go through it, the fingerprints, the pictures, everything. They put me in a cell, with a phone in the back, bring me the yellow pages, and I spend half an hour looking through the plexiglass door at the guys in uniform avoiding my gaze. And then I really get high and mighty. If they thought they were in the right, wouldn't they at least look me in the face? If I'm such a fuck up, what's that going to cost them, but not once would they look my way. It didn't even occur to me that I was scenery, but even so, doesn't that prove my point?

I didn't want to call anybody. What was the point? Eventually, I got so bored I started reading the phone book. Started looking up all my friends by their last name. How many Monroes were there? How many Kings? After counting how many whosits and all that, I figured I should probably call Carrie, let her know what a deadbeat I was, and some short guy with chops opens the door, and asks if I've gotten a hold of anyone. When I say No, he cuffs me again and leads me through a few halls. We get to a little room with a table in the middle. Nothing like what they have TV. Much smaller, no mirror, and when a guy did come to Take My Statement, or whatever, he didn't look at all like Brad Pitt.

I say, I don't understand why I'm here. I just want to go home.

Homely detective says, If we figure out what happened you can go home.

Turns out his name was Squire, and he had just happened to talk to my arresting officer and got this wild story. This is all from my lawyer, when he was telling me I could beat this, so I don't know how true it is, for what that's worth. Squire runs through the whole bit. He tells me when I was arrested I kept saying It's all my fault, and he thinks he knows what that means. He says Did you push him? Of course not, I said. I

said, I love Brian. I did too. He and I did a lot of stupid stuff together and wasted a lot of time, but still.

Squire says, I don't doubt that you cared for him, but you did push him, and we need you to tell us what happened.

He fell, I said. I can't tell you anything else. I want to go home.

He said, You already have. You've already confessed, but we need to get it in writing. If you cooperate here, we can make sure that the judge knows, and that goes a long way. If you don't, you're going to be here a very long time, and I have three officers who heard you say it was all your fault. How do you think that looks, Benjamin? Tell me that you pushed him, and you can go home.

I just want to go home, I said.

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Of course Carrie never believed any of it. She was the one waiting for me when I got out the next day, at, what, must have been nearly noon. When she got the call, she went over to my place, got some money for a bondsman out of my stash, drove a few stray ounces some scales, my tray and all that over to her place. What a girl! She wasn't even pissed.

What happened? she asked. Like I wanted to talk about it. Still, how could she not ask?

He fell, I said. Brian fell.

When we got to my place, I called his parents. Told them how sorry I was. When I got a lawyer, a few days later, he was really distraught by that move of mine, but

Brian's parents were great; they knew I wouldn't do anything like what they said I did. Still, when they were on the stand, saying what a good friend I always was to their boy, and the prosecutor got up and asked them what happened the day after their son's death, they had to say I called and apologized. That I said I was sorry. And I hated them for that. I hated them for not lying. What a little thing it would be, to say that I called to tell them my side of things, that I called to see if there was anything that I could do. That was close enough to the truth, wasn't it? Wasn't that what I was doing by saying I'm so sorry? It was close enough to the truth, and who could blame them for protecting me, their son's best friend?

The worst, though, was calling my mom. Funny, with Brian's folks, it had to be done, so I did it, you know, not No Problem or anything, but necessary enough for me to just pick up the phone and do it. With my mom, fuck, why did she need to know? It wouldn't do her any good. She was cried out. Nothing could shock her anymore. Nothing could make her tremble. The thing is, I've always kind of thought that she wished I'd been arrested a few weeks before, like she knew it was inevitable, but why couldn't I do it before her daughter and grandson were killed? Those deaths would wash it all away, all the gossip and the talk about what kind of mother she was. Nobody sends macaroni and cheese when your son gets on lock-down. Nobody says a word, looking at you.

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A fucking year this thing stretched out. My mom found this lawyer, a guy named Horowitz, who looked like everybody's hippie uncle, his hair in a ponytail, thinning on top. He didn't seem too interested in what had happened. Ok, so he asked me once to run through it with him, and I did, like I did just now with you, but he didn't ask again. After that it was all What did you say here? and Did they do this there? He told me the confession was bullshit, and they should be able to get that dropped easy. But it didn't, and he kept on about it, but after awhile, he was like, There's nothing more I can do, and that was that.

Carrie was fucking great, though, at my side at the funeral, our second practically in as many weeks. But it wasn't like with Sam, you know with the awkwardness and her trying to read me. The night of his funeral we went back to my mom's, and I was in my old room again, the posters taken down and a fresh coat of paint on the closet but still the same desk that I'd scratched a picture of a phoenix into the top of. I was sitting in that desk, running my finger along its feathers, and Carrie goes I'm right here. I'm right here; what's wrong with you. And I said, I know you are. I just don't know. . .And what don't you know? she asked, and when I said I don't know again, that was fucking it, and she split, popping the door against its stop, and it gave out one of those resonant buzzes, like the core was shaking and she crossed the hall to the bathroom.

I sat there, feeling those feathers, knowing I was going to have to go in there and apologize, because what else, chase her away next? I didn't need that. And I finally got together what I was going to say, got it straight in my head, one of those I can't even explain what is going on with me right now, but if you'll stick it out, I'll try. I'll try and let you in, numbers; but when I went into the bathroom, she was sitting on the toilet, one



hand on the sink, and I walked up to her, and with her free hand she undid my belt and my pants, and started working on me. At first, I wanted to pull back, say something about not needing any pity fuck and what was she thinking, but really, I think she was doing it for her, and so I started doing it for me, feeling her lips between my teeth and the porcelain against my bare thighs, and for the first time since Sam died, I got some sleep.

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We went through all sorts of court shit. I had to learn how to start dressing. Two fucking funerals I'd been too, and I didn't know it was brown you couldn't wear with black. I thought it was blue – turns out that's true to if it's *navy*. I started getting haircuts once a month, worked on my lost child look, the stories I was going to tell. Caught up in a world of drugs. I didn't hurt him – we were always definite on that point – but we were so messed up all the time, the both of us, really it would be another tragedy if two lives were ruined here. I clipped my fingernails; I shaved. I hated it.

My dad tried to show an interest early on, but like I said this went on for a year, and he stopped coming before the trial even got going. At some point, Horowitz stopped talking about beating it and started talking about what we could live with. We. Us. Our situation. And the whole time I'm flashing back to that junkie in the back of the cop car, thinking, how smug do you have to be to pick this as your job, to make somebody's else's life your means of buying a car or dinner out?

I tried explaining it to Carrie, after some continuance or another, about how all this mess was designed to figure out what to do with me, like somebody else had that

right. I know, baby, she said. You didn't do anything, and we'll make them see that. We'll make them see you couldn't have done that. She didn't get it. Hell, Horowitz wouldn't get it either, or he wouldn't care, probably give me some social contract spiel, and my mom, well, she came to every court date, made me dinner every night, wouldn't even let me try to cook her a meal, but she stopped talking to me, at least about anything that didn't have to do with Brian or the case.

How was church, mom, I'd ask.

Fine. Any news from Mr. Horowitz, she'd say.

You guys still working on *The Celestine Prophecy*? I'd ask.

He really should call you, she'd say. He said he'd have heard something by now.

It went like that.

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In the end, I pled guilty to manslaughter, got five years, which Horowitz assured me would end up being three by the time this whole thing was said and done. Why shouldn't I trust him, I thought, his whole life is in averages like this. His self worth is in inverse proportion to the number of years his clients serve. We didn't even get to present our case. The prosecution did their thing, or most of it, but we cut a deal partway through. I was sitting there, up at the front with Horowitz, and the jury was called in and told that they wouldn't be needed, but we were indebted to them for their time and all that jazz. I picked this one lady out, about my mom's age, a horse-faced woman who held her jacket at its hem tightly around her stomach. I wanted to know, are you buying this? She

looked back at me, relieved she wouldn't have to make a decision, and I thought that was the sanest response anyone could have.

I looked at her hard; what do you think, lady? Would you have fought for me? Do you have a son my age, no what it's like to be left holding somebody else's hat when the lights come on? I wanted to ask her, did I make the right choice. Her eyebrows were thick, but well-shaped, defined. She had big brown eyes, bug eyes almost, but pretty, alive. I couldn't tell a thing.

Clayton Webber

## Chapter 4

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When I talk about being put away I'm careful to distinguish between the experience of being booked and that of actually living in prison. This seems obvious, I know, but you wouldn't believe how many times in just the past two years I've gotten into those lonely man-to-man heart-to-hearts at the bar, and I'm spilling my story, and some guy in a windbreaker and dungarees goes, Yeah, I was locked up once. DUI, Failure to Appear, Public Intox, whatever, and the gist of it is, their heart goes out to me. They've been there. How surreal, they say. I drink, because that Huh, I'm really here, wears off pretty damn quickly. That concrete becomes concrete after about a day-and-a-half.

So fuck them.

And I'm not a fighter, or a scrapper, a bruiser, or a pug, but I tell them so too, right in their faces. Fuck you, I say. And you know what? When you've got a swastika tattoo won't nobody touch you. I was a crazy man, a throwback, a less evolved and more brutish being, that kind of thing. You think it'd be an excuse to put somebody on the floor, a He had it coming, kind of thing. I mean, even in Oklahoma that doesn't fly. But, no, nobody would touch me with those big broken crosses. Now that you've made me look a little more acceptable I may not be so lucky, or whatever it is that stopped people from knocking my teeth out last month.

Really, I'll let you decide. Obviously, I'm not a throwback. I never bought into any of it. You know that, right? Then again, a lot of other guys didn't either, probably, and look what they were capable of.

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Let me tell you this: what do you know about flying aces? Best fighter pilot ever, killed like double what that pussy red baron did, was a German in World War Two, named Gunter ?????, or something like that. The guy thought Hitler was a nutjob, didn't believe in the war, any of that. 3?? Confirmed kills. So, what, he didn't have anything against the Jews but look. I never did anything near that bad, and that guy's a celebrated aviator, well respected after the war, all that.

He didn't buy it, and neither did I.

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I'm getting ahead of myself. I was sentenced to three years in Lexington Penitentiary, in Lexington, Oklahoma, a town that wouldn't exist if not for the prison. In fact, when you drive through, or you know, there, the thing that sticks out is the inmate cemetery, thousands and thousands of plain gravestones, like what they give soldiers. Except, this isn't any memorial, so nobody has to take very good care of it.

I went in on one of those dull grey done up school buses, with the cage around the driver and a guy with a shotgun. The whole way in I was thinking, Why didn't I just run?

I mean three years, when you're nineteen-years-old. I changed so much from sixteen to then, and I figured I wasn't done yet. I had a lot of figuring out to do before I hit twenty-two. That's what I was thinking, looking at those graves, not that I was going to die there or anything, but that I should've avoided it all the same.

Thing is, they got you. What else would I do? Sure, when I was going in, I was thinking I'd be willing to live on the run forever, work under the table, pick a new name. It's not like they'd spend much time looking for me. But it doesn't seem like too many people do that anymore. We just used to taking our medicine?

Lexington's all done up in blue, white, and gray. Like county, it's all in pods, steel concrete, semi-circles and ninety-degree angles, and what more do you want? They took pictures of my one tattoo going in, gave me a haircut, and I got some new clothes: orange socks, sandals, pants, shirt, even dyed-orange tidy-whities. I got a blanket, comb, toothbrush, high fluoride toothpaste that turned my teeth brown, and a cup for coffee. Carried all that around, taking little baby steps in my shackles to D hall, which was my new home. I was told, not by the guards of course – they don't really talk – that D hall was for folks who were doing a little bit of stretch but weren't supposed to be troublemakers. As much as they wanted to make a fuss about the whole bit with the ski masks and the cigarettes, I guess they didn't buy it much themselves.

The guard took off my chains outside my cell, let me inside, closed the door, and that was that.

I could tell you the place was small, and gray, and talk about the concrete again, but you've watched TV, you've seen the shows, and on that point they're right. The inside of a jail cell looks exactly like you think it does. So do the showers and the mess

hall, the cat walks, all that. Lexington was old. Refurbished, but old, which meant no animals running around, no windows, but a chill, a dampness: the worst of both worlds.

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I'd been thinking a lot about what to do when that cell door shut behind me. Nobody wants to be a punk. So, while I was lifting up my legs one at a time to get the cuffs off, I was thinking, Square those shoulders. I gave myself an under-bite to set my jaw, tried to not make fists, and when that door opened I thought, this isn't going to be so bad. First one I saw was named Billy. He had a pock-marked face and looked like a guy you'd guess had been to prison. Not dangerous so much as lonely, bad-lucked, and no so bright. The other guy was named Floyd, a skinny black kid with soft eyes; he didn't look any older than me.

A fresh one, Billy said. That got me even stiffer, but I realized I didn't know what to do. I had nowhere to sit, standing by the door seemed to me a little over-optimistic, and I didn't have much to say.

Yeah, I decided on.

You got cigarettes? Floyd asked

I wish, I said.

Well, don't wish your way over to me, he said.

You got smokes? Then why'd you ask me?

Look at these things, he said to me, rolling one between his fingers. I've been trying to stretch them out, and they're stale as the fucking cornbread.

I left my post at the door; there wasn't much to look at out the window anyway. An overhead head light was going with that silent buzz of electricity above my head, and at the back, next to the bunks was a window-type-thing. I mean, it was like those big glass blocks rich people use in their bathrooms so they can get in some natural light without being seen bathing or using their shower massager in a way it wasn't intended. The toilet was a boring chrome and sat off to the side by the sink with a button spigot and a glassless mirror that made my forehead look big and cartooney cephalic. A cot, my cot, stretched out in the far corner, bare and flat.

Why don't you have a seat, man? Floyd said. You're making me nervous.

I dropped my gear on the cot, and saw a piece of paper with the rules of the institution. Don't expect to get married in jail, it said. Make your bed. Keep yourself clean. It went on. I laid that piece of paper on top of my blanket and felt the mat to my cot, disgusted I walked away but didn't get far. I could feel Floyd and Billy's eyes on the back of my head.

You're not looking for something to hang yourself with so soon, are you? Floyd said.

There ain't anything, Billy said.

So how about one of those cigarettes, I asked Floyd again.

I told you, he said, no hint of a smile. Unless you want to get on my body.

I didn't even know what he was talking about for a second, and I just looked at him and those soft eyes, like no one who had eyes like that could do anything or mean anything like what he was saying. But Floyd looked over to Billy, said What do you think, this one gonna suck? That sent my hands clenching. I thought, that table, it's got a



nice sharp corner to it. I thought, that toilet between us, if one comes, I can pull him across it.

Billy nodded.

You don't talk much, do you? I said to the white guy. Billy shook his head. I said, Well, you might want to speak up now, tell your boy there that I'll fuck him up good. I don't forget.

I said, I don't forget. I've pushed a man off a motherfucker bridge for less.

Floyd laughed, and Billy, I saw him crack a smile, just a small one, but that was about all he ever did. Billy didn't do much besides sit and read, fucking blank man. You see his face, Floyd said, those big brown eyes glistening with tears, that sure puckered up his asshole. Tell me, though, he says. When was your last blowjob?

Give me one of those smokes, I said.

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I told them.

A few weeks prior to standing in that cell, Carrie and I had gone out for a drive. We started in the afternoon, and I don't think I was supposed to be out really at all, with my mom being a caretaker of sorts, and supposedly making sure I wasn't going to get into any other trouble before this whole business was taken care of. But there we were, smoking a joint and cruising the city in the springtime. Little shit, like stopping in Kwik K for sodas and passing strip malls and churches, we went off toward Lake Overholser. Floyd had never been there, though Billy nodded his head, all the recognition I'd get. I

said, it's a dam and a bait shop, and a mile or so of road to get stoned and drive around, with an old wooden bridge at one end that howls a little when you drive over it. Rabbits, I said. Graffiti.

There hadn't been much rain, but things were getting green again anyway, grass and trees doing their thing, cause what else were they going to do. We passed the dam and circled out through the neighborhoods nestled against it, looked at the empty tennis courts and pulled in. This is where it gets good, Floyd said.

This is my story, motherfucker, and I'm still waiting on that cigarette.

Thank you.

We walked down a little path, no wider than my shoulders, stepped through some ivy and into the lake bottom, or where the lake would have been in wetter times. We walked through concrete pylons and broken bottles of Wild Turkey, crushed up Mad Dogs, and Carrie says, I remember the piece you did right here, pointing to this column of cement, bathed in gang writing. It was crazy fucking whacked out cow spraying milk out its udders.

That's right, I said.

You guys worked a long time on that.

Gone now.

And about then, I think, she knew I was going to jail, and we relit the joint and passed it back and forth talking about when I was in school around here, and how she'd grown up not five blocks from there, but her parents had transferred her to this art school, and funny how we never knew each other as kids, and all that. She took a big hit and said, I would've liked to have known you as a kid, and I said I was kind of a dick. No,

she said. It's true. I was a bra-popper, a little smart ass. I said, I made my seventh grade English teacher cry. We finished the joint and flipped it into the sand. Looking out at the lake and the rocks, I wondered if it was true what they said, that you could walk from one end of the lake to the other and never go deeper than your ears. You think it's true, I said.

What?

Nothing. Let's go.

When we got in the car the wind had died down a little, and we drove with the windows down and the music up, but there wasn't much fun in it. We went over the bridge, and passed the gated community, farther up around by the trailer parks and then Carrie did a crazy fucking U-ie, and went back toward the burbs, over on the other side of the dam. We drove everywhere. This is where I fell off my bike and got that scar on my knee, she said pointing at a stop sign. This is where Trevor Burke kissed me in sixth grade. This is where I used to swim. This was Carla Jenkins house. And then I started in, turn left here, now right. Yeah, this is my old bus stop. We retraced our routes from school, drove by old houses. We drove by the Braum's I walked to for sundaes. But we didn't stop, not anywhere. We talked about being chased by older kids and braces and how I used to sneak out my back window to go through my neighbor's yard and into the park, and then to Pete's house, where Brian and I would get stoned every weekend, only I wasn't supposed to be there, cause Pete was a few years older and mom said he was a bad kid, no future.

Oh my God, Carrie said at a little cul-de-sac off Council road. This is where I lost my virginity. The street was dark and the pen oaks came down like a fan over the road. Right there, she pointed.

Pull in, I said. Funny, we can't let things go. We want to be everywhere they've been. And I guess she wanted me there too. She turned around and parked under the trees and we cut the engine, the lights, everything. We scrambled to the back seat, barely fitting, pressed against the glass, the air sticky and hot. It was hard to move. I couldn't get to her at all; the angles were all wrong. But that was my last blowjob.

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Fucking hot, Floyd said. That's what I miss most about being outside. I used to know this Hispanic girl. Her brothers were real pissed off – I was just some nigger – but me and that girl. . .Floyd let loose with a long low whistle, more breath than tone.

Leticia Gomez, Billy said. You'll get to hear a lot about her.

Floyd asked what else we were supposed to do. And to me he said, So you eat it? I mean, you said you couldn't get to her, but normally, when you weren't getting your shit tied off in the back of a car, you eat pussy? You get your face all up in that?

I helped myself to Floyd's open pack, then his lighter. Lay off my smokes, he said. I owe you, I said. When I can get to the commissary I'll get you back.

What do you think? he said to Billy.

Billy said, Yeah, he definitely eats pussy.

And what of it, I said. Seriously, in my experience you don't get far if you don't.

I bet you lick ass too. You'll be popular here, boy. Yeah, fishy, Floyd said.

I'm starting to get a little pissed, I said. Why don't you lay off? It hasn't been that long for me; you know what I'm saying?

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What I didn't tell them:

when Carrie and I were down at the lake, before our landmarks of adolescence tour and all that, and we were talking about that crazy cow Brian and I spray painted, Carrie goes, Why'd you tell them it was your fault? And I was like, fuck, man, I mean her too? That was the last thing I needed, with a trial starting and stopping and all that shit, and everything else.

I said, I just need you to be on my side. I'm tired of talking about it.

She said, You'll need to talk about it a lot more until this is all through. He's dead, Bin-E; I just need to know. I want to believe you, but I need to know why you said that.

I'm going to cut a deal, I said. I'm calling Horowitz tomorrow and tell him. We've talked about it some, but I'm going to make it happen; I'm giving him the go-ahead.

Oh, she said. If that's what you want to do.

Then we went driving, trying not to talk about it.

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The first thing I had to do in Lexington was figure out who I was going to be. When I thought Billy and Floyd were going to try some shit with me, I said I pushed a guy off a bridge. Why I said it is I guess obvious enough, but I didn't like saying it, which I guess it obvious enough too. But it was a story I told a few times. It was a talisman. It didn't work. That first night I woke up to Billy holding down on my arms and Floyd was right on top of me, punching me in the ribs.

You're getting pissed, huh? Smoke my cigarettes? he was saying with each jab. You learn your fucking place, white boy. You're nobody.

The whole thing probably wasn't more than a minute, and Floyd was spitting and wheezing. He tired quickly for a skinny guy, but he grabbed my blanket when they let me up and took it over to his bunk. I just held my ribs and coughed, breathing hurt so bad. They weren't four feet away, but I wouldn't look over. There's two sets of lights on the inside, and when it gets to be nine-thirty, and time for lights out, the other lights stay on, not bright enough to read by, but bright enough to see a man's eyes from across the room.

Each cough sounded like a fucking explosion. Something about the concrete and the steel makes a sneeze goes off like a torpedo. After awhile I got used to how loud it was, but that night, I felt like I'd just gotten to sleep. Everything echoes, takes on epic proportions, yelps that will ring your ears, the farts of Greek gods, the whole thing. Even the yard, the one time you're outside, and all you hear is weights and metal and talking, incessant talking. It's a lonely place, but a loud one. No suffering in silence. Doesn't help you feel less alone, though. Laying there, I just felt surrounded. Alone and surrounded.

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Lights up at six-thirty, and even if you want to sleep you can't. Not at first. I hadn't been sleeping, really, but I was still surprised to find myself curled up and shivering, still without my blanket. Billy was up first, pissing while filling his cup with water. Downing that and going for a second before his stream faltered to a dribble, he arched his back and went back to his bunk. Floyd was next, doing the same routine, only he splashed some water on his face, looked back to me. Breakfast is in thirty, he said. You have prison food before?

I shook my head.

Well, smoke one of these now, he said, tossing me a cigarette. It'll make it go down easier.

I lit up, had a cup of water and a piss myself. Brushed my teeth and thought, how long had it been since I'd had a shit. I certainly didn't want to have one then. Walking around made me feel a little bit better, got the blood moving some, and I didn't feel so cold. Briefly, I wondered what temperature it was anyway, but there was really no point in thinking about that. What was I going to do, have them turn up the heat?

So this Carrie, chick, Floyd says, She have nice tits?

Fuck you.

I think he's still sore at us, Billy said.

I wouldn't know what for, Floyd said.

It feels like you were jumping on my chest, I said.

I wouldn't know anything about that, he said, eyes going wet again from his smile. Just enjoy your cigarette. I want you to have it.

I'm not going to lie. It was as stale as he warned me, but the best damn smoke I'd ever had. I burned it down to the filter and tossed it in the toilet. Floyd still wanted to know about Carrie's tits, asking me to show him, you know, with my hands, like I was squeezing oranges. What were they like? he asked. Were they firm, perky? Would I describe her nipples?

I remember her hair, I said.

Her hair, Floyd goes. You fucking faggot.

It was short, I said, shorter in the back than the front, but just that right length to grab onto. I used to love getting a fistful of that hair.

That's more like it, he said. Tell me more.

There was a lot of that kind of thing with Floyd. He fancied himself an expert, said I can tell you anything about what's on the ho platter. Floyd claimed to have had them all, said he knew he knew the difference between Koreans and Laotian girls by the way they fucked. Floyd had been all over the country, selling vacuum cleaners, or trying to. The job was kind of a bitch, he said, hard to make money, but he claimed to have slept with housewives in forty-three states. I always thought those Kirby folks stuck to a region, but I wasn't about to say anything to Floyd about it. When he was in a good mood he shared his cigarettes and didn't pound on my ribs at night, so if he said he talked his way into every bedroom from Lexington to D.C. that was fine with me.

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Billy was a whole different beast. He spent most of his days reading. We were allowed two books in our cells at a time, and Billy was trading them out every day or two, which was easy for him since he worked in the library. Billy had that kind of thinning, sandy, graying hair that makes a man look beaten, but he was a fucking monster on the chessboard. Floyd had stopped playing with him at all by the time I got there, and for a few days straight he pinned and forked and scattered my pieces while Floyd talked about pussy. The games made it easier to block Floyd out, but they weren't much for my ego.

There was a lot I wanted to ask Billy, about why he was there and all, and about Floyd especially, but it was always the three of us and not much chance for privacy. So instead we played chess and drank water, and then Billy would go back to his bunk and grab a book, and I'd rearrange pieces while Floyd did his thing.

We were like a regular family.

Except at chow. There we didn't even look at each other. I made the mistake of going over to where Floyd was sitting that first day, and he says, Peckerwood, you better keep stepping. So, I did. I mean, I kept my head up, walked with a purpose, but I didn't have anywhere to go. That chow hall's a scary place. And it's as sectioned-off as any high school lunchroom. The Bloods and Crips, the Mexican Mafia, the Aryan Brotherhood, they've all got their tables, their turf on the inside. I remember standing their, holding my mac and cheese slop, thinking what about these tables is worth fighting for, holding onto. Those were Big Mac's tables, and I didn't want them. All the same, I needed them, needed a place to sit and eat, and stood there not knowing what to do. In

the end, I sat by myself, shoveled the food into my mouth, and if you can believe I thought, I can't wait to get back to my cell.

I get partway through the mac and cheese when these shadows roll over my plate. Looking up, I see five guys, all Mexicans and tatted up. Two sat down on either side of me and the other three stood on the opposite side of the table. Here it was, and I didn't even know the rules.

My friend here, says the guy in the middle – short guy, stocky, with a Virgin Mary tattoo on his neck – and he's patting the guy to his right's back, he's a big dumb ape and can't get enough of the cornbread. I tell him it's shit, but he doesn't listen; you know what I mean?

They look at me.

I place my fork down on the tray and look up, and I swear to God, it was like, like laying on your back in a pine forest and looking up at the trees, how they shoot up and almost around you. There they were, fucking tree people, looking at me like we were having an actual conversation. I swallowed.

Yeah, I guess.

So you think it tastes like shit too, then? he said.

I don't think the way it tastes is really what they're worried about, I said, trying to choose my words carefully.

So that's not what you're saying? he said, leaning in and putting his hands flat on the table. The trees closed in. Are you saying, he began again, that my friend is a big dumb ape?

I don't even know your friend, I said.

But you insult him.

No, I said. I didn't insult him.

Oh, he said. Good. Then, we're just talking about cornbread, eh?

Yeah, I said, gritting my teeth, it tastes like shit.

Then you won't mind if my friend has it, he said, smiling, but before he could reach over and grab that brick of baked batter, the guy next to him, the friend he'd been talking for says, I'm thirsty too. That cornbread, it gets stuck in my throat.

Nothing like a little milk to help wash that down, the first guy said and put his hands on my food and my milk carton.

Now, what was I going to do here? If I let them take my food, they're going to be here every meal. I was fresh there, I knew I had to do something, or this was going to be a long stretch.

I think I'd like to keep that, I said, putting my hands over the hands on my food.

I thought it said it tasted like shit, he said, still smiling.

It does.

You like the taste of shit? Maybe, I think, you like the taste dick too, eh? he said.

And I hit him.

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That was fucking stupid, Floyd said in the cell that night.

What was I supposed to do? I asked. I spit in the toilet, got another handful of water from the sink, swished and spit again. I'd been at it for what felt like hours, but I was still spitting red.

Shit, man, you could always punk out, Floyd said.

Shut your fat fucking mouth, Billy said, looking up from his book.

He speaks, Floyd said, holding his hands up to the gods. You have better advice for him?

Yeah, I thought not. And Ben, get me some fucking cigarettes. It ain't that hard to get down to the commissary, and I've been giving you smokes for a week.

You think they're going to try and kill me, I said.

Floyd laughed, little fat water bubbles springing from his eyes. Yeah, man, I bet they're having a meeting right now in C-Block all about you. What are we gonna do about this gringo, they're saying. Fucking peckerwoods. Shit, you're inside now. Nobody cares about you.

I spit again, then reached inside to feel if a tooth was loose, but I was lucky there. I stood up and looked at myself in the mirror. I was in some shape, that's for sure. You can still see it there, on my right eye. It's not so bad anymore, but it bled like a sonofabitch. My supraorbital margin was cracked. But to top that all off, I got blamed for it. No time in the exercise yard for a week, and a note in my file, and I know what I felt: relief. One less place I had to watch myself. I mean, sure, Floyd could decide he wanted another chance at me some night, but he wasn't going to do anything to me like what those guys would.

I was looking in the mirror, at Billy looking into his book like he was drilling holes in it. It was some Tom Clancy thing or something: like I said he went through two a week or something. Billy, I said, and he looked up at me. What would you do, if you were me?

I'd watch yourself in the shower, he said. Or walking around. Anytime there's only one guard, you avoid those guys. One guard is cheap. Or I'd join up.

Join up?

It ain't like there's a shortness of dirt to be done, he said. Everybody's recruiting, and you can get yourself some protection.

What about you? I said.

Fuck this, let's play some chess.

I swished and spat, while he set up the board on his bunk. I sat down, and he'd let me be white, even though it was his turn. I moved my rook's pawn forward two. And he put it back. You play chess with me, you play good chess. No more of this shit. I'm tired of kicking your ass with this junk. You play king's pawn, queen's pawn, or maybe queen's bishop pawn, but that's it. Play good chess, he said.

I moved my king's pawn forward and he matched me. We played three games. I think he let me win the first, which was nice of him. He couldn't play junk against me for long, though.

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So, you want to know what we were fighting over? The food? Yeah, so here's a typical breakfast. You bring your own cup, and you can get milk and coffee, which is nice, but the coffee's lukewarm, and oftentimes the milk is half-frozen. You can get two packets of sugar, which makes the coffee go down easy, but generally you try and hold onto that, so you can have some chits to play cards or something with. The oatmeal looks like oatmeal, but you can't spoon it. It's oatmeal you've got to cut. A lot of times, though, you get lucky, and there's coffee cake with the oatmeal and if you take a bite of each, you can just about choke the oatmeal down. If it's coffee cake and oatmeal day, that means you get scrambled eggs too. They're scrambled eggs. Not too many ways you can screw those up. They're cold as shit, but what were you expecting anyway? And then there's the orange, cause you've got to have some fruit in your diet. The orange is about the size and shape of a lemon, and almost the color of a lemon too, they're such a pale orange, but then again, with our jumpsuits, everything looks pale in comparison. The orange isn't half bad, though it's not what you'd call juicy, and that's breakfast. Ditto for lunch, only with meatloafs and spaghetti, minus coffee. Same for dinner. And, you know, on Thanksgiving and Christmas we get a little something special. Not too special, but still, it was nice, a break in the routine.

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By about the third day of no time in the exercise yard and taking my meals in my cell, I was so bored, I was wishing for a shank. Let me out! a voice inside my head was howling. Let them kick my ass or stab me; anything but this. It's funny now, I'm busy

again. Did I tell you I got a job? Yeah, and now that I've got it, I'm going like mad and a day or two to collect my thoughts doesn't sound so bad. But when you've got that time, it'll make you crazy. I wanted out so bad. First thing, I memorized every bit of graffiti in my cell. I memorized the placement of it, the scratched in conversations. The I need pussy and the You are a pussy that answers. And I wondered how they did it. I tried with my toothbrush, but I couldn't get the paint to come up at all. Couldn't leave a mark.

When that week was over, I was out walking around and scared shitless again. And that first day back out in the exercise yard I was lifting weights, cause I wanted something heavy to throw if need be, and this shadow comes up over me again while I'm benching, and I shoot up, and there's this white guy standing there, all done up in White Power tats. A lot of them I didn't recognize, but I sure as fuck knew what the swastika was on his neck. I also knew that if it was facing the other way it was a Tibetan good-luck symbol, but I wasn't about to tell him that.

He said, I saw what happened with those wetbacks who tried to take your food.

I didn't know if I should go back to lifting or tell him to fuck off or what, but he says, I hear you're in here for throwing a nigger off a bridge.

I say, Yeah.

I don't say, he was my best friend, you white trash piece of shit. I don't even say, I don't want to talk about it. I say Yeah, that's what happened.

You know, we're the minority in here, he said. Tells you something about this country, that's for sure. And us white people, we need to stick together, especially in here. And we think, that you might be the kind of guy who wants to stand up and protect what's his. Is that right? Are you tired of having what's yours taken from you?

Nothing in here's mine, I said.

He laughed, three big chuckles that sounded more like coughs. That's nice, man, he said. But you're here, and your Big Mac's, so you may as well find something that's yours. Tell you what, you think about it. You decide if you want to stand up as a proud white man, or if you want to be these fucking mongrel's bitches. We'll see you soon.



Clayton Webber

## Chapter 5

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I said, An Aryan Brother is without care. He walks where the weak and heartless won't dare. For an Aryan Brother, death holds no fear. Vengeance will be his, through his brothers still here. It was all very solemn and serious, and Will made sure I understood that I was part of a new family now, but really, I had to dig my fingernails into my palms to stop myself from laughing. Come on, care and dare, fear and here. That's some laughable shit. I mean, this was early nineteen-ninety-six, and I'd been listening to the Wu-Tang Clan's Thirty-six Chambers for like four months before going off to Big Mac. At least ODB rhymes diarrhea and gonorrhea, which is laughable in a different kind of way, but you get my point. There's some originality with the Wu at least. But also, this oath, this pledge of mine was kind of predicated on the assumption that I'd go to bat for these guys, that I trusted them to carry on after me in the event I had to take one for the white team, and standing in that cell, hours after lights out, going from face to face, I was thinking, No way I'd take so much as a splinter for one of these degenerate monkeys. I mean, they were a tough enough looking group, but my first impression was that besides keeping a shank out of my side the whole group was about as useful as a big wet vagina fart.

Ok, so when I say I was digging my fingernails into my palms to keep from laughing, I mean that, but maybe not in the way you think. It's just, I don't want you to think that I wasn't one of those thunderclap sneezes away from shitting myself. But it's like this: when I was like fifteen and Brian and I would spend our summer days at Frontier City, trying to cop a feel off our dates in the haunted mine shaft ride and doing all the roller coasters and cooling ourselves off on the log ride, I would laugh on this one ride where you did a big loop-D-loop backwards. It was like not seeing what was coming or the stress or something just caused me to, well, laugh. So, really, I think it was probably a mixture of the fact that they had the dumbest fucking initiation poem ever and that there was a chance I was going to get gang-raped and gutted, or worse yet, gang-raped and sent back to my cell with a See you next week.

So I said my oath, and this big guy who looked like he should be named Tiny but was called Wired on account of the fact that he talked and moved at a porpoise's pace and wielded a tattoo gun went to work on me. He had nothing like this fine contraption you've got, obviously. For a needle he had a piece of guitar string running through one of those clear plastic pen bodies and it was attached to what looked like a tape deck gone bad. They sat me down and I took my shirt off, and Wired pulled out an egg-carton-cup-thing filled with bluish black ink and set to working on a swastika on my chest, that first piece you covered up so nice.

Wired was what you would call heavy-handed. I'm not a skinny guy, but it felt like he was rapping on my sternum. Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! like a chisel carving me out of wood. I sat and looked around and didn't flinch, cause this may have been part of the test too. How was I to know that all of Wired's tats went like that? Like I said, I'd

had a piece done before, and it was nothing like this. The ink even burned, a low smolder under my skin. And I looked around. Will was there, of course, the one who had approached me, who was vouching for me as a member. He looked pleased but also a little nervous, like something of his was at stake too. The others I hadn't met before that night. Sitting next to Wired, this cat named the Octopus looked bored. He was older than the rest of them, maybe sixty, maybe younger than that, but it's hard to tell with an old guy on the inside. Too little sun, too much bad food and looking over your shoulder. He was wearing big thick glasses and had dark hair graying at the sideburns. Besides Wired and myself, the Octopus was the only one sitting. Standing above us and off to the side of the cell was Poppins, so named because he could fly a kite better than anybody in the Brotherhood. Poppins knew most of the ciphers by heart and didn't need a key to code or decode messages, which made him more useful than any of the other thugs to the Octopus. He didn't look like a bookworm, though. Poppins was the biggest of them by far, and he kept his head shaved down, way down; this kid went after his skull with a bic at least once a day and had lightning bolts above both his ears. The other guy in the room, standing over by Will smoking a filterless cigarette to the nubbin was Viking. He was in his mid-thirties and wore a long beaded handlebar mustache. The Viking didn't talk much. He was a skinny guy and loved motorcycles. He was the scrawniest biker I'd ever seen, though. That mustache swallowed his face and his body, but even Will was a little wary of him. Skinny guys don't go down, Will told me later. They just keep coming, and Viking's like one of those pop-up clown punching bags. He just moves through it.

When Wired finished with my swastika he stood me up; this was my moment of triumph. Viking, still smoking, slapped his thighs and the other clapped, and then came around one by one to give my new tat a good sharp slap. You're a peckerwood now, Will said. You're protected.

The Octopus was the last to give me slap and he wrapped a big blue arm around my shoulder. I'm glad you're here, he said. You're going to be a credit to your race, I know it. But now, you've got to get back home and let the big boys talk.

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And that's how I became an Associate of the Aryan Brotherhood, not that it was put like that. Will used the words, You'll get to be in the brand when you earn your bones, but they don't give that rock away for nothing. Blood in blood out. You get this. You earn those bolts and won't have to worry about nothing ever again. Translation: you get to be a full member of the Aryan Brotherhood when you kill someone. They don't give away membership to anybody who wants it. You kill someone to get in and you die to get out. When you earn a pair of lightning bolts in battle, they will back you for anything, and the other gangs understand you are truly untouchable.

I shook his hand, and a guard let me into my cell, pocketing a bill from Will. See you in the morning, I said, thinking I won't kill anybody for you. I've got three years, and I'm not jeopardizing that for anything. Seriously, if they were going to bump me up to a nickel or a dime, I'd just as soon let myself get shived in the shower. Three years I

could do; I'd be young when I got out; I'd still remember what freedom felt like. I was no lifer.

Before I got into bed, a little bit of viciousness kicked in. Floyd and Billy were watching me, obviously wondering how a new guy, a fish was getting out past lights out and What had I been doing? and all that. I pulled my shirt off , splashed some water on my face and toweled off with it. I faced them full on and got into bed. Better to test it there, than in the courtyard or the mess hall and find that a swastika didn't mean shit. And if it didn't, well again, I would have preferred to get shived. I put that thing on my body to be protected; the way I looked at it life is more valuable than pretty much anything. My body's just a vessel and what's on it isn't of that much importance if it keeps what's inside intact. They could have the vessel if I could have the heart, you know? God, I sound pathetic, trying to justify or whatever. You ask, do I regret it, and I think, Do I regret what? Being covered in white power shit? Of course, I wish it hadn't happened. I wish I could've kept under the radar for three years, sat with my books like Billy and slipped out unscarred, uncovered. But do I regret joining up? Again, I wish it hadn't happened. But regret? That's hard. Where else would I be right now? I mean, obviously not here, but where? I don't know that I do, regret it I mean. I wish it hadn't happened. I wish I could've been Bin-E inside. And Billy, shit. It isn't like he did slip by.

Floyd said, Don't let that thing go to your head.

Billy said, He's too smart for that, aren't you Ben?

All I want's to be left alone, I said.

That's right, Floyd said. Getting high and getting over. I get it. You want a cigarette, dog? I know you ain't ready to go to sleep.

That was the truth. I took a smoke from Floyd's outstretched hand, lit it with a match from under my mattress pad and stared at the ceiling. I stared hard at it, gray cinder blocks. Fucking everything was gray.

Don't think you still don't owe me, he said. And I know now you're going to get the good shit. You keep me in mind, dig?

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Things changed the most in those first few days after becoming a Peckerwood. At breakfast I met the other associates, guys my own age mostly, though quite a few were pushing thirty. Since they hadn't earned the brand, they weren't invited to my initiation. Honestly, they seemed like nice enough guys. Relatively speaking. They weren't any worse than Floyd or Billy anyway. Nobody was in for tax evasion, though. Not even close. Going in, I thought these guys would be blowhards. You think of the KKK or something, and what do you think about: an overgrown boys club. I understand they've done some pretty horrific shit, but I mean to a certain extent aren't they just Masons who weren't held enough as kids? They play dress up and have their little meetings and go home. But these guys were fucking hard. One dude, Jeff, beat his wife to death with a bottle of Cook's on New Year's. I didn't talk much to him. Ok, so that story is a little extreme, but most these guys had been popped for armed robbery or at least a few counts of B and E. We didn't even have a meth dealer, and come on, it's Oklahoma, there's one

cooking in the back of every other kitchen. All these guys were in for something physical. None of that nonviolent offender business. The other thing is, they thought I was hard too. Apparently Will had talked me up something fierce, cause first thing Jeff wants to hear the story.

I don't want to talk about it, I said. I was in now and not so scared anymore. All of a sudden I'd manufactured a conscience again.

Come on, man, Jeff said. I mean, were you fighting with this nigger, or what? He been hassling your old lady? Or was he walking the wrong bridge at the wrong time. I can dig that too.

Whatever makes you happy, I said. I'm just trying to eat my fucking oatmeal.

Getting high and getting over, one of the others said, and that was pretty much the end of that. I didn't hang around Jeff much, and otherwise I could pretty much slip on by. Weird shit. I mean, this guy, Brady, he's in for whatever and it's not like he's anybody's bitch or anything, but he's giving out his coffee cake at breakfast. Says the sugar doesn't agree with him. And he makes sure the new guy – me – gets a piece. He and I didn't end up friends or anything, but he was just kind of a chill guy, a football nut, and he was always wanting to talk Sooner ball. Even in the off season he was hungry for whatever kind of information he could get his hands on about training, or a new coach, who the prospects were that year. Outside, he'd probably been poor white trash and inside he helped us run drugs and money through the prison, but all I ever saw him want to do was listen to some sports and share his smokes. How can you not like a guy like that?

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The other thing is, the correctional officers and the staff started having it in for me. I got pulled out of my shower the day after taking the oath and taken back to the outer portion of the jail for reprocessing. They took pictures of the new tattoo, wrote in my file that I was a known associate of the Aryan Brotherhood. A few days after that, the Warden brings me into his office, and he gives me the speech about how now I was really going to mess my life up. All you have to do is keep your head down, he said. If you're having problems, if inmates were doing things to you, we have channels to take care of that. But you don't need this, Benjamin. This, he said pointing at my chest, is a dead end.

Seriously, he said that, a dead end. Ok, so the man kind of had a point, but he'd given that speech how many times? He even seemed bored with it. What was it going to mean to me? And trust my life with the guards? No thanks, man. He had to have known the Brotherhood payed off guards to get me that tattoo. And those same guards took money from whoever for a lot of reasons besides artistically augmenting one's skin.

So, I stood and I stared at him until it was time to go back to my cell.

But then he came around his desk and put a hand on my shoulder and said, I'm not giving up on you, Benjamin. I know your case was a little more complicated than most.

I really wanted to believe that last part, that he meant it, but with a steady stream of so much bullshit coming out of his mouth, it was hard to know what to think.

And besides, the benefits outweighed any of the intermittent harassment from the guards. Everything that we got out here, you could get in there. I mean dope, liquor,



books. We even set up hookers for people on the inside. You pay off the right guard, get Poppins to send a kite addressed to his aunt with a simple code and a few days later, a woman would show up and whoever had paid to make this happen would get a trip down to the rooms for conjugal visits. No matter that he was married or on the register for their use. We could do anything.

I learned the ropes fast. First thing I did was hit the irons. I ate as much of that prison food as I could stomach and every second on the yard I was lifting weights, doing pushups. If it wasn't that, it was walking around with Will trying to get the politics straight.

Look, he said. I don't know if you know how things work here or if you even approve, but that shit doesn't matter. This is how it is; this is the business side of things. Our three money items in this order is heroin, meth, and pot. You give me any of that nigger weed shit and I'll smack your face. We don't talk like that in here. I don't know what you were doing before, but white folk here want to get high, and they don't need us telling them that the green is for the niggers and spics, alright?

What people do with their own bodies doesn't bother me at all, I said.

Good, he said. Now most of the heroin we get in comes from us, our kind. But the meth and the pot we get from the Mexican Mafia. Again, I will smack your fucking face if you get all high and mighty on me here. You don't mess with the spics, alright?

Jesus, I said. Yeah, I get it?

I didn't get it.

Will said, You look around this yard, and what do you see. People stick to their own kind. I'm not saying I like the spics, but the Mexican Mafia are businessmen, and so

are we. Maybe you got some ideas about yourself, about being a warrior, and you're that too, I know you'll earn your fucking bones, but a lot of these guys, a lot of our guys, aren't awake to that. You've heard them say it, Getting high and getting over. And that's a sick mentality. But the truth of the matter is, we're the minority in here. White men are the minority. And yet, we're running Big Mac. This is our fucking house, and it's ours because we play the game. People want to get high, we let that happen. We help them, and it helps us. Do you understand me, Ben.

Does the Octopus know? I said.

About the Mexicans? Yeah, everybody knows. The Octopus knows that's how we keep our power. I want you to read a book, it's called *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. I know, that sounds like some fucking sand nigger bullshit, but it will change your life. We run this place because of our will. We rule because we will not be shaken.

Now come here, he said, I need to show you how to handoff dope.

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Billy told me I was getting better. The way he put it was I wasn't so easy to take lunch from anymore, but still, he won my tray five out of six times. I knew he liked playing chess with me, because with everybody else a match was a match, but when we played he'd give me best two out of three. You don't draw in prison chess. No matter what the king goes down. Some days I'd be playing chess from breakfast to lunch. Shit, the AB boys didn't care so long as I wasn't supposed to be slinging, and since it was getting to be summer time the drought was on. You think it's hard to get pot in the city between June

and August, try it in the joint. A spliff was going for twenty-five dollars in the summer of ninety-six. When Billy told me it was getting harder to take my lunch, we were sitting in the bay area, and I'd just offered up a bishop to get a vicious skewer on his queen.

That bitch is mine, I said. I'm going to take her over to my house; see how she likes it.

Your house is my house, and you haven't got her yet, he said, scrambling to get a defender to his attacking rook before I could swing my remaining knight over.

The thing about prison is that I thought about home, Carrie, my mom even all the time, but there was little to remind me of those things. People on the inside weren't like the people I knew out there. Even with chess, with Billy scratching at his nub of a beard like it would give him the answer, I was a checkers kid, and that was only until I was like nine-years-old. But when it was first getting hot, like it was that day, things changed inside for me. We'd been coming through the winter and I was chilled all the time: eating, reading, especially when I was sleeping. I couldn't even shake the chill when I was working out. And with the smells and sounds thinking of everybody else was like thinking about a really good movie, you know? You couldn't quite get it out of your head, but it doesn't really relate to anything. But sitting there, with the heat coming down and the stink of us, and everybody talking about the drought reminded me of this time Brian and I had slept in my car out near fucking Okarchee or some shit waiting for Evan to show up with like half a pound of grass one summer. And I was thinking of being out there in this two-door Honda, and the mosquitoes are so bad we couldn't even crack the windows, and Billy goes, Hey, move, and I'm kind of startled because that was like the closest thing to a dream I'd had since I was locked up, and I move, and I go back

to thinking about being out in the middle of nowhere, parked down a dirt road that was five miles off the highway and still another three miles to Evan's uncle's place, and how Brian and I had gotten lost, smoking big fucking dime-sized blunts and we weren't supposed to be coming out there anyway cause Cletus or whatever the fuck his name is was such a paranoid fucking tweaked out hillbilly, and at around three we had to just pull off the side of the road, park it, and try for some sleep.

And Brian's all, We should have taken the fucking beast, meaning his Suburban, and I'm trying to roll on my side, but my steering wheel won't let me, and I just started laughing because I wouldn't let him drive, thinking a black guy in the driver's seat would arouse a little too much suspicion in these parts, but here we were on the side of the road with like a thousand dollars in cash, and we can't even stretch our fucking legs. And seriously, why the fuck would a black guy in the passenger's seat be any less suspicious to some cop who may have the same tattoo I did thinking about it back then while I was about to lose my game to Billy cause I was too busy thinking about it. Is that right?

But at first, Brian and I were a little worried, being out there, but we kept smoking and talking – this was when Carrie and I were still new, so we spent a lot of time talking about that, and Is there really such a thing as The One? and how the fuck would you know if she was? – and after a few hours a single car hadn't driven by, and the city started to fade behind us in the west, and the whole sky started to get purple and bubble gum blue, and we got out of the car and sat on the roof and watched the sun come up.

I don't even care where Evan is right now, Brian said, sucking deep on the last of our travel bud.

Me either, I said. So long as he isn't here.

That's pretty cold, Bin-E.

Aeon Flux or Holli Would? I asked.

I'm taking your fucking lunch, Billy said. You can't just sit off there and expect the game to win itself. And we're having cornbread today.

Alright, alright, I said.

I don't want to see you slinking off with your Peckerwood friends, now, he said.

Alright, man, you'll get your fucking cornbread. Don't act like I didn't have you scared, though, I said, and Billy carried his board and pieces off to the next table. I looked at the big clock on the wall, still an hour to chow, and I tried to put myself back there, back out by that field with the smell of barley and manure, but couldn't. That was gone, but the heat had stayed.

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That night, Billy's board was conspicuously absent from our cell. I mean, I say it was Billy's board, but really the prison owned all the sets. Still, Billy was a strong player, maybe *the* player at Big Mac, and the strong players were able to monopolize the boards, keep them in their cells, that kind of thing. That way if you wanted to play, you had to go to them. Otherwise, nobody would want to play with Billy. It would be like us Peckerwoods going out for some Horse against the Crips. Why play when you know the outcome and it's not good for you?

Billy, I said, where's your set?

Not here, was all I could get out of him, and he went straight to one of his books, a western this time. Something by Elmore Leonard I think.

Well, what, are you telling me you actually lost a game? I asked.

Something like that, he said.

Leave the man alone, Floyd said. He's had a rough day. Ain't that right, Billy? A rough ride.

Billy kept his head in that book, and I was a little disappointed. At night, I could never get comfortable. I'd been in at this point, close to six months or so, and still I wasn't used to Big Mac at night. I kept expecting somebody to say, you can go home now. This was all a big misunderstanding. Go to your bed. Call a girl; get yourself laid. I filled up my cup, had some water, did some pushups. I'd pretty much blown my arms out that day, though, and I could only do about twenty-five before my arms stopped responding, felt wispy and ghost-like under my chest. Floyd could see me straining on those last few and laughed.

That how you did your girl, Ben. The old up-down, pause u-u-u-p again? he said.

I went back for more water, looked at the Nietzsche on my bed. That wasn't what I needed to calm my mind. I needed a game of chess, a simple attack, something with rules that I could follow.

Come on, man, Floyd said. Tell me again how you gave it to her. Tell me about that time in the car.

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The next day in the showers, I was standing between Billy and Will, soaping myself off as quickly as possible. Even with Will underneath the faucet next to me, I could never quite feel comfortable in there. If I faced the wall anybody could be coming up behind me. If I faced the floor I could be mistaken for a pecker-checker, and the Brotherhood had a strict policy on homosexuals, being if you were one, you were dead. They seemed to be a lot stricter on that than on any of the race shit. So I spent my time in the showers scrubbing and saying something to Will, looking off behind me to my right, scrubbing and saying something to Billy, looking off to my left. I thought I'd got a nice little system down, but this big guy, big black guy gets his arm around Billy before I even knew somebody was there. This guy just steers Billy off and out they go, and not like Billy's being pushed out either, just like he's taking a walk.

What the fuck's that about? I said to Will when they were out of earshot.

Him? I thought you knew. That's Billy's jocker, he said.

Billy?

Shit, you had to know he was getting taxed by somebody, didn't you?

That ain't right, I said.

What can I say, Ben, your chess hero's a punk.

I heard my name and number and turned to see a second guard standing next to the one who had been on watch in the showers. Get yourself dried off and come on, he said. I looked at Will, like here we go again, and took my time getting to my gear. He took me up to see the warden, but not before he did the whole shackles thing, like I was so fucking dangerous. This was a new guard, one I hadn't seen before, and he looked like he took his job real serious, like he was out saving lives or something. Every time he

looked at me he let out a breath, almost a snort, like who's got the stick here, me motherfucker. We did the long way up, so everybody saw me out there, but before they'd let me in to see the warden, I had go through a search. I mean, not like I was just in the showers or anything, but what the fuck do they care? They checked the soles of my feet, my mouth, made me do the bend and spread. Alright, the guard said and opened the door.

Ben, he said, have a seat.

I shuffled over to his desk, sat myself down in one of those padded institutional chairs, the kind that looks like they just tacked some carpet on an aluminum frame. It was like I was a kid again in the principal's office. I started going over what I could be popped for. I'd passed off a few kites the previous week, the kind that were written in piss and the real message could only be seen under firelight, but I know those had gotten where they needed to. As for drugs, shit, nothing like what I'd been doing on the outside, and we hadn't been in lockdown for awhile, so how would anybody have found it, not that they cared half the time when they did?

The warden told me that this little group I was in was dangerous, that this wasn't play acting. That maybe on the outside I thought it was cute to sell some pot, but this was the real deal in here. People died over it, and he wasn't about to let things escalate on his watch. That was his word: *escalate*.

I know I've got some weak links in my chain, the warden said. But that man out there is solid. The warden was pointing toward the door, and I looked at the shadow of the man who brought me in. He went on, I want you to tell me how the Brotherhood moves drugs into this prison, and how they move communications out.



I don't know what you're talking about, I said. This is a philanthropic organization. If you let us, we'd like to plant some trees in the courtyard.

Ben, Ben, Ben, you don't have to play hard and tough with me. I know that you're new, that you couldn't possibly have anything to do with the way all this got started. But I also now, this is a network and Mr. Young here, your Octopus, doesn't have anything in his cell directly. That leaves, what, his Lieutenants: Mr. William Blaine, Oscar Granger, Michael Reese, I can go on here.

And he could go on. And he did. Things were going to change around here, and I may as well be on the right side, and he could even get my sentence reduced. Ah! I'm sorry, I saw that movie, and the moral is always Don't talk.

I wouldn't know how to get that, I said. I don't think I can help you.

And he said, I know Brian Wright was a friend of yours.

Yeah, I said. That's right.

And what do you think Will would make of that? he said, and stared in at me from across his desk, grey hair smoldering. What do you think Mr. Young would say? You're their pride and joy. A regular race warrior, or whatever the hell it is you faggots call yourselves. You think they'd feel a little betrayed? I would, Ben.

You're misinformed, I said. I didn't kill nobody.

Well, that's not what you said for the court, he said. And you're going to have to live with that. That's the record.

You can send me on my way anytime, I said.

No matter which way you slice it, the warden said, you owned up for something that you're not, and you're too slow for the stream you're swimming in. When you think

about it, Ben, it's all you can do. Everybody saw you coming up here. You get us a note, just a tiny little piece of paper, we put you in solitary for awhile, make up some bullshit charge of why you brought in, and I'll bring you some outside food for once. But that's just temporary, Ben. First thing, we get you transferred to a med. sec. Everybody there is just trying to get by, no politics. And that's just until your first parole hearing. I'll put in a good word for you, and a good word from me goes a long way. You keep your nose clean at the med. sec., and you can write your ticket. Free man. How's that sound, Ben? You want to get out of here? Or, we can send you back to your cell, but everybody saw you coming up here, and they're naturally going to think we exchanged some words. And they're going to assume what those words were about. You want something owned up for you?

He just kept talking. He just wouldn't shut up.

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Floyd was going on about Annabelle, a white girl he'd had from Warr Acres, from where I grew up.

Was she the pigeon-toed one, with the lazy eye? I asked.

Shit. She was the volleyball player. From Central. Still had those athletic thighs when I knew her.

I didn't go to Central, I said.

So, what could the warden really do anyway? I mean, I was keeping my nose clean as far as anybody could tell, and really, I wasn't even around the Brotherhood besides meal time and yard time, and half the time on the yard I was doing weights.

Hey, Floyd, I said. What's been going around that you've heard lately.

I'm telling you about the way this girl used to, kinda, pop back like this, and you're asking me about who's sucking who's dick? he said.

No, man I'm not talking about that. I mean political.

Give me a cigarette, Floyd said. He had one of the two packs I'd gotten him through the brand sitting right next to him, but I handed over one of mine and tapped one out for myself. Nah, he said. I don't think I know of anything that'll interest you, and he laughed. Stupid fucking white boy.

You know you could have just asked for a fucking cigarette, I said. Billy does. Billy, though he usually would wasn't in the cell. Neither Floyd or I had said anything about it since I got back.

You want political, Floyd said, Where you been?

Up with the warden, I said.

Floyd asked what the warden would want with me. I told him the warden was still pissed at me getting tattoos and was making a lot of empty threats.

And those threats come with questions, don't they? Floyd said.

I said that was right. Floyd stretched back, put the cigarette in the corner of his mouth, and smiled one of those v-shaped devil grins, his eyes as rolling and soft as ever. I hear the El Rukns are trying to make their way in, Floyd said. Nothing big or above ground yet, but I've seen some drawing of scimitars around, and that means it's only a

matter of time before they make a move on turf. Not making anybody in my camp happy. There, that what you wanted?

I meant more like a rumor, I said.

Warden made a mess out of you, didn't he? Floyd said. You're in the spotlight now. Before I had a chance to ask Floyd what he meant, the cell door opened, and Billy came in, chessboard in hand.

Clayton Webber

## Chapter 6

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I started getting more tattoos. I had a little bit of money saved up, from slinging a little, moving the H around D block, money I had nothing to do with. I couldn't very well send it home, and mom's visits were getting scarcer as it was. It's so much hassle, I said. Coming in and out. You don't know what they do to us before we see people, I said, knowing this would break her heart. But my shaved head, the blue-black peaking out from under my jumpsuit, those things I knew were starting to wear in a wholly different way. So we both pretended to believe that it was easier on me if she only sent letters. In a few weeks time, I got this one here, on my shoulder, I got the eighty-eight on my forearm, and I got the runes on my knuckles. All very clandestine shit, the symbolism of the *movement*, the code of hate. As you know, from when I first started coming in here, I looked the part. Eighty-eight, for eight eight, for H H, for Heil Hitler. Runes for the Viking Nordic blood that supposedly ran through my veins. Never mind my mother's people were Slovaks, Poles. The big old English fourteen that you covered on my back stood for the fourteen words We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children. Those were written by the guy who did *The Turner Diaries*, another book the Octopus had recommended, but I couldn't get through that one.

What set this all off was a talk I had with the Octopus the day after I'd seen the warden. I was hitting the weights with Will and Viking, trading reps and so on, still just fucking jaw-dropping stoner-eyed at Viking's skinny ass benching like two-eighty, when the Octopus walks up and says that after dinner I should come back to Wired's cell. Now with the talking that went on the night before, you can imagine I'd be a little nervous about that, but if they were going to shank me they'd shank me in the courtyard, right? So after dinner I go to Wired's cell and the Octopus and Will are there, and Will's all, It's all I could do not to tell you on the yard, but we've given it some thought. . .

I've given it some thought, the Octopus broke in, and while you didn't pop your cherry on the inside, you're still a race warrior, aren't you, Ben?

I'd had just about A fucking nuff of people asking me questions. I mean, between the warden and these guys, Floyd always out for some story about pussy, and the fact that Billy was getting raped, everyday for all I knew, and that was the one thing I wanted to talk about and fucking nobody would open their mouth about that, because why? Because we're in prison and nobody does anything else for anybody else in prison. These people wanted me because I could help them make money, and my skin was the right color. I just stood there, ready to take whatever.

I'm not assuming too much, am I? The Octopus said. The nigger on the bridge was your first one, wasn't it?

No, I said.

No, what? the Octopus said. No, I'm not assuming too much, or No, he's not the first person you've killed.

Nobody else, I said, trying not to shake.

Good, glad to have that settled, the Octopus said. I don't like to assume things. I make it a point to not assume too much, but I'm glad that we're on the same page. As I was saying, we've noticed – I've noticed – that you're a little, shall we say, distant from the group, and I think I understand why. A lot of these guys are getting high and getting over, I mean, hell, it's practically our goddamn motto, and you sir are practicing RAHOWA. I get it, Ben. I really do.

The Octopus talked about my contribution to the white race, and said that Wired had agreed, and at Will's sponsoring it was decided, that they'd give me a spider web tattoo on my elbow. I didn't know whether I wanted to grab him by the head and shove his skull between the bars on Wired's cell or drop to my knees and thank him for taking me in, tearfully rejoicing that my friends would think so highly of me. I was between believing what they said about me, believing that I had killed Brian and trying to take down at least one of them, the one, for saying it.

You're right-handed, right, Wired asked, as I sat down. I nodded and he got out his contraption, with the cassette motor and the guitar string and the egg cup, and he set to work on my elbow, doing the web freestyle.

And I thought the first one hurt.

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RAHOWA.

Racial Holy War.

Will and the Octopus, everybody, really did think I was the real fucking deal. I went back to my cell that night with a spider web on elbow, a badge of honor earned by watching Brian fall off a bridge, from holding his head, while a little, I mean not more than teaspoon of blood trickled out of his nose, and that was that. I didn't know what to do. So, I started seeing Wired every chance I could get. Got the swasi on my arm, some sleeve work. It was one thing to be friendly with Floyd. He was my cell-mate; he was protected, and I was protected. That was business. But if their golden boy was just some nigger-loving raver, well it could go either way.

The warden brought me in three times in the next two weeks. Each time, he said things were going to change, and I better get him a kite. At least with all the new ink I was getting that didn't look suspicious.

Look at me, I said the last of those times he brought me in. You think anybody's going to believe what you're saying? Even if they think maybe that was me, I'm a convert now. I stand up for my people, and they know that's worth a lot more than whatever you're selling.

Winds are a-blowing, the warden said.

He always had something stupid like that to say.

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And then things started changing.

A peckerwood, some guy I'd only nodded at, was found knifed in his cell. Nobody saw anything, nobody knew anything, other than his bunkmates didn't do it,



because the whole place, all of Big Mac, was put on lockdown within minutes of it happening and their cell was clean. A week later, Jeff, the fucking psycho with the champagne bottle, bit it in his cell. I thought the warden's new crew may have been responsible, let it happen; but even Floyd was talking about how hardassed those new guys were, wouldn't take money from nobody.

I told Will about the El Rukns trying to make their way in. You think they're trying to start off with a bang? I said. You know, gain some support from the other black gangs, before all the squabbles over territory and who had what rights and how do we cut up the pie? started.

Fucking startup gang can't do shit like that, he said. That takes capital. Getting into cells, moving around under the watchful eye, nah. Now if we were in Florida, I'd fucking buy it, but we ain't. If the El Rukns had that capital with the guards, they'd be using it to make money. And the Crips aren't going to be happy with them showing face. Your bunkmate tell you that?

He said as much, I said.

You watch, he said. This shit with Jeff and Dennis – bless their souls – I mean they were good brothers, good white men, but all that's going to blow over. Nobody likes violence in here, and everybody knows that if you fuck with the Brand, that's your ass. I mean that's why we signed up, right? Someone takes a pipe to you, you got ten brothers behind you with chains and a blade. Not like the niggers, man. And this is what I'm telling you, you keep an ear out on Floyd. This shit with the El Rukns is going to get something out of the Crips, and when that happens, you got to let me know.

Why don't we just let the niggers handle their own business, I said.

Because the niggers don't know how to handle business. We'll get the El Rukns to fighting strength, then back the Crips, cause shit, they're going to win anyway, and word from the Octopus is, when the dust settles, we'll just pick up the pieces. And those pieces'll be c-notes.

We reached the end of the courtyard, over by the fences and underneath the guard tower. Will bent over to tie his shoe, and a group on their way back inside came through the corridor that separated the yard from the rodeo grounds they'd been working on. Through the fence I handed off a small roll of twenties and palmed two syringes from one of the guys back in the mess hall, the one who wanted my cornbread. I turned back toward Will and he stood up. We walked back to the weights.

We golden? he said.

New works for the gents, I said. Wish I could get a job in the clinic.

Those pills will fuck with you head, man.

I've been thinking about something, I said.

Hope you didn't hurt yourself, Will said.

What do you think of Billy? I asked.

Which Billy? Your roommate, the punk?

He's not a punk, alright, I said. He's a good guy. I was thinking, maybe the Brand, you know. He would work hard.

Tell me you're joking, Will said.

It's just hard for me to watch, I said.

I can imagine, Will said. He's a white guy sucking off a nigger. I'm sure that appals you on all sorts of levels, but the fact of the matter, Ben, is he's a faggot and a nigger-lover, and there's no place in the brand for any of that shit.

I was thinking, maybe we could just watch out for him, you know? So, he didn't have to keep doing this.

Watch his back for what, chess lessons? You're a good guy, Ben. You got some heart. But hey, he said, as we got closer to our group, this shit with the niggers. Don't go talking it up, alright. But seriously, you're gonna get a chance for that rock real soon. Be Alice Baker all the way. Blood in blood out. Full brother. Yeah, you like that, don't you? My fucking man. That's my boy.

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Nigger is contagious. You start saying it cause it's expected, you start saying it cause you're the posterboy fucking racist whose one shot at heroism was pushing a nigger off a bridge. You start saying it, cause if anybody believes what the warden's snitches are right now spreading around that concrete and wire, I'm as good as Jeff, that is, fifty stab wounds worse off than I am now.

And then, it kind of slips out. Nigger. That's nigger talk, when your boy talks about Laying Pipe with some girl on the outside. That's a nigger for you, when a black guy cops out and turns state. You know, like white boys aren't playing both sides. You know, Nietzsche says that all creative power is appropriation, it's control of an other. He says the higher individual is one who recognizes that and pushes ahead with his creative

goals. There was always a lot of irony in this for me. I mean, most people turn AB because they wanted protection, they wanted drugs, and they wanted to feel a part of something. Those are all very reactive life choices, as opposed to the proactive self-affirming bullshit Nietzsche made his career on. The thing is, it gets easier, this appropriation of the other, this instilling one's will on the world around him. But really, it's even any of that. I said nigger because I didn't want to die. And then I kept saying it. Earlier today, not three hours before I came in here go get this thing on my back cleared away, I see this guy walking down twenty-third wearing a Marvin Harrison jersey, you know number eighty-eight, and I think – I swear to God, I'm near a year out and I think – What's that nigger doing wearing an eighty-eight. Where does that come from? I mean, I know, but still I'm asking. I've got to ask.

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This other tattoo, this other one on my back, I don't want you to touch, cause I can't say I did much to stand up for me, to stand up for Bin-E while I was at Big Mac, but this cheesy ass fucking tombstone was what little I did.

Get my rock.

All this shit with Jeff and Dennis will all blow over.

I thought I was a fucking dead man. I thought that the warden was right, and no matter what I said and how hard I acted, no way I was stabbing somebody cause the Octopus told me to. I wasn't going to go to war for the Aryan Brotherhood, which meant I was going to die. This is what I thought about, sitting in my cell, losing four straight

games of chess to Billy. Still, though, I was looking at Billy, and it was like when my aunt got sick. My mom sat Sam and me down – I was still pretty young then – and she tried to explain what was happening to her. Didn't get Mom of the Year points there, I don't think. She said that something was growing inside of Aunt Helen, and that it was something bad, it was something that was making her sick. And she wasn't going to look good for a little while, but the doctors were optimistic and pretty soon the hair would grow back, and she'd be good as new, better than that even. But the next time I saw Aunt Helen, I hid behind my mom's leg. I was afraid of what was growing there. I was afraid of what was making her weak.

I sat there, looking at Billy, losing at chess, thinking, I'm sitting across from a guy who's been raped. He looked healthy, healthyish anyway, the same as he always looked, and then I was thinking, well of course he looks the way he always looked, cause this has been going on since before I came here. I wanted to do something for him before I got shanked. I wanted to do just one good thing before the Brotherhood knew I was a niggerlover too, before the traitor-in-the-midst and all that.

I said, Billy, what if I could get you protected.

Billy said, Protected from what?

You know, I said.

The balls on you, Billy said. What, you a big man now. You got the Brotherhood behind you and you out to recruit. They don't want my kind.

I'm not out to recruit you, I said. I just think, you know, do a little work, stay behind the scenes, not even through me, just something that makes you valuable.

You're out of your mind, he said. And you're in check.

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But that other tattoo, the one I said I was going to tell you about but didn't, I went to see Wired, thinking, well, I can't avoid these guys. They're my ticket, right? So, I went up to him and I said I wanted a piece for a dead friend.

You hardly knew Jeff, Wired said.

On the outside, I said.

So, I got this tombstone on my back shoulder blade. I know, tombstone, real cheesy, right? Yeah, I guess it is. I always figured if I got a tattoo in memoriam for somebody I'd have their ashes mixed in with the ink or something like that, get a symbol for infinity, something spiritual, something unique. But subtlety doesn't play too well inside, and I wanted this piece to be a sign, if only for myself. I had him put Brian's birth date on the stone. If I was going to die inside, I wanted something that could be identified that said I didn't forsake him, that I didn't lose sight of him completely.

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A blade is the great equalizer. With a blade everything is decided by will. I guess you could argue that will is like size, though, in that way. You're born with it, you develop it, or you don't. That really, there is no equalizer, because we're unequal. Yeah, I guess you could say that.

But for all intents and purposes, let's say that there is something, some *thing* called equality, and it's this never-ending fountain of a thing, something that can be shared by all. That fountain would swell up from a blade, one of those sword in the stone numbers. By looking at convicts on TV, watching the movies, you'd think it's all about who's the biggest, wouldn't you? But how's this: the Octopus had me read *The Prince* too, and that whole mess is organized around the principle of being willing to do what your opponent is not capable of, in whatever fashion you want to define *capable*.

Take Viking. He was scary for a scrawny guy with his moustache and all, but still, he was a scrawny guy. Small compared to Billy's jockey, small compared to most of the Crips who hit the iron like a blunt. But he had the will, that Machiavellian switch or whatever in his head and with a blade he was equal. Not that there was anything most anybody else on the inside wasn't willing to do in return, so I guess I'm a little out of my league here. Rationalizations aren't my strong suit.

Thing is, that equalizer sits heavy on the backs of every inmate's mind. Like a scimitar on a flag, it's a standard, the enemy's standard, and we carry it around like so much grit and treasure. The only benefit this constant fear really bestows is the relative lack of light violence in the prison. It's not very often I saw fistfights at Big Mac. I saw people carried out of their cell, red and still. I saw hoses turned on cells. I mean, we lived with each other. How could anyone afford the raw feelings of a fight. Most of the time, we were polite even.

So one day Will's spotting me, and I go to add twenty more pounds for my presses, he looks to the corner of the yard and goes, Hold up on that. How are your arms feeling?

What kind of a question was that? My arms. Fine, I said.

He looked at the corner again, and to me he said that I needed to go and get in a fight with the nigger over by the basketball court, the one with the bandana. Like that narrows it down, I said. Look, he said, and sure enough only one brother in a bandana. Hit him hard, but don't hurt him, Will said.

What does that mean? I asked.

Now, he said.

Will took the weights from me, hung them on the bar and helped me to sit with one of those brother handshake-to-your-chest things, and then I was walking across the yard, by myself, wondering if this guy in the bandana was going to put the great equalizer in me. I noticed a couple Mexicans stop talking and watch as I passed. A peckerwood on the yard alone. I knew that look they were giving me, that catlike stare. It said, Are you leaving the nest little bird, or are you learning to fly? Was I dissing my boys – fair game – or was I on a mission?

By the time I put my foot on the blacktop, the guy in the bandana had turned around, stood there watching me. So, you're the one, he said, and I looked for a blade, I looked for it hard in his eyes, figuring they had to tell me if he had one stashed. I kept walking, fast, and sprinted the last few steps to him and popped him in his jaw. His head snapped around, and I tried to reposition myself, find where to strike next. I still couldn't see a knife. When this guy hit me, it wasn't stick, stick, hook. I just felt fists. No art or beauty, just fists on flesh, and I unloaded too, feeling the wind sucked out my mouth, a ringing in my ears. Don't hurt him. I don't think I could have if I wanted to.

And then I went down. I've been shot, I said. I'm dying.



But of course I wasn't. I'd been shot with a beanbag from a guard on the tower, and then another shot went off, and the guy in the bandana fell on top me, rolled around on my legs saying Jesus, fuck, in that order over and over like a mantra, clutching at his back, like an itch he couldn't reach. The rest of the inmates gave us plenty of space, and we were picked up with two guards each, hauled across the yard, my shoes dragging off the blacktop and into the dirt. That's when I looked up at a row of bleachers, saw another guy, another black guy sitting there with his hands on his stomach, just sitting there, with a thick swath of blood darkening the legs of his jumpsuit, nodding off like, but with a little shake, a little tremor of what life he had left.

I'd never been in a fight before.

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For fighting, I got a week in the hole. I don't want to talk about that. You talk to other ex-cons, and they tell you about the hole, like a point of pride, like time in combat for an Army man. They talk around it but make sure you know they were there. I knew the warden wanted to have it out with me, have another one of our chats, and by the third day I was hoping he'd pull me up there, so I had someone to talk to. And then I hoped that he didn't, because I'd probably say anything, everything I knew.

In all reality the place sounds a lot scarier than it is. You think of a hole, you think of rats, bugs, a toilet: all that tests one's humanity. Really, it's just a cell like any other, except I was alone, and that despite being alone I had lights on twenty-four hours a day, I got searched and the finger wave twice a day, in case the Brotherhood could send

me drugs through the walls. For seven days I sat by myself without anything to read, anything to do except piss and shit, masturbate and eat. A guard came by twice a day with food, wouldn't talk, wouldn't ask me if I wanted coffee so I went without. For seven days I thought about that guy on the bleacher, bleeding out without any guard taking notice. I thought, Is that my fault? I thought, I wish I had a sheet.

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But the warden never did summon me. After seven days I went back to my cell where Billy and Floyd looked at me like they'd forgotten me, an Oh you again, kind of thing. And as much as I'd been missing them, yes missing them, I didn't know what to do. I'd been starved for conversation, and I didn't have the appetite to talk. Really, I wanted to lay down and have them close by, except that I wasn't really sure what I had done out on the yard.

Who'd they get? I said.

All business, Floyd said. You didn't even wave to me when you came up on our court. No, man, you did good.

You were there? I asked.

I'm dying, I'm dying, Floyd said. That sound familiar.

What about the other one? I asked.

Your boy with the moustache took care of that. You did good, Floyd said.

I laid down, thinking that might make me feel better, and I grabbed a cigarette from my pack, still mostly full, like I left it, and with all the sounds of the prison after breakfast, the shouts and threats and the TV in the quad blaring, I tried to sleep. I told

myself, I'll be out by the time this cigarette is done and let my hand hang off the edge of my cot.

What're you sleeping there for, Floyd said. I think you get the bunk now. Billy, make room for the man.

I'm fine where I'm at, I said. Billy, you stay right there.

Well thank you, sir. Thank you mass'r, you're too kind, Billy said and went back to his book.

And what's your problem? I said.

Floyd told me not to mind him too much, said his daddy had picked the wrong side and now he was a little pissed, not giving Billy the sugar he needed.

I'm so tired, I said.

Let me tell you about this girl I once knew, Floyd said. This one was Vietnamese, her parents came right off the boat. I'll tell you most gooks don't have enough curves for me, but this one was something special. I'd eat through a mile of her shit just to get a taste of that ass, you know? She was all quiet and proper but when you got to working those nipples, wasn't a thing she wouldn't give you.

He went on, and I tried to get a look at Billy, say I'm with you with a little head nod, a little gesture that I understood him, that I'd get him out someday, make sure his jockey got what was coming, but Billy kept reading. I wanted to tell him I wasn't laughing at him, but he wouldn't look me in the face.

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You didn't want to do that, the Octopus said.

No. You're right, I didn't, I said.

But you did it anyway.

Yeah.

You didn't ask why, he said.

No, I said. I didn't.

The Octopus and Viking were in *my* cell this time. Floyd and Billy were out doing what it was they did during the day, and I lit a cigarette, held up the pack.

No thank you, said the Octopus. Viking?

I'm fine, Viking said.

Suit yourself, I said, and tossed the pack on my cot.

So, you didn't ask why, but you didn't want to go, the Octopus said. That makes me think of some rumors that have been going around, rumors that would make sense for someone who would rather not act than act.

I didn't know if I was being sent over there to die, I said. But I went anyway.

What does that tell you?

Precisely, the Octopus said. Why would you think that Will would send you off to die. He's been very good to you, hasn't he?

Will's been solid, I said.

We've seen you with the warden, Viking said, one arm behind his leg.

I looked at the Octopus's big bushy sideburns and a spot under his nose that he missed shaving. I didn't even know where to start. It's like my high school science teacher, he said you can't prove a negative. How was I to prove something didn't

happen? I spoke to the Octopus, I looked him right in the face. You think I would talk? I said.

I'm sure you said something, the Octopus said. You're too polite not to. Tell me what that was.

I told him to fuck off, I said.

And what did he say?

He threatened me. He's a pig, what would you expect, I said.

And what did he have to threaten you with? the Octopus said.

I said rumors.

Are these the rumors about that nigger you killed?

Yeah, I said.

Viking leaned forward and picked up the pack of smokes. This your cot? he said. I nodded. You need a bed, son. Only reason a Peckerwood should sleep on a cot is if he's lucky enough to share a cell with Brand brothers. You get me?

I nodded again.

A punk shouldn't be in your bed, Viking went on. Unless you're not really a Peckerwood. He said it was an issue of pride, of staking out what's yours. Nothing is given, he said.

That which is given has no value, the Octopus said.

I feel sorry for him, I said.

No reason, the Octopus said. In here, you can choose to be a warrior or a woman. Your cell-mate made his choice.

There's no way out for him, I said.

You're awfully concerned about him when there's other things you should worry about, the Octopus said.

I looked at him and at Viking, that god of a moustache hanging off his chin. I dragged on my cigarette. It's more than that, though, I lied. About Billy's bed. That nigger's always coming by, and I know he's stashed some shit in the seam of Billy's mat. I saw a scimitar on a piece of paper once. It was in code, so it's not like I could do anything with it, but I haven't wanted to mess with that.

A scimitar? the Octopus asked.

Yeah, I said. I think Frank's banging. I haven't wanted to say anything cause I'm not sure, but that's the reason I think Billy would be helpful.

Frank wouldn't tell his bitch nothing, Viking said.

No of course not, I agreed. But we get Frank off Billy, we take care of Frank, and that sends a message.

And why didn't you say anything? the Octopus asked.

I wasn't sure, I said, which sounded better than, because I just made it up.

We'll tell you what makes you sure, the Octopus said. You watch that boy, and you watch that jigaboo. And if you find anything you come to me with it. Don't go thinking about it.

Alright, I said.

You get me? he said.

I said I did.

What do you think? the Octopus asked Viking.

I think we're done here, Viking said.

Clayton Webber

Chapter 7

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I'm bored with this game, Billy said. You may as well resign.

I'm only a pawn down, I said.

Oh, he said and looked the board suspiciously, like I'd put an extra piece on when he wasn't looking. I hadn't.

I guess I'll resign then, he said, and tipped his king over, went to his bunk and started reading.

What's his problem? I said to Floyd.

Lovers quarrel, Floyd said.

I wish you'd shut the fuck up, I said, again to Floyd.

You need to not be so close-minded, Floyd said. It's the nineties now, get with the times.

What's really going on? I said.

Frank's been trying to get us moved to the same cell, Billy said.

Moving in together. That's a big step, Floyd said.

This is the kind of shit that makes me not want to talk to you guys, Billy said.

Floyd, shut up. Billy, you telling me you want to move in with what's his name, Frank? I said.



Floyd said, The problem is Billy wants them to get a dog, but what Frank really wants is a pussy, a cat I mean.

That's fucking it, Billy said, and got up like he could walk out. He stood there for a second, then picked up his book and sat down at his bed. You're an asshole, I said to Floyd.

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I had a visitor. I showed off my teeth, the bottoms of my feet, then took a seat at a long table. The visiting room was crowded, with plastic chairs and the sounds of talking, women's voices. It was like being in a school lunchroom again, all the noises and smells of people in perfume, the sound of jewelry – I think I could even smell the leather in someone's shoes. When I sat down, Evan was already there, sitting on the other side of the table. When he caught sight of me, surprise would be an understatement. He wasn't wearing his jacket, and I wondered if they wouldn't let him in with it. His hair was still long and stringy, and to be honest I still saw that same dumb kid who wanted to get me killed in Texas, but that didn't change that I needed him.

I told him he looked different. He chuckled and said I did too. What's with the tattoos, he asked, looking at my wrists and my neck.

I've picked a few up, I said.

Yeah, hey about not coming in sooner. I meant to come see you, it's just--

I didn't want you to come see me, I said.

That shut him up. Evan reached in his pocket, like to grab his Zippo or something, realized it wasn't there, and set his hands in his lap. So, what's up then? he said.

Don't get all butt-hurt, I said. And keep your hands out of your pockets.

What do you want, Evan asked.

Porno, I said. I said, You remember all that hot shit your uncle used to have? I said, Can he still get it. It'd sure make it easier to get through all this if I could have some porno, some of that stuff your uncle gave you, that kind of shit.

I said, Do you understand what I'm asking?

Evan had his doubts, of course and left a little pissed off, I think. Still, double street value for his uncle's pot, and now that Brian and I weren't around to help get rid of it, I mean, that had to have him thinking. Moving dope into prison, though, well, that's kind of big time, and while Evan was enough of a cowboy to think he could do it, everybody has their limit, right?

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That afternoon the Octopus and I were touring the yard together, away from the other guys. He wanted to know if Evan was in. I told him I didn't know and that even if he was, I probably couldn't be involved.

What do you mean, he asked.

I got the fingerwave going out of there, I said. The warden's got the pigs watching me.

The Octopus asked for Evan's address and said that he could set something up, get someone else to drop-off. Picking up, though, would still be on me.

One more thing, he said. This rumor about you being friends with the nigger you killed. Due to your continued interest in the financial success of our enterprise here, Viking has convinced me that what's going around couldn't possibly be true. As far as the Brotherhood is concerned, all that's only a dirty rumor trying to disrupt us, an attempt to discredit one of our up-and-coming brothers. And you deny it, yes? I nodded.

Good, he said. Because Will picked you out for a reason, and we can't have you making him a fool. This turns out to be true, and you're better off hanging yourself. I just want that made clear.

What about Billy? I said.

Billy doesn't need to know either, the Octopus said.

No. He's practically invisible. He can get the dope in and we can protect him. No membership, no favors, just care, like looking after one's cattle. He'd be a mule, I said.

Let me think about it, he said. In the meantime, I'll get Poppins working on getting a note to your friend, Evan, right?

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In the week following the prison had a charge, a static pop off the bars, a hum in the TV sets on the quads. It was hot, and for days on end, my skin was wet, slippery. On the yard, the sun warmed my tattoos to burning, and we could taste the dirt in the air, that hot

blowing furnace around Big Mac, and the fighting really started. Floyd said the El Rukns were going to make a play, a retaliation for the guy in the bleachers who was bleeding all over his shoes. They found the big guy in the bandana – the one I had been told to start a fight with – in the showers. A guy in the Mexican Mafia, the one who worked in the clinic, said his guts were spilled out on the tile, that they were a pain in the ass for the guys who cleaned it up.

What do you do with a mess like that? he said. They don't go back in and hold their place.

Floyd got popped too, only he was carrying a blade down his pant leg and only ended up in the infirmary. Still, he was holed-up for awhile, while they tried to keep fluid out of his right lung and there was talk about if he'd make it out or whatever. I stayed in my cot and tried not to think about it, tried not to look at the empty bunk. Billy didn't see the point, said Floyd was a pain in the ass anyway, and why didn't I take a bunk when I could. I wanted to change the subject, ask him about moving some weight, get a little protection, play chess in peace, but I hadn't heard from the Octopus, so I didn't say anything.

We didn't hear much from the Octopus at all that week. All he said was Hold. Palm up in our face: Hold. Another Crip got stabbed in the throat in the elevator. Hold. This guy, a guy I'd never met, crawled halfway down D Tier with his hand pressed under his chin until he gave out. While we were on lockdown, the blood was hosed off. Hold.

Will said, We gonna pick up those pieces. Once the niggers have fought it out, we'll be there.

But the call didn't come. We waited, and then one day, on my way to chow, I hit the ground floor, and up in the catwalk, I could see three guys, their jumpsuits tied around their waists, undershirts showing off their tattoos, big blotchy things I couldn't make out against their dark skin. One of them snapped to attention at the sight of me, did a little Sieg Heil, then wrapped that outstretched hand in a circle, like he was holding something and put an imaginary cock in his mouth.

You a tough fucking nazi, huh, he said.

His buddy said Stone to the bone, and patted him on the back. Then all three of them spit down on me.

Come down here and talk that nigger shit to me, I said, loudly, as loud as I could.

Move on, a guard said, motioning at me to keep toward the chow hall.

I'd never been so happy to see a pig.

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It's too fucking far is all I'm saying, said Will.

And I'm saying that it isn't your place to say what is too far, said the Octopus.

We should go stick those niggers and call it a day, Will said, keeping at it. I ate my cornbread. It seemed like every day all we ate was cornbread. It was dry, with a taste barely reminiscent of rice cakes, but it stuck in your gut, which is more than I can say about the green beans.

But they're always going too far, aren't they? the Octopus said. What, with the degradation of white society, the appropriation of white culture into this nation of ours

that encourages deviancy, sloth, that rewards the niggers and the spics for coming into our house and stealing the food off of our table. Yes, Will, I agree with you, with your sentiment at least. If we were sane men, we would go and stick those niggers, as you said. But we do not live in a sane world. This place, this country does not belong to us. So, if you want to do right by your real nation, your race, I strongly suggest that you cut your fucking mouth right now and act like a proud white man. Don't act like a fucking monkey.

There was still the question of how we should avoid getting stuck ourselves if we weren't going to throw the first pick. See, the thing is, in prison if you're protected you don't really get the idea that someone is after you until they're in front of you with a blade or a pipe. But every once and awhile, this gang shit goes open, like with the El Rukns earlier that day, and that meant that anytime we weren't with each other might be one of those times I was just talking about. And it's not like we could just stick together either. We got split up, put in lines, stuck in our cells, put on lockdown, whatever every day. Like right after chow, I got pulled off by myself by two guards, shackled up and sent off to the warden's office.

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His eyes looked kind of gray that day, like something was bothering him. I had no reason to think it was the string of stabbings, since he wasn't going to catch any heat over it. It's prison, that kind of thing happens, I think is the general attitude held by anybody who could pitch him heat. To my knowledge not one of the murders in Big Mac since I got

there was even investigated, but still, a part of me wanted to believe he was concerned about all that, about the war going on underneath him. It was the part of me – the part that wanted to believe he cared – that I'd spent nearly two years by then trying to bury. It was that same part, that although I was standing with a pig, someone I knew as a pig, thought about as a pig, it was the same part that made me think, If he'd just wrap me up in those flabby pink arms and tell me I was going to make it, I think I just might.

And he was talking all soft, but what the warden was saying wasn't anything that would make me better any safer, not that I'd expected it, really. He was talking about Thailand, about being sent there with a group of wardens and law enforcement officers on a, what's the word, a goodwill kind of trip from the United States. He said one night he was in a nightclub, and he was talking with this Thai pig, like the equivalent of a beat-cop or whatever. The warden said, That Thai cop told me that in Thailand we have two hands. We have the right hand, the white hand, and the Warden held up a hand for me to see, like that was supposed to be real interesting. He went on, And we have the left hand, the black hand. And in Thailand, the white hand keeps the black hand in shadow, it protect it. The warden pressed his palms together and turned the back of his right hand at me, so I could see that his right hand was covering his left hand. For a second, I wondered if he was going to hit me with that right hand, and really I was kind of hoping for it.

In return, the Warden said, using the words of the Thai pig, the black hand supports the white, gives it a base to rely on. Do you understand what I'm saying, Ben?

I said, Are you saying that Thailand is corrupt? I don't have any money for you.

No Ben, the warden said and leaned back in his chair, like this was really taking a lot out of him. I'm saying that you are trying to be the white hand, and you can't. The Brotherhood doesn't care about you. They won't support you, but you are in the light. You are visible and accessible.

Everyone in here is visible and accessible, I said.

Not like you. Not like Ben, the great white warrior. You are going to die unless you give me some information. And you are going to die protecting them. What would Brian think about that? he said.

Have you ever killed a man? I said. Have you ever looked one in the face, saw someone who you loved and did it anyway? Have you ever come back stronger, knowing what you were capable of?

I don't know why I said those things, but really, what else could I have said. I wanted out of that room. I wanted out bad.

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When I was put out on the yard, it was on the other side from the Brotherhood. To get to them I had to walk past the basketball courts, the bleachers where I saw that guy bleeding out, the circle track all dusty and weed-bitten. I had to walk past weights and everybody else, and I wondered if the warden was right. I really wondered right then if I was going to get stabbed, in front of everybody. It's fucking ridiculous, but as I walked across the yard, I could see it in my head, the whole place, everybody circling around me, the Brotherhood far away, but looking on, looking on curiously, like they were watching a



snake eat a mouse. I saw Bloods and Crips, the El Rukns and the Mexican Mafia all joining together to stab me over and over in my stomach, so they could watch and see how long I would keep up breathing.

So, I've got an ego, I get it. Leave it to me to assume that people are going to put aside gang ties and whatever to kill one white boy, but have you ever felt like that? Have you ever been somewhere and thought, I'm not safe here. Why did I come? Imagine that feeling right after somebody told you you were going to be killed. I kept my head up. I kept walking.

The Octopus wanted to talk when I got over to him, so we circled the yard, going back the way I'd come. It felt a little better with him there, a little more like I was in a place I could control. And then I looked at him, and his big ugly glasses and inky arms. And I thought, this guy is my friend. He's what I have for friends now. I bummed a smoke and let him talk. He was a friend after all. Really, he was all I had.

I've been thinking about Billy, the Octopus said. What you were saying about having him mule the dope in, that's a good call. That's smart thinking, Ben.

I thought so too when I mentioned it a week or whatever prior, but I nodded my head and pulled on my cigarette and listened while he told me about how Poppins was going to set it all up, get a note to somebody who would get it to Evan.

You don't need me to get in touch with Evan? I asked.

There's no need for you to do that, he said. You've put yourself at enough risk. Just worry about Billy.

Yeah, Billy. Billy who's trying to move in with his boyfriend. I asked what the deal was with Billy, what our terms were.

No membership, the Octopus said. No ink. But we'll watch him, make sure nobody else tries to make him their punk, and this is where you come in, Ben. Hold on, though, I promised Will he could tell you.

The Octopus gave a two-finger wave and Will trotted over like a kid who'd won the game coming home to tell dad. He reached us and balanced himself on the Octopus's arm, brushed his pant legs. Can I tell him? he asked. The Octopus nodded. You're going to get that rock, he said. Seriously, that first one was great, but now you're getting in the brand.

I was like a dumb kid myself, all like What are you talking about? and Who? and whatnot, and Will said, Billy's jocker.

What the fuck does he have to do with anything? I said.

He has to do with sending a message, the Octopus said. That bullshit with the El Rukns earlier today is symptomatic of our perception within these walls. And if we're going to pick up the pieces once the black gangs have piled up enough bodies, we must be feared. That's what he has to do with it, Ben. That, and he's not going to let Billy just walk away. Your friend may be a faggot and his lover may be too, but that doesn't mean that it can not work out and each goes their separate ways, no hard feelings.

But the guy's a nigger, Will said. This is about honor. This is about race.

Goddamn it, this is about our future, Will, the Octopus said. I'd never heard him yell before, and really it wasn't loud, just a hiss, probably inaudible not four feet away, but his jaw was set hard and he looked like he might hit Will. I'm sorry, the Octopus went on, of course it's about our race. It's about the future of our people. So, what do you say, Ben?

What could I say?

Will here will get you a blade, he said and walked away.

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That night I thought about Brian, because I did that a lot, and I was there when he died, and it wasn't everyday I was asked to kill somebody, like Here, hold on. We'll get you a knife and then you can go and stab this guy to death, ok? So I laid on my cot, thinking of Brian and the empty bunk next to me and Billy, who hadn't said much of anything that night and hadn't even offered a game of chess. I fingered the web tattoo on my elbow – it was still a bit raised up like a maze – and I thought, It's like a chit. I got into this whole thing, like back in my junkie days, and was thinking we're all chits, little poker chips to be hoarded and traded and moved around, but Brian, Brian was a chit too. And he was a chit that I was moving around, spreading out, giving a little here and there, a tip to the dealer, a nod to the pit boss, and I wondered, Do I have anything left for me. Is there any of Brian left for me?

And then, in true junkie fashion, I thought, Of course. What are you thinking? They can't take Brian, because they didn't know Brian, and all two people have is there time together and nobody in here was out there for that. What a pussy I was being. What a fucking chick. Disgusted, I rolled over, faced the wall and tried to go to sleep.

It didn't work.

Nobody's taken him away. They can't take him away, I kept telling myself. He's as real as he ever was, and I tried to picture his face, and I still could. He was fifteen and

skating, with a big dumb afro. He was fifteen, with a blunt behind his ear. He was smiling. He was kick-flipping and baggy-jeaned and brilliant in the summer.

That's what I thought about Brian. And if that's what I thought about, what did Billy conjure up before he went to sleep? What were his slipping somnolent dreams?

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You've been going easy on me, Billy said.

What are you talking about? I said. I've won twice in like the last five games.

Just because you can't beat me doesn't mean you haven't been going easy on me. Playing some bullshit. I know how you do. But you've been out. You've been after me.

I'm just playing the game, I said. But I smiled, and lit a cigarette, and it that smoke felt good in my lungs for the first time in a long while. Billy set his king lengthwise on the board and reached across to shake my hand. That was new.

Three and three.

Why is it, I said, that we celebrate life by shortening it? With cigarettes, booze, whatever.

Billy told me that if I was celebrating beating him at chess, locked in a cell at Big Mac, then he wasn't sure if he wanted to talk to such a crazy man.

It's not about the chess, I said. But in general, why do you think that is?

Not that Floyd had been asked, but he sat up in his bunk and said, Home boy here's all perky cause he's got a night coming in the boneyard.

That ain't it, I said.

The hell it ain't, Floyd said. Was my home boy penciled you in. So you getting that rock, huh?

Lining pieces back in their place, I asked Billy if he wanted another game. But he said, You ever seen somebody so pleased with himself. What, next time I see you, do I need to salute?

Come on, Billy, I said. Let's play a tiebreaker.

Is that an order? he said. Are you going to be head asshole now?

Don't be like Billy. I just want to play a game, I said. I wanted him to know that I was happy about him, not about my rock. And I didn't even know about this supposed trip to the boneyard. But everything I had done since I got inside I'd done for myself. Evan Brian's tat, the one on my shoulder was more for me than for him. I realized that after I got it. But keeping that blade hidden, walking around with it against my leg, the tip stuffed down into my sock, the only way I could keep from throwing up was to think about Billy.

You know me. I'm not a noble guy. But I had to do something good. Even if it was something bad. I couldn't even get mad at Billy calling me an asshole. That was how I felt, and we played one more game that day, and I think he beat me, but I was all smiles and cigarette smoke. I was all sure.

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After breakfast, Will came by the cell and told Billy to take a hike. Billy left all no fuss and Will sat me down to go through it with me. From his pant leg he pulled out the shiv.

It was about six inches long and wrapped in toilet paper rope. The blade was that dirty industrial steel that was everywhere in the prison, filed down to a point. I don't know where they got it.

Now don't believe Hollywood, he told me. Don't go slicing away with this thing. You're not trying to shave him. Hold it close to your chest, like this, and jab out with it, like you're punching the guy with your thumb. You see? Put it here. Will put his index finger between two of my ribs and told me not to worry too much about placement, because the blade would split the ribs if I put my weight into it. Just keep stabbing, he told me.

This will be different than before, he said. He's going to talk to you, say *Please* and *No* and whatever else. You're going to be looking into his eyes when he dies. Make sure you see him die.

Ok, I said.

Ok is right, Will said. It's about fucking time, I say. I'm proud of you, Ben.

I stashed the blade under Floyd's mattress, went to shake Will's hand, but he gave me a hug, held me close enough to smell the sour milk sweat of his arms. Will loved me because of who he thought I hated. Easy now, big fella, I said, and Will let me go. I waited for him to leave. Fingers working on the hem of his jumpsuit, Will stood there like he was waiting for me to say something, but I didn't have anything to say, not really, not anything he'd want to hear. Not any of that in the slightest.

Sometimes I wonder, he said.

You high? I asked him.

That's the fucking thing, ain't it? I say I've been thinking, and you assume I'm stoned. I'm not harping on you, really, I mean anybody, but you know what I mean?

I don't, I said.

I mean the Octopus, Will said. I mean is this ORION, or is this the same nigger shit dressed up in pride?

It's business, I said.

That's what I fucking mean, Will said. This business with the Mexican Mafia is one thing, but fuck man, I've seen the Octopus working with the Crips, like close, like brothers man, and I ain't no niggers fucking brother. You know there was even some rumors going round about you. I mean, I knew it was bullshit, but the Octopus didn't care. Man, back in the old days, where I come from, you would've been called on that shit, made to say what's up.

So, what do you think needs to be done, I said. I'll stand with you Will maybe hold off on this thing here, and we'll figure something out. Octopus ain't shit without us anyway, is he?

Will said that I didn't need to hold off on nothing. You get that rock, he said to me. Then we can take back what's ours, with a vengeance. Octopus wants to make a statement we'll make a fucking statement. I'm talking war, son, he said. I'm talking war.

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Will said this wouldn't be like the first one, like Brian. Will said I'd have to watch Frank die. I wondered if I'd watched Brian die. Even now, I'm not sure. He was still when I got down to him, but was he dead already? Was he slipping away. Like I told the cops, I'd missed it, and it was all my fault. I knew that something bad, something important was happening, but I can't quite say what it was. He didn't move, I'm pretty sure of that.

My biggest fear, even bigger than thinking Frank would be ready for me, or would overpower me and bury that shank in my chest, was that I'd get him cornered, and he'd see the knife, and I would back off. Sorry, man, I thought you were somebody else, and that wouldn't help Billy, and it wouldn't help me, but what if I did it? What if I couldn't?

I stayed with Billy the next few days, following him everywhere with that chess board. I told him I wanted to play, that I had some new thoughts for the Grand Prix and I wanted to try them out. Even after he made me leave the board in our cell, I kept him in my eye, talking shit with the other Peckerwoods or lifting weights. I tried to find a pattern of when his jockey would grab him and go back up to his cell. On Tuesday, Frank took Billy into one of the showers. On Thursday he pulled Billy out of the shower and took him who knows where. Friday nothing. I knew I was missing something. The library? Was he finding Billy at work and pulling him into the stacks?

On the yard I asked the Octopus if he could get me into Frank's cell.

You're a bit cocky, aren't you? he said. If he sees that cell door open, with you standing there, you better hope he doesn't have a shiv.

Get me in late, I said.

While his other cell-mates are sleeping. I won't risk it.



What if a few of us go in, I said.

It's your rock, he said.

I went back to my weights, trying to find Billy on the bleachers or walking in dumb little circles, whatever it was he did. After my curls, I did some Marine-style presses, looking to the other side of the yard, and I saw him following Frank, holding onto a turned-out pocket on Frank's jumpsuit.

Will took a seat next to me on the bench and said, Makes you sick, don't it?

I just want it to be done, I said.

Well, I'd get a move-on then, brother, he said. Ever since the Octopus had given the order Will had taken to calling me that. I kept telling myself that he was the worst in the bunch, that if he knew about Brian he'd be the first to say they should gut me, but yeah, I felt bad about how good he was to me. If I got Frank and the code, that was it for Will. The life he was used to would be over.

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I gave up on Billy and tried working on Frank. I watched him in the quads, in front of the TV and buying dope. He was scoring from the Bloods, though he wasn't one. He didn't care for chess, and he didn't have any other punks. I found myself wishing he would just stick to his own kind, have a little black guy to push around, so it wouldn't be my problem, but even as I was thinking it I knew that wasn't right at all. I'd still be asked to kill somebody, whether Frank was fucking Billy or the warden. And even if Frank was punking out some other guy, some other black guy, would I just drop it if it was put in

front of my face? If it was Floyd? And then I found myself wishing I didn't know. And that was no use either; there was still that rock to worry about.

You look like shit, Will said. I jumped; I didn't even know he was next to me. He placed his hands on the railing, next to mine, and we looked down on the quad where Frank's back was to us, watching *The Price is Right*. I rolled my hands on the railing, palms up, and gave a shrug.

I don't know that this is as hard as you're making it, Will said.

Are you trying to say something? I said.

I'm not stuttering, brother, Will said. I'm not accusing either. But you've got to make an example of this sambo, and quick.

I'm trying, I said.

It's been over a week, he said.

So, what do I do? I asked.

Will said, Are you kidding me? You kill a motherfucker. You don't worry about witnesses, cause nobody talks. You don't worry about friends, because we're trying to send a message. You worry about pigs, you keep your eye on the security cameras. That's all you got to do, brother. But fucking do it, man. No more putting it off.

That night, I shaved my face at the sink in my cell, just before lights out. I was looking at Billy reading his book, comfortable in it, and I thought, you won't have to read so much soon. There's always plenty to get away from, but I'll make one less thing. I got into bed, picturing the showers, a fight in the quad, the guard leaving his station and me coming in behind. I waited until I got under the blanket to slide the blade out of my pant leg and tuck in under the mat on my cot. It was an ugly looking thing, the point not

so much sharp as it was backbone, unyielding. I will be a knife, I said. I won't go soft. And when it's done, all these cats that called me brother will be finished. This is the right thing, I prayed.

This is right.

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After breakfast the next day, I went to Wired's cell. I'd almost gotten used to the feel of the knife on my leg, and I found that I didn't pop up when I walked anymore. Just a little disturbance, man, and a carton of smokes for your trouble. Nothing's for free, even between brothers. People were down in the quad, watching TV and playing chess, their jumpsuits tied around their waists, cause even inside it must have been ninety degrees. The smell of sweat was thick, viscous. Nobody was looking me in the face, but that was nothing new. Nobody wants to see anything.

It wasn't until I got to Wired's cell – right in front of the damn thing – that I could smell the blood. It hit me a second before I saw it. Wired had bled out on the floor, on the mirror and sink, the walls. His jumpsuit clung around him, the fat pockets on his sides taut and still and red. He had his back to me, face down. Did he say please, I wondered, like Will told me they all did?

I didn't even touch him, try to roll him over or anything. I went for the Octopus, facing the same backs and looking-away faces as when I'd come in. People went on with their games and their talk shows. Nobody I knew.

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There's a danger in only knowing partway how something works. The Octopus gave me Wired's tattoo gun, showed me how to dismantle it and keep the pieces under my mat, next to my blade, the motor in the false bottom of a shampoo bottle. The subterfuge wouldn't last a room inspection, but everything looked clean at first glance. The Octopus and I had taken our shoes off before going in the cell. We scrounged a kite, the tattoo rig, but we left his smokes and his pictures. We didn't talk except for the few short instructions he gave me. Check the seam of his mattress, that sort of thing.

When we left, we peeled the wet socks off and through them back into Wired's cell. We put our shoes on and walked back toward my cell, the Octopus saying, Animals. They're fucking animals. Did you see what they did to him?

On the yard, the Octopus told the other guys what happened, but news was already moving, so he must've been found by then. Of course, everybody wanted something done about it, and Will wanted to know how come something hadn't already been done, something that was supposed to be done by now, anyway. The Octopus told him to shut it and now wasn't the time, but the way they were both looking at me, was like You're a killer, why aren't you out killing? but I couldn't really think of anything except the inside of that cell and going back in there. That thick, sweet smell.

The Octopus told everybody that I'd be doing the ink from now on, and that everybody needed to hold back on things and keep themselves straight. Vengeance is

coming, he said. All fire-eyed. I know some people have been getting restless, but I told the sword to remain poised, and now, only now am I telling it to swing.

The rest of our time on the yard was more social than most. Some guys in the Mexican Mafia came by to show their respects, say that Wired was a good man and all that. The same guys who had tried to take my food those first days were shaking my hand, looking at my arms and saying they knew I spent a lot of time with him. A solid guy, a warrior, that kind of shit.

It was that night when the Octopus showed me how the rig worked. He had me assemble and disassemble the thing over and over, like it was my rifle at boot camp. Not too much, he'd say when more than a quarter-inch of guitar string stuck out from the pen. Nice and tight, he'd say when I was adjusting the motor.

I can't really draw, I said.

Can you trace? he said.

He showed me how to mix and make ink. You'll have to practice on yourself, he said. But don't worry, when you get that rock, I'll do the honors. Won't do to have you with a crooked shamrock. And about that, I lied for you today, son. Don't make me regret that. I will fucking bury you if you make me out to be an asshole.

Don't worry, I said. Consider it done. Tomorrow.

I'll consider it done when that nigger's carted out to the fields, he said.

When the Octopus left, I got the motor running dry, just to get a feel for it. Holding it too tight made my fingers numb, but when I relaxed, the guitar wire danced around the air like firelight. How does this even work? One night Carrie and I had taken a shower, and we were sitting on the couch, while she ran her fingers over my back,

down my sides and over the towel still tied around my waist. How do they keep all these little pieces from falling away, she said lazily. They're like little hairs. Why don't they fall out? I told her they were made with a loom, I was pretty sure.

But how does it work? she asked.

The magic loom, I said.

If we have kids, you better come up with something better than that. Where do babies come from? The magic womb, she giggled.

I took the rig apart and hid the motor in that shampoo bottle. I de-threaded the guitar string and slipped it and the pen body under my mat, next to my blade. I laid down and pretended I couldn't feel what was beneath me. I am not a princess and those are no peas, I said out loud.

Carrie had kept on laughing that night. Where do people go when they die, daddy? she said in a little girl voice. The magical tomb.

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I was trying to keep my head in the game. Billy rallied his pieces after a failed throw at my queen side and was swinging his rooks over to my lonely king, only a few pawns to protect him. I'd seen him do this before. He'd sacrifice a whole piece, maybe two, but then he'd trap my king in the corner for a smothered mate. If I could counterattack at the right time, line a bishop up behind my queen and regain the initiative, I could hold out for a winning end game. I pictured the board like Billy had taught me to, saw it a piece at a time, saw it in terms of structure and force, where the weak points were in both of our

camps. I still couldn't see too many moves in advance, but I saw patterns in the pieces, knew their strongest squares. I moved a bishop to the center of the board, planning to retreat him to the confines of a pawn island next turn, but Frank was there, and he picked up the board, scattering pieces across the table and floor, that loud metallic clap of plastic on steel, like rain on a cheap tin roof.

Come on, motherfucker, Frank said.

What's your problem? I said, standing.

Don't worry about him, Billy said. It's fine; it's fine.

We faced each other, and I pulled my shoulders back, made sure he saw that swastika on my chest. He lowered his eyes, and grabbed Billy by the wrist. Come on, he said.

Didn't you hear me? I was talking to you, boy, I said.

I ain't your boy, Frank said, but he let go of Billy. I apologize for breaking up your game. Later, then. We need to talk, he told Billy. Meet me at seven.

Those pieces aren't going to pick themselves up, I said, but Billy started scrambling, setting them back on the board in clusters, some rolling off and tinkling back to the floor. I got it, he said. It's fine. I got it.

Frank walked away, and I sat back down. Well, I'd call that a mulligan, I said, waving at the board.

It was fine, Billy said. I was fine. You didn't need to do that.

I smiled and offered him a smoke. We played another game, one Billy beat me at pretty easily, but I wasn't phased. Seven o'clock; I could count on that.

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My blade stayed under my mat until after dinner. While everyone else was grabbing new clothes and buying smokes at the canteen I tested the point of that blade against my palm and satisfied, stuffed it down my sock, the metal cold and inviting in the August air. I power-smoked one more cigarette before stepping out on the quad, trying to find Billy. Floyd was on the ground level, a do-rag pulled down almost over his eyes. We looked at each other straight on, but neither of us nodded or said a word.

I made my way back to the canteen, and I saw Billy with a book in one hand walking away from me with a pad of paper in the other. Keeping pace behind him, I watched him pass the entry to the kitchen and the laundry rooms. He was kind of a silly guy; keeping his feet firmly in the thick blue arrows that directed us to cell blocks and chow lines. I watched his hands as they swung in an almost strut. It was like he was walking the dog, just taking a stroll to wherever. I thought of Frank and his big teeth and cauliflower ears, knuckles the size of quarters. He's been so beaten, I thought, that he just does it.

It wasn't until Billy rounded the corner to the west wing that I figured out why he was carrying a book: he was going to the library. I jogged up behind him and called out his name. Billy spun around on the balls of his feet but didn't look so happy to see me. I asked him if he was dropping a book off. Billy said he was, and I asked if he wanted me to do it for him. I've been given another reading list, I said.

Now that you're a big dog, huh? Billy said. What do you need; I'll bring it back for you?



You hear about Frank? I said. He got jumped after chow.

No, he said.

I said, Yeah, the Crips, I think. Billy gave me his book and pad, and took off back toward the quad, to see how bloody his jockey was. Just you wait, I thought. It gets even better. I buttoned the jumpsuit all the way up, and adjusted the spare I had folded around my waist in the back. At the door I paused, heard the echos of steps and coughs too far away to see. I stepped into the library to find Frank sitting behind the circulation desk. Library's closed, he told me.

Door's open, I said. You mind if I just grab something real quick?

He said, I told you the library's closed, but I walked past him into the stacks, turned a corner and dropped Billy's book. I bent down to grab the blade, and I heard Frank walking after me. You've got to go, he said. And then, bending down to pick up Billy's book, Where did you get this?

I came around the corner with the knife held tight against my hip bone, and he was right there, standing with the book in his hand. He saw the blade and said, What did you do – before I hit him with it fast and hard in the gut. He breathed out a hot hard little grunt, and I hit him again in the ribs. That second stick was harder; his ribs fought against the steel, but it broke through, and he grabbed me by the ear. I stabbed him again, the blade slipping in my hand, and he tried to push me away, into the shelf of books. The knife was sticking out of him, but I couldn't get a hold on it. He knocked my head back onto one of the shelves and when I came forward I used the heel of my hand to push the blade in deeper. I looked him right in the eyes. I saw them widen, and I saw his mouth open, a hiss coming from behind his teeth. Books fell around me, and he pulled at them

to keep his balance. I tried to pull the knife out, but it was too slick with all the blood. The threaded toilet paper handle dissolved into my palm, and I gripped it hard and yanked it out of him.

Frank let go of my ear and slumped down on his ass, and looking up at me he breathed in deeply once. My arms felt like I'd blown them out, and they'd lost their sting, but I went to one knee and stabbed him once more in the chest. This time the blade glanced off one of his ribs, and he grabbed me by the wrist. No more, he said. It's ok, just let me sit here. I tried to pull my arms free, but there was nothing left in them. We stayed like that while his breathing became wet and slow. And when he started with the shakes, I didn't try to pull away. It took me what felt like a long time to stand again, but I undressed and redressed quickly, wiped my hands on the soiled jumpsuit. This was good, I said. This was good. It was right.