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RANSACKED

By

THEODORE LOUIS MCDERMOTT

Bachelor of Arts, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, 2004

Professional Paper

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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In English, Creative Writing

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# ONE

I guess it's not enough to be right.

That's a quote. I'm quoting Sheila, who I worked with at a homeless shelter in Columbia, South Carolina, after I moved back. I wasn't a social worker or anything. I just worked there. I manned the front desk and checked people in and answered phones and made coffee and swept the lobby and that kind of thing.

My job was just to sit at a desk and deal with people who had nowhere to live. With drunks and drug addicts. With the mentally ill and the unfortunate. With all kinds of people seeking refuge from their terrifying, parallel worlds that only they could conceive, places with populations and structures that only they knew about. They were like evidence for those theories about the multiverse, about how there are all of these overlapping, simultaneous universes where all of our other possible lives are being lived out. I saw a PBS special about it. The multiverse idea. Not that it matters: everyone is hounded by themselves, in the end.

There was this guy Slit Wrist Dan, for example. That's what everyone called him. He'd come up to the front desk and talk to me about how, if you think about it, it'd be easier to be

dead. Suicide, he'd say, just made sense: it was practical, rational. It had nothing to do with desperation. It would reduce suffering—and isn't that what everyone's after: a favorable ratio of pleasure to pain? Why go through all the trouble of trying—and failing—to achieve happiness when you could just end it, call it even, and feel nothing? I knew he'd never do it. He was just trying to sound morbid, impressive.

Then he did it. Except he didn't slit his wrists: he checked into the shelter, took a bunch of pills, and died in his sleep, in a twin bed. When the EMTs were gurneying him away—that's when Sheila said, "I guess it's not enough to be right."

That stayed with me.

But Dan was just one of thousands. They kept coming and coming. This was a job for Jesus. I wasn't up for it. I couldn't help these people. All I could do was try to record some reasonably accurate biographical information (name, age, employment status, last residence, documented mental illness, etc.), book them a bed, make the coffee as strong as possible, sweep, mop, dust, set out *TV Guide*, and turn people away when we were full. I worked from four to midnight, most nights. I had some pretty decent coworkers. I made eight bucks an hour.

It wasn't ideal but I tried to be grateful, since it was sort of a small miracle that I'd gotten a job at all. I went to a good college and taught intro photography for a few years as an adjunct, at I.S.U., but everywhere else stopped considering me as soon as they saw my answer to the inevitable application question about past criminal convictions. No one let me explain. They didn't want to know the truth: that my daughter's imagination is as elaborate as mine and that my ex-wife's heart is as hard as a hammer. They didn't let me explain why I left Normal, Illinois, where we'd been living as a family, and moved back to where I grew up, to Columbia, South Carolina, to live alone in a duplex.

I'm not here to defend myself.

That said, I didn't do anything. I was innocent but I had to plead guilty and the judge told me, *And don't you even think about your daughter again.* That was part of my sentencing. Being told that. And of course it's all I can do.

But I have a story to tell.

In October, around five on a regular Thursday afternoon, an elderly guy came into the lobby, sat down, produced a slender red balloon, and blew it up. He looked like a washed-up character actor. One who'd always played wizards and who'd lost his nest egg investing in some unlikely invention. He looked like he could've been distinguished if he'd slowed down and thought about things. He was probably six-five. He had white hair that was swept back in a rough wave over his narrow head. His face was pink and smooth, like he'd just shaved with scalding water and a straight razor and then stuck his head in a freezer. He wore loafers with filthy white socks and a clean white, collared shirt tucked into khakis. He didn't have a belt.

His sleeves were rolled up and he twisted the red balloon he was holding into a perfect red giraffe. He was like an alchemist, converting nothing into something.

It was nice out and early, so not many people had shown up yet. A couple of regular residents watched one of those Judge Somebody shows on the TV in the corner. An Indian man slept upright, with a newspaper open on his lap. A black lady at a table by the front windows did what she'd been doing all day: played Candy Land by herself. The lobby was a place where people were compelled to kill time. There were water-stained ceiling panels and fluorescent lights and hard plastic seats bolted into metal supports. An inspirational poster scotch-taped to the wall showed an eagle soaring into a sunset and was captioned *HOPE*.

Sheila was sweeping the linoleum floor, and I watched the guy with the balloon get up, walk over to her, interrupt her, give her the balloon, and take a dollar from her hand. He sold Sheila the giraffe. Then he came up to the front desk.

“Balloon animals,” he said to me, gesturing back at Sheila as an explanation. “One dollar.”

“Sure, “ I said because I was curious and had vague ideas about mailing one to Grace. But I wondered if it would deflate before it was delivered. Fritz said it would stay okay for a couple days, at least. I could send it overnight. It would be light, so the shipping would be cheap. What kind did I want? “A turtle,” I told him.

He introduced himself. He had a Lowcountry accent that extended everything. He smelled like a Werther’s Originals and cheap toothpaste. His hands were below the desk, so I couldn’t see him work but I could still hear the squeak of the plastic. Then Fritz put the turtle up on the counter, between the clipboard that held the sign-in sheet and a fake fern that I occasionally watered as a kind of joke. The turtle was perfect: both cartoonish and accurate. One of its feet was raised so that it looked like it was perpetually taking a step forward. Its head had little ears. It was yellow.

“What’s her name?” he said. “Your daughter.”

I told him. I told him that Grace was four and that she loved turtles and that she kept two in a kiddie pool in the backyard and fed them shredded lettuce. I told him that she lived in Illinois, thirteen hours away, with her mother.

“Yeah?” I could tell he’d been preparing what he was going to say more than he’d been listening, like everyone does. “I had child,” he said. “A son. Dave.” He paused, looked distracted. “I did. He’s dead.” He stood there and I swiveled in my office chair and the turtle was

on the counter between us. “Drowned,” he said. I was used to the soliloquizing of the residents but this felt like a confession, like an unburdening—except methodical, labored, removed. He looked just beyond me, instead of at my eyes, when he spoke. Like he could see it all happening behind me. And his height exacerbated his detachment: he was far away from me. “Off the coast of Myrtle Beach, two years ago. Not that I knew it then. I denied it. I was deluded. Denied it completely. Refused.” Now he looked me in the eyes. “How could I agree with something like that?” He looked away. “That my son was dead. I couldn’t. I figured he’d just run off. Just fled. But if he was gonna flee, then I was gonna go after him. So I did. I went up and down the coast. From Myrtle Beach to Biloxi and then all the way back to Virginia Beach. Then I headed down again. Got as far as Wilmington. He wasn’t there. Wasn’t anywhere.” He allowed himself a little smile, like this was reminding him of something funny that he hadn’t thought about in awhile and wouldn’t explain. “Anyway. I was just looking for something to find. It was difficult. But I hope your daughter—hope she likes the turtle.” Then he looked at me expectantly. I didn’t know how to respond until he said, “It’s one dollar.”

I got out my wallet. He thanked me, then left out the front door. Through the streaked floor-to-ceiling windows, I could see him head up the sidewalk, toward Main. I tried to imagine where he was going. I pictured him in Finley Park, selling balloon animals near the snack bar, with a view of that weird concrete waterfall, and I felt he could help me.

I went over to Sheila, who was still sweeping, and asked her who that guy was, how she knew him, what she knew about him.

“Fritz? Oh man. It’s really weird. Do you remember that show *Mr. Knowzit*? That kids show that came on WIS on Saturdays. In the morning? When we were kids?”

I did. I watched it in my pajamas when I was young enough to wear pajamas. Mr. Knowzit was also the local weatherman. As the weatherman, he went by Joe Pinner or something like that. His character was kind of a Mr. Rodgers-Bill Nye hybrid. He wore a plaid blazer and did simple science experiments and told stories and had guests on to talk about local events and interviewed the kids in the studio audience about what they were going to be for Halloween or what they wanted to be when they grew up.

“Well that guy, Fritz, he used to be on that show. He was like a regular guest.” Sheila was a couple of years older than me and overweight. But she dressed well. “Remember him? Fritz the Balloonatic.”

“No shit,” I said. I remembered him. I remember him wearing a tuxedo and a top hat. I remember a mustache and that he was so tall. He came on every once in awhile and demonstrated some simple designs and twisted a few elaborate things. He made a whole huge castle once. “Fritz the Balloonatic? He was creepy, kind of. Wasn’t he? I hated him.”

“I know.”

“That was him?”

“Yeah. He checked in last night and tried to sell me a balloon animal, so I had to buy one. You know. And we started talking and he told me. It just came up and I told him I wanted a giraffe. They’re my favorite. But the balloon, it popped while he was blowing it up. And it was his last one. So he told me he’d get more. Today.” She looked at the giraffe, which was standing on a top of the upright piano and looking at us like it wanted to be fed. “So yeah. Isn’t that weird? Fritz the Balloonatic.”

It was weird and I wanted to know more. I asked her if she’d done Fritz’s pre-assessment, the formulaic form we have to fill out whenever someone new checks in. She had. We went to



the front desk and she showed it to me. Fritz Franklin Hoffmann was sixty-two years old. His last permanent address was 8790 Beachfront Drive / North Myrtle Beach, SC 29573. Prior to coming to the shelter, he'd been living in some scrub woods near I-26. He'd arranged a little encampment there and stayed for more than a year. He was divorced. He was an alcoholic. He'd checked in last night, around eight, after being released from the Richland County Jail. No charge was listed: Sheila said he didn't want to talk about it.

“Seems like a nice guy though,” I said. “Wonder what happened.”

I went back to the front desk and imagined him walking through Columbia, calling out, *Balloon animals, one dollar*, like some old-fashioned peddler. Then Tim, my supervisor, came by and told me that it was almost five and that it was my turn to clean the showers, so I went upstairs and wondered about Fritz while I sprinkled bleach and filled the mop bucket hot and scraped caked soap and refilled the paper-towel dispensers and did all that.

Later that night, I solicited another balloon animal—this time, a toucan—as a pretense to talk to him more. He seemed relieved to have someone who'd listen. He stayed at the shelter for six days and I talked to him whenever I could, as much as I could, before work and during work, but I always had to buy a balloon to engage him. By the end of the week, I had a menagerie in the backseat of my car.

## TWO

This is the beginning.

On the Thursday before he came into the shelter, Fritz was crouched down with his ass hanging over a felled log and he was struggling to take a shit. It was late afternoon and he was squatted a few hundred yards from the living room he'd arranged out there among the pine trees as a stand-in for a home. He was sweating.

He was candid. Denial, he told me, had cost him too much.

It had cost him his career, his family, his house, his car. Everything. He'd been Fritz the Balloonatic. He'd been steadily employed for thirty years at Splash City, the water park that his wife Charon (pronounced *Sharon*) owned. He'd arguably been the most successful balloon twister in the entire Southeast, even after *Mr. Knowzit* was cancelled in the early nineties. He and his wife had built a lavish oceanfront home (with a gazebo) just north of North Myrtle Beach. They'd had a son, Dave.

Now he was just Fritz and he had nothing, because one day Dave went out in his boat—supposedly on his way to his job as a water-ski instructor—and never arrived and never returned.

Dave disappeared. The Coast Guard opened an investigation. Search parties searched. Anyone with any information regarding the whereabouts of David Franklin Hoffmann was asked to come forward. Then his boat was discovered sunk off the coast of Florida and one of his shoes washed up on a public beach in Jacksonville and Dave was officially declared dead. Fritz couldn't accept it, so he didn't.

Fritz and I sat on a bench outside the shelter, on a gauzily hot afternoon, talking about our absent children. He told me he'd ruined his son. I told him I hadn't ruined my daughter.

He told me he'd been a terrible father, the kind that drinks Captain Morgan's with his orange juice and beats and berates his boy into success—which the boy then squanders just to disappoint the father, to get even. Dave had. He'd navigated his 28' MasterCraft X-2 way out into the Atlantic and sunk it, along with himself. This was Charon's theory. The Coast Guard's findings corroborated it. But Fritz refused to believe it was true. He felt culpable when Dave drowned: he believed he was the cause of Dave's distress, of his suicide, so he refused to accept it. So he'd left his wife to search for their son, had never discovered him, and so had never returned. Then, following one of many false clues, Fritz found himself in Columbia.

Fritz was in Columbia and had nowhere else to go and he'd had run out of money and he ended up homeless. He stayed in a shelter—the one on Assembly; not the one where I worked—for a month or so and sobered up. Someone stole his shaving cream. Everyone was always offering him a sip of something in exchange for company. He watched someone puke into a backpack and then nonchalantly carry it inside the building. He listened to a teenage boy give a transvestite a blow job on the bunk below his. He needed some privacy—residents often feel this way. So one afternoon, Fritz went for a long walk and found some unoccupied woods where he discovered a treehouse installed in a pine. The wood had softened but wasn't yet rotten.

He slept there that night, aloft, undisturbed. He awoke and looked around. The woods were small and haphazard, a scrap of unclaimed land bordered on one side by the Interstate and on the other sides by the crisp fields of a recreation complex.

There were all of these people who came into the shelter who lived alone in their own, idiosyncratic worlds, governed by whoever. They'd talk to Jesus or Satan or the Virgin Mary or Mao or their mother and they all meant someone different and they were all always just talking.

Not far from the rec complex parking lot, Fritz found where people illegally dumped stuff. He dragged a green, floral-patterned couch in decent shape into the clearing below the treehouse. And he found all kinds of things. Over time, he assembled from what he scavenged a pretty respectable living room in that strip of pine forest and began arranging a home, even if he didn't have a house to keep it in.

He had a 32-inch television with a cracked screen, a black metal desk with four empty drawers, a particle-board bureau, and one of those fireplace sets that holds two kinds of pokers, a tiny broom, and a correspondingly small dustpan. A small set of shelves held a couple of reference books, a souvenir snow globe from Utah, a box of wood-tipped matches, and a VHS copy of *Mr. Mom*. There was a Cold War-era globe and an unplugged clock radio. On the glass top of a rusted wrought-iron coffee table, sat a meticulous model of a nineteenth-century schooner that Dave had built. It was the single object that Fritz had taken when he left his house and that he'd kept throughout his wanderings.

Behind the couch, where the dining room would've gone in a conventional floor plan, he'd built a neat landscape of carefully organized scrap and salvage. Books were organized in alphabetized stacks. Kitchen Appliances included everything from microwaves to egg beaters. Household Electronics was stocked with vacuum cleaners and boom boxes and all kinds of

objects with cords trailing, hanging, or curling up behind them like tails. Clothes were sorted by color. Sporting Goods featured baseball mitts, hockey sticks, shoulder pads. Silverware was lined up by type. And there was so much more besides. Someday, Fritz planned to sell all of it and make enough to buy a car and afford gas and resume his search.

He'd need, he figured, at least six-hundred to get started. Then, once he was going somewhere, he'd figure out how to make more and he'd pursue Dave to wherever he was hiding out under an assumed name, with a false social security card bought wherever illegal aliens get theirs.

Fritz knew his son had to be somewhere. No one can disappear, no matter how hard they try. Believe Fritz, he'd tried. He'd thought: If Dave can do it, so can I. But Fritz's escape had been incomplete: he was still confined within the world. There was only one way out of it—and he couldn't consider it. Doing so would entail capitulating to everyone else's ideas about Dave. Fritz had his own ideas. Dave easily could've sunk his boat, taken a tender back to shore, and bought a bus ticket to anywhere. Fritz knew the urge to flee. And Dave had inherited it from him. But don't people flee to find out if anyone will seek them? Charon had just let Dave to disappear. At least Fritz looked. And he would again.

So, late in the afternoon of that Thursday last September, he was far from his living room and all of his scavenged stuff, at the edge of the woods, within hearing distance of the sibilant Interstate, hoping no one in the passing cars could catch a glimpse of him, failing at the most elemental thing—what even a newborn can do accidentally. He'd been living on mixed nuts his friend Karla brought him and free lunches in church gymnasiums and on the contents of restaurant and grocery store dumpsters. Since his diet was irregular and meager, he was constantly constipated. When his stomach was knotted up so tight that he couldn't straighten his

torso, he'd limp out into the woods and dig a hole with a trowel he'd found and wait for what could take two hours, then bury it and then stick a twig in the ground to mark his spot, so he'd know where he'd already gone and wouldn't accidentally unbury it. He felt like some feral animal. The earth near his improvised home was studded with these sticks.

Hunched there, Fritz knew he was too old to be living like this, like a squirrel or some lesser rodent, on the run from humans, an inhabitant of some drab woods that were merely the remainder of a world inefficiently divided and conquered. To distract himself while he waited, he read in a back issue of *The Sporting News* an article about Warren Moon and the Oilers' last-minute victory over the Rams in Week 14 of the 1987 season.

Finally, he did it. He wiped himself with a few of the smooth magnolia leaves he stored in an empty coffee can for this purpose. Then he walked back toward his living room arrangement, unburdened. He passed through a confusion of lean pine trees and weeds as big as bushes and bushes convoluted with vines. He came into the living room and stopped, shocked: in the space where all of his scrap should've been neatly arranged, there was nothing now except for a stray sock and a single ski pole on the bare, trampled ground. There was nothing now where his livelihood had been.

Then he surveyed the living room. The TV and the desk and bureau and the fireplace accessories were all there. The snow globe and books were still on the shelves, where they belonged. The big globe and clock radio hadn't been touched. Everything seemed OK, but something was amiss. One thing, Fritz discovered, was missing: the model ship. It wasn't on the coffee table, where it should've been. It was gone.

This was like coming home and finding your home had been burgled. It wasn't like that: it was that. Fritz had been robbed. Hadn't he? He ran as fast as he could, which wasn't very fast, up the only path that led out of the woods, in pursuit of whoever had done this.

He emerged into the bright, open night of the recreational complex in time to see a red GMC truck overstuffed with his stuff—and with a statue of the Virgin Mary tied to the roof of the cab—cross, in profile, the infield of the baseball field before him. He couldn't catch up. It was already gone and accelerating. He saw all his things jumbled high above the top of the tailgate, saw the Virgin Mother mounted in a display of blasphemy, and vowed, as do all the forsaken, vengeance. The truck hurried across the soccer fields and outfields, and then lurched up to the parking lot and drove off elsewhere. To where Fritz would find them, no matter what. Not that he knew how.

He watched children chasing balls across the grass that was sprawled out and subdivided before him. He had no car and no idea where they'd gone. So he turned away from the world and slunk back into the woods, to what remained of his ransacked life.

That's what Fritz told me, anyhow.

## THREE

If it were true, I'd hate me too.

But it isn't. It's just that you tell your child something and your child believes it, because a child is a person who needs an explanation for everything.

*Why are you and Daddy getting divorced?*

Because he touched you.

*He did?*

Don't you remember?

*Daddy touched me?*

I'm sure it was easy.

Allison wanted custody, so she accused me of “inappropriately touching” our daughter—our beautiful daughter, Grace—and she got it. I had to register as a sex offender, and I was only allowed to see Grace during bi-monthly court-supervised visits. This middle-aged guy holding a clipboard and wearing a novelty necktie would chaperone us to T.C.B.Y. or wherever and eavesdrop. Even affection for my own daughter could be evidence against me.



I'm not supposed to talk about it.

Columbia is pretty big. Half a million or more people sprawled out on the sandy middle of South Carolina like an overweight sunbather on a blanket. Secession started there. Sherman burned the city in eighteen-sixty-something. There's an inordinate number of wig shops. It's the capital. There's a chain of diners called Lizard's Thicket. There are four Ruby Tuesday's that I can think of off the top of my head. U.S.C., the big state university, is here. There's a bar called Utopia that I used to go to almost every night.

I never thought I'd be back, not even for a week or whatever around Christmas, not since my mom died, but there I was, close enough to Owens Field that I could hear all the airplanes come in for their landings and then take off again for Pensacola or Macon or Florence or Asheville or elsewhere. The rent was pretty cheap and there was an A-frame doghouse out back. Not that I had a dog. My across-the-street neighbors had a fake well in their front yard. My friend Greg still lived in town and we hungout sometimes, got a beer, but I wanted to meet a woman, move on from Allison and everything. It wasn't working: I didn't know how to do it, how to approach a stranger and engage them. I've never understood what everyone wants from each other.

So I was lonely and living alone in the left half of a rental duplex and I was working at the shelter and I hadn't seen or talked to Grace in thirteen months. I'd call her but they had caller i.d. and no one would answer. I'd write her letters but her mom wouldn't mail her responses. I thought about just showing up but I knew she'd call the cops, accuse me of kidnapping, get me arrested. I was right. The Normal P.D. already didn't like me. I tried to stay away.

I stayed away and there I was and it was late on a Sunday night in early December. Fritz had come and gone—I'll come back to him—and I was in my bedroom, reading some story on

the CNN website about a kid in Ohio who killed his high school guidance counselor for allegedly molesting him, when I heard the doorbell ring. Which was strange. I figured it was someone looking for my neighbor, Joe, who was bald and wrinkled and reminded me of a baby ostrich and lived in the other, inverse half of the house.

I went to the door and opened it and discovered James Tilden looking distracted on the portico. Which was weird: we'd been best friends in middle school but I hadn't seen him in probably twelve years. James was standing there and I had no idea why.

"Hey," he said, then leaned his head back and blew cigarette smoke straight up, like he was trying to manufacture a thought bubble for himself. It dispersed above and behind him. It was around eleven. He looked at me, squinted in the orange porch light, and took another drag. A pair of over-sized aviators were pushed back on top of his his head. A white scar carved an inch-long inlet from the exact center of his forehead into his buzzed black hair. He was wearing a faded Gamecock hoodie, jean shorts, glaringly white running shoes, and brown socks that looked like they'd lost their elastic a long time ago. We'd been best friends from ten to thirteen and he still looked about that age: like he still believed insolence could be an effective form of rebellion. He wouldn't concede. Even his facial hair seemed stunted: he'd grown a wispy and unruly beard and there were stray hairs climbing up toward his eyes.

"Shit, man," he said. "I'm fucking glad you answered. I got nervous for a second that I was at the wrong house. Like some man in a dirty basketball jersey or something was gonna come to the door with a big fucking shotgun. How you been?" He flicked his cigarette into the night, into the yard, and was talking again before I could answer. "Hey. You remember Hayes, right? Hayes Le Something? I can never remember his last name. Le Chambre. Something French. Or Belgian or something. Francophone." All I knew about Hayes was that we went to the

same high school and that he I'd never seen him not wearing Oakleys and that he sold weed. I'd bought from him once and we'd smoked the obligatory bowl together but he was intently watching a Russian soccer game on some obscure cable channel and he barely spoke. "I was at Hayes' house just now and we were hanging out. He lives just, I don't know, maybe a quarter mile from here. Up on Catalpa. And you came up. And I was telling him about when we broke into that Hammond school bus and fogged it out and the cops came and there was that lady cop who put us in handcuffs and frisked us and I started to get a boner. Remember that? Got in so much shit." He laughed, stopped, and said, "Think I could come in?"

"Sure. Yeah. Of course."

"Great." He came in and stood in the middle of the living room and kept going. "I was telling Hayes, you know, that I hadn't seen you in probably what? Like ten years or something. And we were best friends. We were inseparable back then. But then I don't know what happened. You went to Dreher, I guess, and then there was the fire and all that shit and your parents moved to Lake Catherine or wherever. And anyway, I was just saying I hadn't seen you in so long and I'd sort of forgotten about you and I wondered what you were up to. And Hayes—he told me you were back in town. He was like, Yeah, he lives just down on Ocoola. On the corner or whatever. The brick duplex with the Previa in the driveway. Across from the house with the fake well. Said he'd seen you outside a lot, doing yard work or whatever."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. So here I am. How you been?"

"Fine," I said because I didn't know what to say. The last time I'd seen James, we were both seventeen and he was drunk and we were at Eric's San Jose, a mediocre Mexican restaurant that used to be next door to Richland Fashion Mall and that's since been converted into a

daycare. I was out for dinner with my parents and he was drinking a bottle of Miller Genuine Draft at the bar and he told me then that he'd missed me, that we should hang out sometime. I think he meant it and I said sure, though I knew we wouldn't and we never did, because soon after I moved to Michigan for college, then moved to Chicago and took photos for a disreputable regional boating magazine, then married my ex-wife, then moved to Normal so she could take a nursing position in her hometown, then had a kid, then taught three sections of introductory photography a semester as an adjunct at I.S.U., then all that other shit happened. Now James was in my living room, which was furnished with furniture I'd inherited from my parents. It made the room feel sort of like a set from an eighties sitcom, like I was living on a bad TV show. I wasn't uncomfortable with James being there, with him arriving like a guest star. I wasn't annoyed or anything. I was weirdly excited to see him. We'd been close and I'd wondered about him and I'd worried. Now he was here. There we were and James seemed like he still needed something from me, like he was overwhelmed by himself and needed me to somehow relieve him. "I'm good," I said. "I guess."

"Hey." He took from his pocket one of those metal bowls that looks like it was assembled from spare parts found in a machinist's shop. There's something disconcertingly utilitarian about those. "Want me to pack a bowl? Old time's sake or whatever."

I said, "Sure," because I thought it might help explain things.

So then we got high. So high that I laughed when James told me it was nice to be inside, in the air-conditioning, because for the past four weeks he'd been living outside, on a mattress, under a blue tarp, in some woods along the Congaree River. I was stoned and I saw him out there, indolent in his private refugee camp, and it was sad and I tried to sympathize. "I'm sorry," I said.

“But that’s the thing,” he said, packing more. “I love it.”

Then he started to tell me about it, about how he got there, about why he was here. When I think about it now, I think that James chose failure at first. I think he believed that, as with a wave, the force pulling backward was really a swell that would eventually compel him up and forward toward something greater. But it turned out to be a riptide, and he couldn’t escape.

He told me what happened, and I might’ve thought he was lying if it hadn’t been for the coincidence of his account with Fritz’s. Their intersection seemed impossible and therefore indisputable. We talked until late, until four, until he said, “Look man, I’m fucking exhausted. Think I could crash on your couch?”

I was greedy for the company, so I said OK. He stayed a few days. With weed, he wouldn’t shut up. Without it, he was moribund, reticent, bored. So we got stoned and he talked and I remember everything he said.

## FOUR

I have something important to say.

On the Thursday when Fritz's salvage was stolen—except earlier in the afternoon—James was driving around town in his dilapidated red GMC Sierra, searching for something to find.

James always liked to drive. When we were twelve, he stole his mom's car and drove us out to Lake Murray, to swim. Somehow, no one noticed. It was as private as a dream.

For the past five years James had owned a junkyard out toward Eastover, except that unlike most junkyards his place wasn't for junked cars but just for junk. He called his operation Tilden & Sons, even though he had no kids and his dad had never been involved. He would find discarded stuff, store it on his land, then sell it to guys who owned stands at flea markets. He made enough to keep up his heavy weed habit but not enough to move out of his mom's house.

Recently—a few weeks before that Thursday—James hadn't used his turn signal and got pulled over and the car smelled like the joint he'd just finished. The cops found a gram in the glove box and put him in a cell with a guy who'd worked in the boiler room of Baptist Hospital

until he was arrested for stealing painkillers. James used his one call to call his mom and she came to pick him up. On the ride home, she told him he had until the end of the month to move out. She'd said this before but now she was serious: she was going to have the locks changed. Their arrangement obviously wasn't working. He needed to find some other way to live. They both did. He had fourteen days to find somewhere to go. And ever since, whenever she could, she'd remind him of his deadline, reiterate the seriousness of her intent. "This isn't a joke, James," she'd say. "I've already made an appointment with the locksmith. He *is* coming." So James had until October 1. Which wasn't for a little while. Until it was tomorrow.

It was Thursday, September 30, and James should've been begging someone for a loan and looking for an apartment, but he was driving around town, looking for salvage. That was his plan: he'd find something great, sell it for a lot, find somewhere cheap to live, and move in. All by tomorrow. It had to work out, so it would.

We talked about how we'd gotten where we were. We were in my living room, on the floor, leaned up against opposite walls, smoking cigarettes with all of the windows open, ashing in coffee cups.

Then James found something: a plastic statue of the Virgin Mary waiting impatiently at the curb in front of a ranch house with a For Sale sign staked in the front yard. She looked as though she'd fled out the front door and was waiting to hitch a ride. So James stopped. The statue was in good condition and probably valuable. He could get at least eighty bucks for her, he figured. Which was a start. He got out of his truck and stood before it. She was three feet tall—tall for a statue. She wore a cerulean robe and a cloud-white veil and had sun-tanned skin. Her entire form glowed, as if lit from within, as though inside her hollow body there was one of those

little electric safety lights careful parents use in their children's pumpkins. But she was hanging her head and her hands were clasped at her waist and her eyes were downcast. James wanted her.

The blinds of the house were drawn, and it seemed unoccupied. James went up to the portico, noticed the dirt silhouette of a missing welcome mat, rang the doorbell, and heard the chime echo. He went around to the backyard, where he found an incomplete nativity scene in an unsown flower bed: Mary was missing and the rest of the family from the first day of A.D. looked sullen, as though saddened by their loss, as though it overshadowed the great gift they (and the rest of the world) had received. Otherwise, the yard was empty, as was the porch, as was the driveway. And the grass was a bit high. And who knew how long, in this economy, the house would remain on the market. And by the time someone had moved in and purchased a mower, the Holy Family would be lost in crabgrass and ruined by weather.

James couldn't return the statue to that and he couldn't leave it on the curb like it was trash. He went back around front, picked the statue up, and was surprised by how light it was. He took it to his truck, set it on the roof the cab. It seemed worthy of display and this was a natural pedestal. Once it was up there, he saw how striking it was: the Virgin Mary would be an advertisement for his business. It was a trophy and a totem. It would be like one of those busts on the prow of a Viking ship: it would be an amulet leading only ahead.

When we were kids, James was always weirdly precise about details—about the tangible, the observable—but got lost in anything larger. He made remote-control cars that came in the mail, in a box of miniscule and jumbled parts, but he couldn't make it through a movie, much less a book, much less seventh grade chemistry.

He found a bramble of bungee cords and a tangle of rope behind the bench seat and lashed the statue to the roof. She was ensnared. She was trapped. She wasn't going anywhere.



When I was twenty-four, I was dating Allison and she got pregnant. Her stomach got large and round as a human grew and existed inside her. A human existed inside her. It was mundane and impossible to imagine.

James drove around town with the plastic statue of the Virgin Mary tied to the roof of the cab of his truck. He drove slowly, not only to take inventory of curbside trash but also so the Virgin Mary would not fly off ungracefully, in a way not befitting an angel, though he knew that she was more than that: she was the Mother of God. But she was also the mother of Jesus, who was different. Kind of. His mother had tried to explain it once.

His mom was always trying to explain God to him but God to her was as omnipresent and indecipherable as soil. She was always talking to James about sowing seeds, seeds of faith, which God could make grow, and she encouraged her son to invest himself in the Lord, to place his faith in Him, to quit his profligate lifestyle and direct his resources, such as they were, toward a source that could pull him forward. A seed could be a prayer. A seed could be finding a real job and reading the Bible. A seed could be sitting down with her and watching a special about young people coming to Christ. A seed could be anything. Seeds could be planted with a check sent to some California P.O. Box or a credit card online or a phone call to a prayer partner, who was standing by.

James's mother lived off the money James's father had left her. There wasn't much, but she still sent in small donations when the message especially resonated or when the prayer gift was something she wanted, something like a Mary-and-Child Christmas ornament or a book by a preacher who was especially erudite and inspiring. She sometimes left tracts on James's bed for him to find. They too could be seeds. One day he discovered on his pillow a pamphlet called *When You Don't Like Yourself*. James only made it through the subtitle, *How To See Yourself The*

*Way God Sees You*, before he became frightened at the thought of knowing more about himself and of being monitored by some omnipresent authority. He crumpled the pamphlet up.

So there was no doubt his mom would find it blasphemous that he'd tied a statue of the Virgin Mary to the roof of his truck. It would be like when he bought a Jesus Saves t-shirt at the flea market and she asked him if he'd really come to Christ and he told her no, that he just thought it was funny. He'd worn it every day for three weeks. Then he forgot it in the bathroom after a shower, and she drove directly to a Salvation Army to donate it.

So maybe he wouldn't sell the statue after all. Its value would only appreciate. Plus, he liked it. Plus, she'd hate it. But he really should sell it. He knew he should—it might actually be worth something.

James was anxious: he hadn't smoked since around noon, after he woke up and before he showered. And now it was almost two. So he pulled over, opened the glove box, and took out a baggie of pot and a bong he'd made from a water bottle he found on the sideline of the football field of Cardinal Newman, the Catholic school his mom sent him to after we got busted for snorting all of my sister's Adderall in eighth grade. He parked before a small park on a side street. He exhaled out the window. He took one more hit, felt looser and clearer and cleaner, as though his brain had been sprayed free of gunk with a pressure washer. He turned on the radio.

"Margaritaville" was playing. He'd always loved that song but now he heard how sinister it is: the dink of the steel drums sounded so canned and calculated, a sweetener added to sugarcoat what was in fact a dirge for all the sunburnt middle-aged deadbeats nibbling on sponge cake, clinging desperately to a belief that life can be carefree when in fact they're just careless. He saw himself on a crowded beach, on a frayed towel, searching through the sand for a lost shaker of salt, anxious about fixing his drink, about drinking his fix. He could see the tattoo of a

Mexican floozie on his forearm, the infected bottle-top cut on the sole of his foot. He hated this song. He changed the station and found one of those weird, slow Zeppelin dirges. He needed one more hit.

We smoked weed together for the first time when we were eleven, with this guy Taylor who was in tenth grade and had a lazy eye and would get anyone high. He was my neighbor at the time. Last I heard, he was an admiral in the Coast Guard and stationed on an island off the coast of Michigan.

James drove around town all afternoon. He found a collapsed bed frame in the parking lot of an apartment complex near the airport, a ruined radiator leaning against an elementary-school dumpster, and a bicycle wheel with a flat tube and cracked tire next to a garbage can at the end of a driveway. A fruitful day all in all, so in the late afternoon he went through a drive-thru for a milkshake. He was drinking the last melted ounces when he pulled up to the brick house he'd grown up in and found his friend Charles reclined in a busted chaise longue on the front lawn, listening to a Discman.

James honked. Charles got up, removed his headphones, saw the statue, and offered James forty bucks for it. James refused. He was gonna hang out to it for a while, see what kinds of offers he could get at the flea market. "It's your life," Charles said, then contributed the chaise longue to the bed of the truck and got in.

Charles was younger than James by five years and played the part of the acquiescent younger brother he didn't have, even though Charles looked much older. He had a full dirty-blond beard and the same-color hair parted and combed neatly on his broad, boxy head. He wore a pressed plaid post-cowboy thrift-store shirt and kept it tucked into his jeans, which were folded up at the bottom.

“So,” Charles said, “I was at work today and I overheard these guys talking.” Charles had a stand at Pops’ Flea Market, a little space of poured concrete under a corrugated roof. There was a plain wooden table with merchandise spread out on top, with some bins and boxes scattered around it, with VHS tapes and kitchen utensils and apparel and paperbacks and whatever else he had gleaned to sell. “I was at my booth and this black guy comes up with his friend, a Hispanic guy holding a plastic bag full of snow globes.” At this point James thought that this—two minorities and an unlikely prop—was a setup for a joke, and so he concentrated on what Charles was saying, since he could never remember any jokes and a good one could come in handy. “So the black guy, he says to the other guy, ‘Nothing here I couldn’t just take from the woods behind those fields by Sesquicentennial.’”

“Yeah?” James was disappointed that this was just a true story. “Like what?”

“They didn’t say,” Charles said. “They just walked off. Didn’t buy anything, you know. So I thought it’d be a good idea to at least go have a look. See what’s back there. If only so the marketplace isn’t flooded.”

So they went. A bridge over the river, four lanes of traffic, fast food cups in the median, an azure water-treatment-facility sphere, a fallow field, the little skyline rippling in the flat distance—they drove down the Interstate a few minutes, got off onto Decker Boulevard, turned right at a Popeye’s, passed an abandoned steel mill, saw a man roll down the road’s shoulder in his wheelchair, a yellow light blinking behind him. Low buildings sagged into the soft landscape. They went up a front road and pulled into the sandy parking lot of a sports complex cut out of a pine forest. They’d stopped with view of the enormous rectangle of grass that was chalked with straight base lines and home-plate right angles and little corner-kick arcs and bisected midfield

circles, that was like a blackboard after a geometry class that had involved frequent use of a demonstration protractor.

It was nearly night, and the sun was heavy on the horizon, like it might sink the entire sky, an anchor too big for the little skiff it's supposed to steady. They got out and descended the bank that led down to a series of infields and outfields and soccer fields. Long shadows stretched out ahead of them like a prediction of where they were heading. They found a trailhead and entered the woods. The pine trees were close together and their branches knit a ceiling above them, so it was like walking down a hall, the hall of a home when the owners were away: the world condensed and squeezed into a space too small to hold it. Their presence felt to James like an intrusion. They snuck down the trail in silence.

James and I were friends because both of us couldn't wait for something to happen. But our restlessness was really recklessness and I was always nervous and so I was more or less relieved when my parents moved across town and I had a reason to remove myself. But I guess I never really got away. Or even if I did, I came back anyway.

After thirty or so yards, the trail ended in a clearing crowded with stuff. Crowded but not confused: the salvage was immaculately organized, carefully arranged. That wasn't a couch, a TV, a coffee table, an end table, a shelf, a globe, a dresser missing its handles, and a recliner with a cloud of synthetic down poofing from a ruptured armrest. No. That was a living room. Someone's living room. It was as unlikely and miraculous as Mary. It was a living room, James assumed, for the homeless who gathered there at night, returning harried from wherever they'd been to relax in this haphazard arrangement of domesticity. Haphazard for the domestic. Immaculate for the discarded. There were even electronics—a television, a yellow lamp, a clock radio—all of which were unplugged, of course, as there were no outlets here where electricity

didn't extend, but which still served a function: they bolstered the proposition that the encampment suggested: that a house is superfluous to the idea of home.

James followed Charles on a path between the couch and the coffee table and through to survey the neat skyline of scrap set where the dining room would've been in a typical floor plan.

"Those guys weren't lying," James said. "They got everything."

With all of this—plus his usual salvaging and sales—he could make enough over the next couple of weeks for a month's rent on his own place, especially if he bought even just a little less weed.

I don't think he had any idea about rent, about how much it would be. He just thought that if he did his best, it would be enough. Which is such a comfortable lie.

James went to get the truck. He crossed the fields again and climbed the bank and the Virgin Mary loomed above, looking down at him, looking disappointed in him—and for a moment James reconsidered, saw the error in their idea, in their taking, but he'd tied her there tightly: she was trapped; there was nothing she could do to stop him. He drove across the fields and backed up to the trailhead, walked down the high hall through the woods, arrived again at the outdoor living room, and found Charles holding a huge pair of rusted pruning sheers.

"All right," James said and Charles headed up the path with the sheers in one hand and a shovel in the other. He looked armed for some ad hoc combat. Night was imminent: the sinking sun was bringing up shadows, the way a lowered weight raises scenery on a stage. James examined the gathering dark for figures, found none, and so walked through the living room and picked up an armload of clothes.

Charles returned and James carried his cumbersome load out of there, lost socks and washcloths trailing behind him. He emerged from the woods, put the clothes in the bed of the

truck. On his way back down the path, he passed Charles, who held a tall stack of VHS tapes. James noticed two of the lesser *Ernest* movies, *Goes to Jail* and *In the Army*. "I could sell these," Charles said.

James nodded, let him pass, and went to retrieve more. He took a stack of books, spilled them out into the bed of the truck, recognized none of the titles, lamented dropping out of college a decade ago, and went back into the woods for more, since he had to make money somehow, since he was unqualified to do anything except this. Since he was sort of grooming the world with his scavenging, picking it clean.

James and Charles had too much momentum to stop. James came out of the woods with a bare bike frame in each hand. Some kids punted a soccer ball high in the air and ran off after it. James balanced a toaster on top of a television and a box of cassettes on top of the toaster. He stacked some dishware, tripped on a root, saw them spilled out in the sand like artifacts, and gathered the chipped bowls and cups and plates like an archaeologist exhuming the twenty-first century and not like a thief. They kept taking until, after twenty minutes or so, the area around the living room had reverted back to nature and the truck bed was stuffed from tailgate to cab, from the bed bottom to the top of the scaffolding that rose up on either side.

"Well, shit," Charles said, looking up at it all, which would've taken months to collect in the usual manner. "I guess that does it."

"Let me just quick just double check that we didn't forget anything," James said, then turned and returned to the living-room arrangement. The woods around the encampment were thick with shadows, as thick as walls, and James flipped through the sports magazine on the coffee table, tried to turn on the television, and tasted a chip. It was stale. He lay on the couch for a second, his feet up on the armrest, dreaming of another version of domesticity, of a couch in a

place where his mother couldn't come in and ask him how he was doing, of an apartment he wouldn't have to clean. Then he sat up. He could've taken the TV but it was cracked and heavy. He could've taken the globe or the clock radio but they were just things and he already had a truck full of stuff. So he picked up the one thing seemed the significant, that was more than merely an object: he took the model ship from the coffee table. It reminded him of the things other kids had made when he was a kid. He took it and left with it, a souvenir from somewhere he'd never been: apart from his mother.

I remember her being as quiet and impending as a storm cloud.

So James and Charles drove slowly across the recreational complex, interrupting baseball games and a soccer practice, while kids marveled at what was passing through the fifth inning: a truck loaded with junk, a plastic statue of the Virgin Mary tied to the roof of the cab, a trail of detritus spilling behind it.



## FIVE

To summarize: James stole almost everything Fritz had, including his only memento of Dave, his dead son.

I realized this almost immediately, of course. But I didn't tell James what I knew. We were stoned and I was enthralled and it seemed too cumbersome to interject and try to explain that, you know, as a matter of fact, oddly enough, turns out I *know* the guy whose stuff you took. Probably, I should've. But James would've turned suspicious and I would've had to explain and his story would've stalled and I wanted to get to the end. So I didn't say anything. So then I couldn't say anything. So James told me everything and Fritz had already told me the rest.

James stayed with me for three nights. We did more than just talk about the weekend he was kicked out of his mom's house. We walked around town. We went to the Rosewood Dairy Bar and ate ice cream. I took him to Utopia. We went to Hayes' house for a new bag. We watched TV. That kind of thing.

It wasn't that different than being thirteen. The difference was, we weren't thirteen: we were both within a few months of being thirty. What would've been exciting then—getting

stoned, fucking around, watching sitcoms during the day, eating fast food, living without obligation—was stale now. It was sad to live like that because it made it evident that no one needed us. We were expendable. We—two grown men—could wake up at noon, smoke a joint, and watch an episode of *Friends* and no one would even notice our indolence. The self-importance we'd felt as kids was shattered and we were left with a lot of arbitrary time to be alive. So we tried to fill it. James vacillated between being unhinged with enthusiasm and being self-deprecating, apologetic, withdrawn. I was basically just bummed.

James wanted to know about me. What had I been up to? Why was I back? What the fuck had happened?

I tried to tell him but I still can't explain.

I told him that Allison and I met in Chicago, through one of her coworkers, a girl I'd gone to college with. We went out a few times and we got drunk one night and she got pregnant. Then we went to visit her parents, to tell them. It was the right thing to do, we told ourselves. Her parents lived on the other side of Lake Michigan, in Muskegon, and so we took a ferry across the water. It would be faster and more romantic.

When we were onboard, Allison convinced me that it would be better if we arrived already wed. We'd seen a priest onboard—he was just another forlorn looking passenger—and Allison thought we should just get married right then. Why not? She solicited the priest. She bribed him with twenty bucks. His name was Father Love—or so he said—and he drank a lot of overpriced Jim Beam with us after the brief ceremony. Sometimes I wonder if he was just some weird guy who wore a Roman collar and pretended. Or maybe he'd been defrocked but couldn't admit it. Either way, we were wed out there on the lake, in the space between states, and arrived

in Michigan a married couple. Her parents tried to be supportive but their concern was apparent. Her dad drove us down to the local courthouse to make it official. Legal.

So then I had a wife.

Then, on a day when the sky was blue and as smooth as the inside of an eggshell, Allison gave birth and Grace arrived on earth to replace, say, the woman in Tulsa who died eight seconds earlier. Birth and death rates are skewed in favor of expansion, and our daughter came out bloody and unhappy. Grace arrived bald and bawling. She arrived in a room. Grace was born. She had brown eyes and no teeth. She had no teeth.

Now I had a daughter.

My daughter was brand new but my wife was three years older than me and two inches taller. She was six-one and kept her hair cut in a bob just below her ears.

The one time Allison took a chance and let me fuck her without protection, she got pregnant. So then she was cautious. won every argument. She was a nurse and only spoke to express concern. Is the backdoor locked? Did you go to the grocery store? We probably shouldn't spend the money. What if Grace doesn't like it? Are you sure you should?

She won every argument. Or would've, if I'd argued. It was easier to accede.

We never went out. We rarely talked. I hated her but I hid my hatred. I taught three sections of intro photography a few days a week and Allison worked nights in the emergency room at the only hospital. We were like coworkers at a daycare. Coworkers who didn't work the same shift. Who had a daughter together.

When Grace was two, she started having terrible, recurring nightmares about a man in a costume-shop mask pursuing her through some elaborate landscape that she always described as being "huge and crowded." She was scared and would come into my bed, for comfort. It was

innocent. It was what all parents everywhere do: console their child with affection, with proximity, with assurance and reassurance. But Allison never liked me and was always suspicious and she discovered us one night and took the opportunity to accuse me.

I don't want to get into it.

I tried to defend myself but, honestly, I wanted to get away from her too. I figured we'd get divorced and that I'd still get to see my daughter often, if not always, and that I'd never have to see Allison again. Which would've been worth it. But then the police got involved—or Allison involved them—and charges were filed.

All of their evidence was circumstantial. They couldn't prove anything. But my lawyer, whose lips were always wet with all the Chap-stick he always wore, said they wouldn't have to. Considering what I was accused of, we'd have to demonstrate my innocence—and that, of course, was impossible. And if I accepted the plea bargain, I wouldn't have to spend any time in jail. Which was the main thing. I didn't even want to know what they would do to me. I don't.

I told James what I'd told Grace: Just because you plead guilty, doesn't mean you did something wrong. That's not how the justice system works. It just means that pleading guilty is the best thing you can do, for you.

I got probation. I endured a few court-supervised visits. I took Grace to Franklin Park and this guy Ronny, who wore a Jar Jar Binks necktie, took notes. With the surveillance, I was wary even of hugging her, my own daughter. I was scared to hold her hand. Ronny would document it and the judge would read it and my affection for my child would be used as evidence against me. I'd be in violation of my parole and sent to prison.

This was what I thought about when I spent my weekly half hour with my child. I had a daughter and I wasn't even allowed, legally, to think about her. I was supposed to forget her. But I couldn't, of course. I can't.

## SIX

Fritz told me that he had to try hard not to die.

He told me that when he arrived back at the clearing where he lived, he went to the empty place where everything had been and he stood for a second, assuring himself that just because something disappears doesn't mean it can't be found. Then he went into the living room and sat on the couch, put his head in his hands, and lamented the loss of his single memento of his son: the model schooner Dave had built meticulously over the course of his sixth-grade summer, when he was eleven.

Dave had always been obsessed by boats, had hinted and hinted that he wanted a model ship for his eleventh birthday. Against Fritz's wishes, his mother had ordered a kit with prefabricated pieces. It came in the mail and he ripped it open and it was clear that this wasn't a simple snap-together toy. It was a deliberately painstaking chore designed for adults looking to occupy a lot of time with something that was difficult and that thus felt productive.

With tweezers and a bottle of airplane glue that had a pinpoint applicator, Dave turned tiny scraps of wood into an authentic-looking nineteenth-century sailing vessel. He spent a week

on the crow's nest alone. The mainmast rigging occupied much of July. But Dave was a promising soccer player, and Fritz had wanted him to focus on that and had forced him to attend a few rigorous week-long camps. But since it was summer, the busy season at the water park, Fritz spent most of his time at work and Dave was left alone to build.

In late August, a few days before school was to start again, Dave announced a christening ceremony on the back deck. He smashed the tiny bottle of champagne that came with the kit against the bow of the foot-long ship, and Fritz saw what his son had named it: *Aquaholic*. Fritz wasn't drunk but he'd had a screwdriver or three and he'd been against this all along and now he was outraged. *You think that's funny?* Fritz said to his son. *What?* Dave asked, acting innocent. *Fritz*, Charon said, *it's just a silly boat name*. Fritz grabbed Dave's arm, dragged him into his bedroom, and beat him across his back with a braided leather belt. He apologized while he did it, lamented that Dave had forced him to do it, explained to him again the direct relationship between discipline and respect. The standard spiel.

He told me not to ever hit my kid. I told Fritz I never did.

Charon hid the schooner in the garage for safekeeping and gave it back to Dave a few days later, when Fritz had calmed down. Dave hid it in his dresser's sock drawer, in defiance, and it was still there when he disappeared twenty years later. Fritz found it when he was clearing out the house before the bank auction, and he'd hung onto it ever since. He said that it helped keep him sober, that it was a gift from his son, a gift he didn't deserve.

Now it was gone. Stolen.

Fritz was squeezing his snow globe, was trying to shatter it with the strength of his frustration, when Karla showed up. Karla was in her mid-thirties and drank way too much rum and slept on Fritz's La-Z-Boy every night. They were friends.

I'd seen Karla around the shelter once—she was drinking what was probably rum out of a Powerade bottle—but we didn't talk.

“Look,” Fritz said without even looking up at her. “Someone stole everything.”

“Jesus,” Karla said. Karla was exceedingly tall, about six-two, and she always wore the same red, sleeveless dress with a stitched purple flower growing from the hemline on the lower front left, and she always carried a tennis racket in a case slung across her back like it was a crucifix she'd outgrown. She claimed to have been a tennis prodigy and to have played number one singles for Converse, an Upstate women's college, until an ACL tear ended her career. She looked to be in her mid-thirties, but she claimed she was twenty-four and on the verge of a comeback.

Fritz tried to explain. He told her about the truck and the statue—and about the ship. Karla knew the ship but not what it meant. He couldn't confide in her about his son because she'd already confided in him about her father, who had been a lot like Fritz, only worse. If she knew how he'd treated his son, she wouldn't have stayed—and he needed her to: he needed to perform the penance of kindness.

A child is always evidence of her parents' errors: you have to be careful around kids.

Karla came each evening around seven and was always gone when Fritz awoke at dawn. Fritz was pretty sure she was an insomniac, since anytime he was startled awake by a sound in the night she would immediately and gently say, *Go back to bed*. She was good at offering solace, and Fritz was greedy for it.

She felt sorry for him, she said, and sat down beside him, near him, a few inches away. Her beauty was still intact, despite her best efforts to wreck it. Fritz put his hand on her hand, which was on her knee. She scooted over, away from him. He was elderly and lonely and she



was here and a woman. He was looking for the limit of their intimacy. His feeling for her was more than protective and paternal. He tried to suppress his surplus emotion, which wasn't merely unhealthy but perverse, considering what her father had done to her.

Lust is just greed and I don't know how a parent could take anything away from their child.

Fritz couldn't think about it. He thought of something else—his stuff—and he told her he was going to get it back. Karla picked up the remote and clicked it at the television. Nothing happened, of course. She crunched cashews, almonds, and peanuts, then passed him the canister and changed an imagined channel.

Karla said she was thinking about getting some practice in, about playing tennis, as she did every day, against a wall. But then her friend Mister was picking her up later, taking her into town. She stared expectantly at the blank TV. "You could ride with us. Maybe they're in town. You know, the thieves. If you wanna come—" she clicked the remote and stood up—"I'm gonna walk over there now."

Mister lived in the Motel 5 on Kilbourne. Fritz didn't know the details but knew that Mister and Karla weren't dating or anything but that they'd been hanging out a lot the past few weeks. Fritz was pretty sure that Mister had been providing food and booze for Karla and Fritz could only assume that Mister got something in exchange, even though she never stayed the night with him. Even though she always returned to Fritz's encampment in the evening. Fritz distrusted Mister. Still, a ride into town seemed like the right idea. Or the only idea, anyhow. Fritz agreed and put down his magazine.

They emerged from the woods and encountered a sideline of parents watching their approximately seven-year-old children scrimmage on an improvised soccer field marked out with

orange cones. These people, these parents sunk deep in domestic-occupational conversation, surfaced from their small talk with silent alarm when a disheveled old man and a still-young woman arrived behind them with all the unseemly implications of emerging skittishly from border woods.

“Hey there,” Fritz said, insistently casual, attempting to disperse the suspicion. Fritz was devoted to the permissive but stolid morality of middle-class parenthood. He was loyal in exile to its code of cordiality. He was still clinging on.

I felt bad for Fritz. I understood. Sometimes I even wore my wedding band so that married people wouldn’t pity me, would know that I knew what it meant.

“Nice night,” Fritz said to a father standing at the end of the group, a young guy with round glasses. “Which one’s yours?” That the man didn’t answer neither surprised nor offended Fritz: he knew and respected the protective instinct of fatherhood. “My son, Dave—he was a forward. This was years ago, but he was a pretty good player. All Region. Four years varsity at North Myrtle Beach. Could’ve played college.” Fritz noticed that Karla was already far off in the direction of the tennis courts. “These kids look pretty good.” Pause. You can’t be too careful. “I mean,” he said, “they play pretty well, you know, for this age group. What are they? Under eight? Under ten?”

“I’m sorry,” the man said, pointing vaguely toward the other sideline. “I have to, um . . .”

“No, that’s fine. That’s fine,” said Fritz. “I understand. Have a good night.”

The other parents were struggling to avoid him, initiating internal conversation to exclude him. “So,” they all seemed to say. “Yeah,” they all answered. “Anyhow,” came the chorus. And there was Fritz humiliated on their periphery, eager to convince them that he was one of them. He too was a parent who had spent weeknights throughout his thirties monitoring his son’s

recreational life. He too had been—and not long ago—a husband who negotiated his schedule with his spouse’s. He’d dealt with subcontractors when he remodeled his kitchen. He’d cleaned-up popcorn spills from the backseat of a station wagon. He too found solace in the strict predictably of television programming. He knew the clichés of suburban malaise were in fact evidence of its spoils, and he was sympathetic to their need to find cause for concern and complaint amidst the safe regularity of their lives.

After all, all along he’d been trying to recreate the domesticity he’d lost. And now all he’d reacquired had been taken. But he would earn back his belonging amongst them. He would. He’d leave them alone now. He didn’t mean to intrude. He only wanted to wish them all well and let them get back to the game, to conversation, to the drive home, to alarm codes, to dinner, to bedtimes and reading glasses and parent-teacher conferences.

I’m elaborating.

Fritz wished them all a goodnight and gave a slow, high wave behind him when he walked off. Then he stuffed his hands in his pockets and tilted his head up toward the sky, like a man too in love with the world to worry if it loved him back.

That attitude, though, was an act: the world hated him, he knew. It was a plain fact, and he resented it as he crossed the field covertly picking up detritus spilled from the truck and warily glancing back to ensure that the soccer parents were still too embarrassed for him to notice that he was gleaning garbage from the ground, that he was picking up a turtleneck, a toaster oven, a left shoe, a bottle opener, a broken umbrella, and a lamp. He carried it all across the grass, past other kids involved in other games, over to where Karla played tennis against herself.

As the sun set and the park lights brightened to break open an unnatural new day, he sat on a berm above the court and watched her slap shots for a set or so and then lay back and fell asleep to the clatter and squeak of her sneakers on the cement.

When he awoke, an airplane was blinking its way red across the gray, cloud-marbled sky, and Karla and Mister were seated Indian-style a few feet away from him, playing oversized checkers on one of those rug boards, passing back and forth a pint of gin. On his other side was the stuff he'd salvaged, and it seemed to him then that the world had been reduced down to the rubble of a few symbolic elements.

Mister was a young black punk with a ring through his septum and a safety pin poked through his earlobe; his tight, tan cargo pants were rolled up to show his high-top All-Stars; his hair was buzzed down to his scalp on one half of his head and was an inch or so thick on the other side. Mister asked if Fritz was awake. Karla asked if Fritz was feeling OK. Fritz's mouth was dry and cumbersome from sleep. He said hey. They went back to their game and Fritz listened to the distant swish of Interstate traffic, unless it was wind passing through high trees. Somebody won. Karla stacked the black chips, Mister stacked the red ones, Karla rolled up the rug.

Fritz asked Mister if he'd heard what happened.

"Sucks" was all he said, then took back the bottle from Karla.

Mister's entire persona was constructed around aspirations of indifference, which was easy, and authenticity, which he seemed to consider a slant synonym of adversity. Hence the conspicuousness of his poverty, which Fritz doubted. Hence Mister's disaffection, which seemed cultivated.

Karla invited Fritz to come with them into town. They were leaving in a second. They'd help him look for his stuff. She was buoyed by alcohol now; later, after another pint or so, she'd be sunk in it. Mister censured her with a sharp look. Fritz faux-reluctantly accepted the invitation. Mister looked annoyed. Karla took the gin, tilted her head horizontal and the empty bottle vertical, as though gravity could elicit a last drop from the glass. It didn't.

Karla grabbed both stacks of chips. Mister slung the rug board over his shoulder. Fritz gathered up the toaster, the left shoe, the bottle opener, the turtleneck, the broken umbrella, the lamp, cradled it all cumbersomely in his arms and followed them to the dirt parking lot. But he stumbled and everything spilled out of his arms and he saw what it all was—worthless—and so left it and got in the back seat of Mister's dented, white Le Sabre. Karla hopped in the front bench seat. Mister started the ignition. Then they rode out of there together, in search of something to recover.

## SEVEN

Plot is just coincidence.

It might be hard to believe, but Fritz, this homeless guy I happened to meet, wanted to retrieve all of the salvage that my long lost middle-school best friend, who happened to show up at my door, stole from him.

This occurred over the last weekend of last September and I don't really remember what I was doing then. I was working at the shelter. I was sleeping as late into the afternoon as I could, until it was ten minutes before my shift and I didn't even have time to brush my teeth before I left. I was watching the various digital versions of PBS so that I'd feel OK about watching so much TV. I was planning to read more and to start exercising—but I wasn't doing either. I was eating microwavable macaroni and cheese. I was responding to personal ads but not getting responses. I was thinking about getting a dog. But mostly, I was looking at a lot of porn. I was watching it as intently as those guys in the NASA command center monitor the shuttle missions. I'd looked at so much porn by then that I'd started to memorize the names of the models. *Oh*, I'd

think, *I've already seen that video of Melody wearing a pink jumpsuit*. Then I'd click until I found someone I'd never seen. I liked when they wore braces, pouted, needed comfort.

I recently read some Time-Life book about Whistler and, according to the author, Whistler was a genius because he made paintings that exceeded what they depicted. I feel like the Internet does that automatically, that it inflates the mundane until it's a version of fascinating.

I couldn't look away.

Everyone always talks about how they're so busy and about how fast-paced life has become, but for me, I've always felt overwhelmed by the opposite, by how technology has made everything effortless, how it has emptied out time.

I never knew what to do, so I masturbated to a woman wearing a costume shop school-girl outfit in Akron.

As my granddad, who lived in a condominium with an Astro-turf balcony, used to say: *You can only be bored if you're thinking about yourself*. But I've never really understood what he meant. How can you think without involving yourself?

I thought a lot about how I'd fuck all these women on the Internet. I knew their names—or at least their aliases—and I started to have dreams about what they did during the rest of the day, when they weren't being filmed, when they were trying to find a parking spot or when they were deciding which kind of black beans to buy in some grocery-store aisle. What I mean is, it wasn't working anymore. My fantasies became mundane and so they weren't fantasies and I knew I needed something else. There's that text-message acronym *irl* that means "in real life," as though there are things in life that aren't real. And I hadn't slept with anyone since Allison. And even that had stopped before we broke up. And even when it was happening it wasn't really worth it.

So I wanted to meet someone new and enter a relationship and find intimacy and be less lonely and maybe even get married again. But that—this idea that there was someone out there that I was going to love—was a fantasy more fragile than anything I could construct for the strangers I watched online.

I went out with a girl I found on a dating website and she had a bald spot that she tried to cover up by arranging her hair in a certain way, with a lot of hairspray. She smelled flammable. I got a hand job from Tracy, a middle-aged alcoholic who only ever left Utopia to pass out until it was time to return and always talked about astrology and didn't remember any of it the next night, when I tried to take her home. I sent an email to a shy red-haired girl who I knew had had a crush on me in high school and we met up at Pizza Man and she was pregnant. Her fiance, she told me, was an exterminator. She ate more than her share but didn't touch the pitcher.

I'm trying to explain why I decided to look for a Russian bride. I'm not sure I can but here's an answer anyway: because I needed to believe that a person is someone you construct out of your desire and because I could go online and order someone from the other side of the world, someone who was too far away to tell me I was wrong.



## EIGHT

James and Charles drove out to the junkyard on the Sumter Highway. Signs advertising extra low rates were painted on the cinder-block walls of bail-bonding businesses. Salvage was protected by barbed wire and chain link. Houses slumped. Pine trees stood sky-tall. James brought headlights and taillights and the rattle of junk.

When they arrived at the junkyard gate, James unlocked it, locked it behind him, and cut the ignition.

I went out to Tilden & Sons to see it myself a few months after James left. It's way outside of town, off Bluff Road, past Congaree Swamp. Not far from where my Aunt Lindsay and her husband live. Out there, the nice houses are built out of cinderblocks and have Astro-turf front steps. The rest are square wooden shacks. You see a lot of kudzu climbing telephone poles. The fields are fallow but confused about how to get back to nature. There are bars on the windows of the disparate businesses. Everything looks worn down, worn out. Exhausted. There's not enough a/c to correct for the languor. Window fans spin forever, stirring up the same hot heavy air that's not going anywhere until November or whenever.

You take a couple of lefts and turn a right at an abandoned gas station and go about a quarter mile past nothing but pine trees and there, on your left, is an eight-foot-high chain link fence that contains what looks like a pretty average chunk of rural South Carolina ground. There's high grass and weeds big as bushes and splotches of sandy soil and some scattered trash and a faint pair of parallel tire tracks that lead into the land. You can stand at the gate and look through but there's no way in except over the fencing and there's no reason you'd really want to enter. There's some broken exercise equipment. I remember two Nordic Tracks. There are a few filing cabinets of various heights. There's a moped and one of those Barbie cars with four flat tires. There are low piles of scrap metal and lumber. There's a disassembled metal swing set spread out on the ground, and the slide looks like a huge snake gleaming in the grass. There isn't that much.

Maybe Charles or Ms. Tilden or someone went out there and got rid of some stuff after James disappeared. I don't know.

But on that Thursday night last September, there was a lot more, according to James. And there was so much new stuff to add. James went around to the bed and considered all of it, all of the appurtenances of so many past lives, of people who had moved on to other things: to heaven, to hell, to a smaller house, to a different state, to a new wife, to college, to a bigger bike, to a smaller microwave, to a thinner TV, to CDs, to MP3s. With all of that and mountains of the same piled high in his headlights, James wondered what he was getting in exchange for all he'd accumulated.

James had been collecting for seventeen years. I remember when he started, when we were twelve and he saw a group of sports trophies on the side of the road while we were riding bikes. All that gold-seeming stuff gleaming in the burnt-out day compelled him to stop. I was

there. So were Trent and Clark, a couple of other kids we hung out with back then. I think we were on our way to buy cigarettes from the Magic Mart on Kilbourne. We stopped so James could examine the miniature athletes paused mid-motion on their elaborate pedestals, but the rest of us got impatient and rode off to buy Newports from a Turkish guy named Ned. James remained behind.

He told me that the trophies were all Honorable Mentions and Sportsmanship Awards. It was the family's mediocrity that made their prizes valuable to him. The trophies were only mementos of failure for their owners, and their abandonment was an effort to forget. James stuffed as many trophies as he could in his backpack. He even gripped one in his free hand when he rode home. He lined them up on his desk. I remember them there. They seemed like a more adult version of action figures, and James kept them there until his mother found them and accused him of trying to appropriate someone else's accomplishments. Knowing better than to argue with his mother about this or anything else, James promised to return them and hid them behind some boxes under his bed.

Then there was a backgammon set missing all of its pieces and a tiny souvenir baseball bat and a box of polyester women's blouses and a video game system he never could get to work and a rake with broken tines, and by the end of the summer his bedroom was crowded with things whose presence he couldn't explain to himself, much less to his mother. I thought it was exciting. We'd spend all day sifting through it, imagining what we could do with all of it and never doing anything with any of it. Behind the house there was an enormous brick garage with a corrugated-tin roof and hundreds of square panes of chicken-wire-strengthened glass forming a wide, horizontal strip along the longer side walls. It was the perfect place to store his collection. He carried it out there a few items at a time, stacked it way in the back, threw a blue tarp over it,

and then added to it whenever he had something new. From that, a single scrap at a time, until he needed more room, until he established his junkyard on land inherited from his father, until all he had was all of this stuff, plus a new load to add.

James opened the tailgate, cleared space enough to sit, sat, thought of the low moon as some kind of escape hatch, and asked Charles for a cigarette. Charles gave him one. James was loose and thin, like a kid just kicked out of summer camp for insolence, what with his buzz cut and untucked t-shirt, his scabbed elbows and torn shorts, his elastic-less socks that bunched up at his ankles, his deep cigarette drags that he allowed to settle in his lungs before letting them disperse and move on to somewhere else. He scratched at a mosquito bite on his back and said, “So how are we gonna divide all this up?”

They agreed they’d just go through it and take turns picking things. But they were too tired to do it right then. They’d do it in the morning. First thing. But James didn’t want to drive around with it all in his truck all night, so they decided they’d go ahead and unload it all—then get stoned, as a reward.

They formed a little bucket brigade. James handed to Charles the stuff of the life they had taken apart and taken. Charles stacked it all in a possible pyre. When the truck’s bed was as neat and empty as a kid’s when he’s at away summer camp, the pile they’d built blocked the path that led further back into the junkyard.

James had bought a fresh bag the night before from Hayes, and a good fifth of the quarter was already gone. He went around to get his pot and paraphernalia out of the glove box, packed the bowl, lit it, let the smoke churn and accumulate until it was as thick as cotton candy, and then he inhaled. He exhaled a fog of exhaust—then coughed hard and passed the pipe to Charles.

They smoked steadily and joylessly, with the efficient demeanor of nurses administering flu shots at a county health clinic. James packed the bowl a few more times and Charles went to look on the floorboard for a bottle of Powerade that he'd forgotten and James packed the bowl one more time and Charles lit a cigarette and James bummed one. Then they sat in the warm dark, in that barbed-wired enclave of garbage and waited for the weed to work, for the world to get more worthwhile and less like it was. They waited for the Rorschach shapes of the night sky to coalesce into discernible images, but they didn't.

James had inherited this land from his father, who had inherited it from his father, and so on until you got back to an immigrant Irishman who was honorably discharged from the Confederate Army due to an injury incurred not on the battlefield but at the mint in Columbia, where he supervised men who printed \$100 bills that depicted Mrs. Grace Pickens (the South Carolina socialite known as "The Queen of the Confederacy"), where he scrambled during sixteen-hour shifts to float the sinking economy of a country he wasn't from and hadn't sought, and where on a certain day the machine that cut sheets of bills into singles jammed. He reached in to repair it, got it working, lost his hand, and was awarded three scrubby, sand-soiled acres as compensation for his sacrifice to the cause. *A good deal for me, all things considered*, he was alleged to have said some years later, when the liberated labor worked cheap and hard for their disabled landowner, and the farm prospered. It went on doing well, more or less, for almost a century, until the Chinese and Indians undercut, etc.

The only fact in all of this that I can verify is the existence of the Confederate mint on the corner of Gervais and Assembly. It was converted into a Publix in the late nineties.

The field was left fallow for four decades, until James, who had filled the glass garage entirely, bought a thousand wheels designed for discontinued car models, which he'd found

advertised for a dollar apiece in the classifieds, and he needed to store them somewhere until he could find a buyer. It took him many trips out to Barnwell, where the seller was, but eventually he brought all 987 of them back to what was then just an overgrown field with an occasional pine tree finding its way above the fray.

He had only bought them because they were so cheap and because that is what salvagers do: buy enormous quantities of seemingly useless things and then resell them, at a profit. So he stacked them on the land and spent his days looking for buyers. He went to car dealerships and repair shops, to flea market vendors and even to a rival salvager, and finally, after a week or so, he found a steel mill in Cayce that agreed to buy them for fifty cents each, meaning he'd lose \$493.50 for all his effort. But it was better than losing \$987. And at least he'd get rid of them and make his first turnaround. Everything was arranged, but when he arrived to meet the semi that was going to haul them away, they were gone—stolen. *You don't have a fence?* the delivery driver asked. *You need a fence. People are vultures.* So James built a fence and wound barbed wire around the top and resolved never to buy scrap again, only to scavenge it.

But what resonated with James that Thursday night wasn't the convoluted tale about the history of the land or its potential as an origin myth that might explain his family's fraught relationship with money or the moral about fence-building. What resonated was the miscellany of abandonment stacked behind his truck. It was his ticket to somewhere. He'd sell it—his half of it, anyhow—and he'd make he didn't know how much, but he was pretty sure it had to be worth at least four hundred dollars. Maybe as much as seven hundred, depending. He'd have to make his selections carefully, consider not only what was valuable but also what people wanted, which weren't always the same thing. He'd do that tomorrow morning, and then he'd go out to

Pops' and Barnyard and Highway One and maybe that new flea market out near Chapin and start seeing what people were interested in.

He wouldn't even tell his mother his new address. Or maybe he would, later, when he was settled in and he could invite her over for dinner or whatever. He'd get a terrarium and a newt. He'd save his best stuff for himself, for furnishing. He wished he hadn't sold that five-disc CD player last month. He'd have a living room, after all, and a living room needs a lot for it to feel full and comfortable. But it also needs to be neat. He'd need a mop. He'd have to go to Target or somewhere and get one. He'd need a dish rack, too. He might forget that.

James' ruminations were interrupted by the muffled melody of "Guitars, Cadillacs" emanating from Charles' pocket. I hate that song. It was Chelsea. He'd been dating her since seventh grade and last month he'd told James that he'd been thinking of proposing, that she was getting anxious for him to do it, that he wanted to but wasn't sure. He was concerned about the boredom of comfort, which seemed to James a good concern to have.

Charles answered her call and James went around the truck to give Charles some privacy and also to consult Mary. She was backlit by the moon. Even in the dark, she retained some incandescence, some rumor of sentience, and James resolved never to sell her. Unless of course someone made an offer he couldn't refuse. Even then he might refuse it.

Then, as though he'd been listening to James' thoughts, Charles appeared at his side. "I'd give you a hundred, if I had it."

At first, the Virgin Mary seemed clumsily symbolic but I never could figure out what it was supposed to stand for and I don't think James knew either. I think he just liked the mystique of the mystical, as though the statue could instantly make the mundane esoteric.

He and Charles smoked. They could hear the long lament of a CSX engineer leading a train full of coal and corn and buttons and God knows what else through the county, the night. Charles told James that some people were at Tavern, the shitty dive bar in Five Points that they always went to. They decided to go. They got in the truck and bounded down the cracked asphalt of the rural roads, radio waves breaking the acute quiet, cigarette smoke tainting the clear air, headlights cracking the hard darkness, the night another thing for them to handle, dismantle, and salvage for themselves.



## NINE

When I taught photography, I'd tell my students that they were supposed to see what no one had noticed before.

I stopped taking pictures when I realized that the only new thing left to document is what doesn't exist yet. What you invent for yourself. To tell a new truth, you have to manufacture compelling lies.

And desire is a way to orient yourself: it suggests a direction.

I went on russianbrides.biz and looked for a new wife. I started a few days after James left and I searched through thousands of profiles and it took months. The women were like pound puppies that had given up on rescue but couldn't help begging for it. The women pled with the camera, which made my search feel less selfish and more like I was doing something generous, like I had an opportunity to do something redeeming, like I could be redeemed, like I was selecting some desperate third-world woman and offering her the salvation of opportunity. Which I was.

It was like touring an orphanage, choosing a child for adoption, for the coddling and love they deserved but otherwise would be denied. I would be generous.

The women sought anyone by offering themselves as anyone.

They emphasized their malleability. They described themselves as Open-Minded/  
Flexible/Easygoing.

And the more pitiable they were, the more I wanted them.

I searched until I found a woman named Ladya, who was the most pitiful of all.

She described herself as Flirtatious/Playful, Kind/Friendly, Gentle, Persistent, Romantic, Self Confident, Sensitive/Nurturing/Loving, Serious/Responsible. She summed herself up in her About Me section as “a very good girl.” Her photos seemed to have been shot in a satire of the ‘80s, in a mall costume shop: she was posed in various unlikely costumes (classic movie starlet, motorcyclist, train conductor, sports fan, gymnast, peasant, etc.) in front of various backgrounds (cityscape, marble wall, fireworks display, Kremlin, White House, castle, etc.). She was seeking a man 25-60. She was nineteen. She had no kids. She wrote that in her free time she enjoyed Cooking, Meetings/Friends, Movies/Videos, Watching Sports.

I sent her a message.

Stories are just elaborate lies.

When we first moved to Normal, Allison and I rented the first floor of a house across the street from the Beer Nuts factory. The mother of our upstairs neighbors was a meth addict or something and she would stop by our place late at night, complaining that her son was ungrateful and that he wouldn't let her in and she just needed to crash on our couch for a few hours, until the buses started running again and she could get back to her boyfriend's. She'd wake us up a few nights a week, asking for something, ringing the doorbell repeatedly if we tried to ignore her.

So we moved when our lease was up. We moved into a two-bedroom bungalow on Chestnut Street. I found out a few months after we moved that Ralph Eugene Meatyard, one of my favorite photographers, had grown up a block away, in Adlai Stevenson's former home. It seemed like an auspicious coincidence but around then Grace started having her nightmares and I started to wonder if maybe the masked people of my daughter's dreams had somehow migrated from the Lucybelle Crater photos that Meatyard took. His initials, after all, are R.E.M.

It was all probably just a coincidence but a coincidence always feels like evidence. Evidence, in this case maybe, that you can remember what someone else has seen.

## TEN

Fritz told me that he sometimes thought of other people as “a trick of light.”

He told me that Karla jumped rope in the back, near the bathroom, and that Mister sat Indian style on the floor and smoked a small joint. Fritz crossed his legs on the end of the double bed, on the slick, bunched-up comforter that was patterned with a creeping mauve vine on a burnt-green background. There they all were in that ruined motel room.

A friend of mine from high school, Zach, lived there—in the Motel 5; in a different room—for a little while after we graduated from Dreher and before I moved away for college. Zach was this tall, thin skinhead and I remember him listening to a seven-inch of a band called Adolf & the Piss Ants. I’m not racist. That was twelve years ago. That was different. Zach was fastidious. Mister wasn’t.

The lampshades of Mister’s room were dented and smudged with burns of bulbs left lit too long, the desk was overturned so its feet spread up like branches of a bare tree, the milk-white walls had curdled into something resembling stucco, the wall-to-wall carpet had started to pill, the telephone was missing its receiver, the damp towels were rolled up where the pillows

should have been, the pillows were on the bathroom floor, the shower curtain was missing, the shower-curtain rings resembled circuitous icicles, strands and globs of brown-pink vomit stained the toilet porcelain, beer cans were spilled like blocks in a preschool classroom, clothes were leaves in the yard of a late-fall foreclosure, bottles were as empty and everywhere as the hopeless, potato-chip sand spilled from the greasy mouths of open bags, an unfinished fast-food hamburger was a cross section of the harm of convenience, and Fritz wondered where the cockroaches were hiding and when they'd emerge and whether they flew and if one were crawling up his back, extending its wings, twitching its thin legs. He shook his shirt to send the insect fluttering off and looked around to discover it didn't exist.

Karla had been jumping rope for what seemed like forever. For her it was about fitness, not fun, and she was focused and controlled and kept going.

"Did you ever do that double dutch shit?" said Mister.

She didn't answer.

"Remember that?" he asked Fritz. "Remember at like the fucking halftime of Carolina basketball games they'd have all these kids out there doing all this fancy jump roping?"

Fritz didn't answer.

"That was amazing. You should get involved in that kinda shit, Karla. You got it down. You could be the coach or something."

Karla kept going. She only stopped when she reached some private limit. Karla sweated.

"Dang I'm thirsty." She went over and found a bottle of rum on top of the dresser and took a chug and said, "Yep," when she was done. She took in deep, therapeutic breaths. She touched her toes.

I'm an only child and my mom used to say to me, *You only live once*, which frightened me, because it meant that everything I did was most likely an error.

Mister had arranged a full fifth of Popov, a two-liter of a Cheerwine, and a stack of fresh plastic glasses on the floor beside him. He offered to make Karla a drink. She accepted. She pulled one foot up behind her and stood like a bird on the other one. She stretched one quad, then the other. Mister dropped the dead joint in the ashtray. He poured, then handed the cup up to Karla, who took it and sipped it and said, "Thanks."

My dad was a lapsed real-estate agent. He let his license expire when there were too many homes to sell and not enough buyers and he started responding to want ads stapled to telephone poles that asked, *Do You Want to Make \$1K Per Week from Home?* Of course he did. The money part wasn't true, it turned out, but it was a good excuse for him never to leave the house.

Fritz fortified himself to refuse any impending offer of alcohol. He conjured calm from full breaths that inflated his stomach like an about-to-burst balloon. He expelled, when he exhaled, all the distress and stress that made him want to feel the cold ease of even just one sip—just one—crackling through his exhaustion, enlivening him into something slack like comfort. He rid himself of that thought. He didn't need it. It wasn't interesting. He closed his eyes and tried to do for this decision what maps do for cities, quiet and organize them, sort and display them, but he found that his mind wasn't conducive to such dispassionate distillation. It was mostly just dark—dark and indiscernible, except for a single specter that lurked in the back like an outcome: Dave. Fritz wanted a drink, a small one, but he wouldn't have one.

My dad died of cancer five years ago, before Grace was born, but my mom met her once. It was Christmas and she'd been drinking egg nog all morning and Allison wouldn't let her hold her.

Mister was sitting still and Indian-style like some blasphemous Buddha. Karla was sitting on the end of the other double bed, holding a red plastic cup.

"I'm fine," Fritz said aloud, practicing, anticipating his refusal of an offer that hadn't yet been extended.

"You worrying about your stuff, Fritz?" Karla asked, crossing her legs. "You all right?"

"Yeah, I'm all right," Fritz said, though he panicked at the thought of his planned pursuit, which he'd successfully forgotten about.

"You should go ask around at flea markets and stuff," Mister said. "Pawnshops. They're probably selling it all right now. Getting rid of it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. That's what I'd do." Mister sipped. "Leave me and Karla alone here for some privacy."

Karla shook her head, unconvincingly. Fritz looked down at the ground, at the cocktail ingredients. Mister un-collapsed himself and stood up and sat beside Karla on the bed, took her hand from her knee, put it on his, put his arm around her shoulder, kissed her on the cheek, on the neck, until she squirmed away, but not far away. She stayed near enough that Fritz knew their intimacy was ongoing, impending.

They sat around the room. The wobbly ceiling fan wobbled. Someone coughed. Someone else scratched their wrist. Mister lit a cigarette. It was like a set-up for a joke: so, a twenty-four year old black punk, a female tennis player in her mid-thirties, and an elderly white man wearing

white socks are all hanging out in a motel and no one's saying a word; it's total fucking *awkward* silence, when all of a sudden there's a knock at the door.

*Knock knock.*

And now their silence sounded concerned, as though they all knew that this was the part when things would begin to go wrong. Mister got up to get it. Fritz stood up. Karla finished her drink. Mister saw whatever the peephole showed and opened the door.

A broad man entered the room. The man looked like an elder in some nineteenth-century cult eradicated by its insistence on celibacy: he had a long beard trimmed into corners that made for something like a low, angular, hairy extension of his jaw line, but his mustache had been shaved away to reveal his wide upper lip; his eyes were as solid black as a snowman's; his hair was neatly parted and combed; he wore a brown suit and a white shirt; his hands were huge as baseball mitts; his teeth were grooved by coffee stains; he smelled of cologne worn so long it had begun to ferment. Or maybe it was just the liquor he'd been drinking.

Then a second man entered. He was the same man, except that this new one was clean-shaven. They were twins, and Fritz recalled meeting them previously, a month or so before, around a round table in a gymnasium, at a Lutheran pancake breakfast for "the needy." Here they were. They introduced themselves now—the clean-shaven one was Duke and the bearded one was Raleigh—and it was clear that they didn't recall him, despite the fact that they'd spent a full hour together, drinking coffee, sharing the newspaper, and taking turns fetching more food for all of them, as cordial and casual as though they'd all worked in the same office for their entire lives and were out to extend a retirement diversion as long as possible, though of course they weren't, though they were just a deposed triumvirate accepting a handout, soaking up syrup.



Now they were here. The bearded one offered everyone a drink and everyone accepted, even Fritz when he realized the tenuousness of their shared circumstance, saw that Mister and Karla were together, that he was an intruder, that these intruders were his equals, that he was idle in a shambolic motel room, that everything he owned had been stolen, that he deserved and needed some sort of antidote. He told himself that one wouldn't hurt and accepted the admixture of Carolina cola and pseudo-Russian liquor that this strange stranger offered him. He took a first sip, his first sip in fifteen months. It tasted easy, felt fulfilling, reached all the way to his toes, solved all of his knotted up anxiety.

After the divorce and everything, my friend Paul came down from Chicago to Normal to see me. We went to a bar and saw a band called Ambient Green play covers of grunge and glam songs. We got drunk. For years now, I told Paul, everything has seemed as complicated and concealed as the underside of a car.

The television clicked on and the anachronistic twins dismissed everything until, their third time through, they resigned themselves to a History Channel special about Goebbel's sex life. Karla and Mister scooted back to lean back against the headboard. Everyone made drinks. Fritz had another one. Then Karla made him another one. And another. And he'd look for his stuff later, when Karla agreed to accompany him. They drank more, until the liquor was gone and someone suggested they go get healed at Perpetual Care. Everyone laughed and Fritz didn't understand why but he went too when they all left the motel room for there.

It wasn't far to Perpetual Care, a bar in a building that previously housed a free clinic and hadn't changed the sign since the switch. I've driven past it, but I've never been in.

The clinic had been converted to fulfill an inverse function for the same population: it was re-fashioned to ruin rather than repair the people who came for aid they still couldn't afford.

The medicines had been exchanged for palliatives, but the worn and humbled huddled there, though no longer around a receptionist's station. Rather, they were hastily arranged around a wood-paneled bar. Instead of a name-tagged nurse filling out paperwork, they were tended by a woman named Teresa who was just then slugging a shot of whiskey with some regulars. Some lesbians shot pool in the back. A dog sniffed a path between her owners, one of whom fed dollar bills into the jukebox and one of whom sat smoking across the room. An overweight woman pulled a pack of cigarettes from the bag hanging on the front of her walker, which was backed up to the table she shared with an elderly gentleman who ran his finger across the newspaper line he read.

There were four idle stools, which Mister and Karla and the twins occupied, in that order, with Mister at the far end. Then there was a man holding an oversized clipboard and rendering a photo-realistic portrait of Ben Stiller from an Internet print out of the *Tropic Thunder* video cover. Then there was Fritz. Then there was a woman who smelled like urine and had a pink scrunchie holding her hair back into a ponytail. Then there were others. Behind the bar, an oversized Hank Williams, Jr. bobble head nodded, menacingly, like he knew what you were up to.

I had to call my mom and tell her what had happened. I had to explain. Which was impossible. She said, *I want to believe you.*

Fritz ordered a dollar-fifty beer, sipped it, and watched Mister buy four shots of something, clink glasses with Karla, down his drink, and order another round. Fritz considered himself in the mirror behind the bar, saw a drunk and lonely old man who needed a shave. He sought solace in his drink, only found alcohol, decided it would have to do, drank, ordered

another, drank, saw Mister put his arm around Karla, turned back to the bar, drank, ordered another.

I used to drink. It seemed like all that liquid could buoy me but I was sinking inside it. A vice is just something to can point to.

The bearded twin, Raleigh, told Fritz a long, boring story about being in a band called The Falconers in the seventies and getting recruited to play on a Jerry Jeff Walker album called *Contrary to Ordinary*. It was probably all untrue, the kind of long-winded lie that the elderly elaborate to imbue all they've been through with some ballast of meaning.

Fritz finally extricated himself and stumbled up from his stool to find Karla, but when he searched the bar for her, he found that she was in the back, slow dancing behind the pool tables with her head bowed forward to rest on Mister's shoulder. Fritz couldn't interrupt, so he went to the one place where he would be both isolated and welcome: he went to the bathroom. It was locked. He lingered a moment. He knocked. Someone yelled go away, so he did. He went to the one place he could go, back to the stool where he'd started.

My mom was found dead on the beach, on a blanket. She'd gone down to Edisto alone for the weekend. She had a heart attack in the morning but no one noticed until lifeguard clearing the beach at sundown came by and discovered her. She was so sunburned that we decided that a closed-casket wake would be better.

Fritz sat down and hoped the twins wouldn't notice him and tried not to notice what Karla and Mister were doing. He sat beside the guy who was intently drawing and offered him a drink. The guy declined without even looking up and continued foreshortening the barrel of Ben Stiller's gun with a pencil sharpened as fine as a pin. So Fritz got a beer for himself, sipped it, put it down, and complimented his neighbor on his skill—"It's so *realistic*"—though in truth his

work was a caricature of precision, was rendered in a style that melded the haphazard fluidity of theme-park artists with the cramped exactitude of Dürer's etchings. The guy didn't respond and Fritz told him about twisting balloons, about how his was a similar art, one in which imitation was the means of invention.

Fritz was tanked, but he continued to drink until Karla shook his shoulder and told him it was time to go. Then he followed her and Mister and the twins back to the motel room, in a blur of streetlight and headlight and conversation that he'd never remember.

## ELEVEN

I can't forget any of it.

My daughter was sick with fear—with what she saw when her eyes were closed—and so I tried to cure her nightmares by giving her something new to see, by telling her happy stories while she tried to fall asleep. I told her about a moose rowing a boat across a lake, about a squirrel playing softball with a bunny, about a baby fox in a hot-air balloon, about a little girl eating ice cream at the beach, in the sunshine. But Grace knew these were lies. She would feign sleep to get me to stop. She'd snore conspicuously. It was cute. I'd say goodnight, kiss her on the cheek, and turn off the light. Then I'd finally go to bed myself and wake up to her dark shape in the startling light of the open door, hesitant about entering. Sleep was a place she didn't want to go. And my dark bedroom must've looked a lot like where her nightmares were set. I would hold her—she was my daughter—and we'd both sleep. When I awoke, she was always gone.

She was gone and so was Allison. And Fritz and James had both left. And so Ladya and I started corresponding. Her emails had obviously been translated by some free website, but she

was able to convey an enthusiasm that appealed to me. We emailed. We talked on the phone occasionally.

When I asked her what she thought about kids, she wrote, *I have dream always of daughter.*

When I asked her what she imagined America would be like, she wrote, *Like movie.*

When I asked her what her favorite movie was, she wrote, *Little Mermaid*, which was Grace's favorite too.

When I asked her what she wanted from a husband, she said, *You.*

We talked on the phone and she spoke like a child: I could hear her haltingly trying to connect meaning to the few words she knew. *I am uh this like when you have are see a like this big thing with uh a um*, she'd say, trying to explain something, giving up. Then she'd laugh and I could hear her trying to suppress it.

When I told her about Grace, she said, *She is pretty?* I told her that she was beautiful and left it at that.

Six weeks or so later, I drank a six pack and managed to make the elaborate international call and propose. *Ladya*, I said, *I want you to be my wife.* It was a chance I had to take because I didn't have any others.

She said, *Yes*, to me and something in Moldovan to someone else, and I could hear her family in the background, cheering like something good had just happened on TV. Then she said, *It be whole new world*, and either stifled a sob or laughed—even the nonverbal is difficult to distinguish through the gauze of an accent—and I told her that I was happy too.

Then I drove drunk to a Western Union in a strip mall and wired her the twelve-hundred dollars I'd saved. She made the airline arrangements herself.

I heard that a team of Norwegian scientists is working on a robot that can cry.

And once, when we were still close friends, James and I were riding our bikes around, bored. We were in middle school. I was maybe twelve. We were trying to think of something to do. Then a fire truck screamed past and we decided to follow it, to find out where it was going. So we did: we followed it. The fire truck went right and left or whatever and we were maybe a block behind it. Then I heard the truck stop up ahead and I realized that we were only a block away from my house. We peddled harder. We caught up with the truck. The truck—plus two others and an ambulance with its red lights rotating slow and urgent—was parked before my house.

My house was burning down. We stopped in the street and watched.

The fire was a ghost: something invisible that you could see. My mom was crying in the yard and my dad was trying to console her by placing his hand on her back. Our resources really are limited in this world. Then a fireman burst out of the front door, holding our bird cage, which he'd rescued from the flames. He came close and I saw that both of my finches were already dead on the bottom, on the newspaper lining that I was supposed to change every day. Ever since, I've imagined that hell was like this: a place you can't escape, even if you're saved.

## TWELVE

James was born into the latex hands of a nurse. James was born to a thirty-two-year-old woman and a man almost twice her age, to parents who had married six months before. Ellen Lee “Ellie” Bullard was a first-time mother. Richard Thomas Tilden was a father of six. She’d been a promising young insurance agent who had transmogrified her deeply pessimistic nature into a special aptitude for selling young people life insurance policies. He’d been her boss.

During a regional conference at a convention center in Charlotte, they’d found themselves alone together in a hotel room. They’d drunk gin and tonics. He’d been married for four decades and had five kids. She was engaged to an earnest Christian her age. The sparks didn’t fly, they flickered; even so, a little fire was kindled and it grew and grew and it burned down their lives: Ellie was impregnated. Ellie and Richard married when his divorce went through. James arrived on Earth a few months later.

At our house in Normal, when the garage door came up it revealed a rectangular room that was empty except for a tennis ball that hung like the last planet in an otherwise disassembled



model of the solar system. I'd pull in and let the ball bounce, bounce, bounce against the windshield until it stopped. The ball was green and was the last planet and it had to be Earth.

So James Augustus Tilden was born, but James was born broken, his collarbone cracked, and there is no cast or cure for a broken clavicle, so he just cried for a few months, while his mother watched daytime television and waited for him to heal, if haphazardly, and his father avoided him, preferring the hot, broken nostalgia of the attic, where a century of deteriorating suitcases contained only dust, as though packed by someone heading off on a trip to somewhere immaculate, a place that would be uncomfortable if the visitor were without some of the familiar unkemptness of home, a place like the hotel room he moved into circa day twenty of his son's lament to escape what he called *the chaos*, though his wife knew that what he really feared was the opposite, the order and obligation of family, of this family, the new family that replaced the one he still wanted, the one with five grown and successful kids and a wife his own age, a woman he at least *had* loved, maybe even continued to love. James' dad left without a word and returned circa eight months later, apologetic but not remorseful.

This new, replacement Tilden family lived in a wooden house, two-stories tall, painted yellow and peeling, with an overgrown backyard, with a shed full of broken lawn equipment and rusted bikes that belonged to half-siblings James barely knew, who stopped by as often as once every other month or as rarely as never, who were decades older than him, who were even older than his mother. Their childhood clothes filled the closets and drawers and were so out of style that when James was dressed in them he looked like an actor in a period drama about childhood in the mid-century South. Their old school books taught him about a nation that no longer existed in a language that no one still used. Their toys referred to pop-cultural commonplaces that had become historical curiosities. Their past lives were preserved in the myriad things James

found and appropriated into his own identity. Here, in this search for himself through the stuff of his semi-siblings, was the source of James' later seeking and gleaning.

This was just his theory, he told me.

It was a search that his mother attempted to stamp out: one day, she found her eight-year-old son wearing the navy blue short-pants suit and bow tie that Harold, Richard's eldest son, had worn to church in the late '40s, and playing with a toy milkman's truck made of lead-painted and -tainted metal that Ralph, his third son, had gotten for Christmas in 1951; the next day, she began packing and discarding all the things of her husband's former family. She placed everything broken or damaged into black garbage bags to be taken to the dump and packed everything else into boxes to be donated to goodwill.

When Richard came home that night and found the contents of his prior and happier life carelessly crammed away and readied for removal, he knelt down on the floor and started to salvage it, much to the relief of his son, who had formed a new but no less firm attachment to it—and much to the anger of his wife, who wanted it gone, who wanted to clear away enough of the past that they might at least try to begin the process of building some new kind of future. Argument ensued; fighting followed. Richard had spent his entire life here; his entire life was here, in these boxes and bags strewn around the house; he couldn't simply get rid of it. Yes, but Ellie couldn't be expected to contend with all of that, all the time; she couldn't raise her son like he was just the coda to a life already fulfilled and finished; she couldn't keep living as an addendum.

I moved into a motel. The Bel Aire. The day I moved my stuff out and into a storage locker, Allison sent Grace to a friend's house and we divided up the silverware and argued about whether or not I had to give back my key. When I was leaving, I couldn't figure out how to back

up with the U-Haul trailer tailing behind me and I got stuck in the driveway. I could see her watching me through the living room window. She looked sort of beautiful.

James listened late into the night to his parents arguing. Yelling, banging, breaking, and slamming rang out, until at last the house quieted and the only sound in the night was the long lament of a train passing through the city to somewhere. Just as James was about drift off into dreaming, he was roused by the slow creak and whine of the attic stairs unfolding from the hallway ceiling and lowering to the floor. He was kept awake by the endless, repetitive patter of footsteps ascending and descending and ascending and descending—the sound of his father packing all of the old stuff into the pyramidal space between the ceiling and the roof, the sound of his father hiding and storing the appurtenances of his previous life in the attic.

James and I were beginning to become friends around then. This was fifth grade. He was a leader without any followers. He was a loner. He'd been riding his bike to school by himself since first grade. I'd befriended this new kid named Preston, who'd moved to Columbia from Mauritania, of all places. I remember: Preston and I were at Hollywood Park, smoking Indian cigars after school, when James rode his bike through and stopped and asked what we were doing. We explained. He wanted one. After that, the three of us started hanging out. We'd ride bikes, watch television, share a cigarette when I could filch one from our housekeeper, Janie. That kind of thing.

Then, after maybe a half year, a school secretary summoned him from our social studies class. James went down to the office and found his mother with a tissue crumpled in her hand and a box of them on her lap. James' dad had died. He'd had a heart attack. James wore a suit, a suit bought especially for him, and felt the sun hot as an iron on his neck while a pastor stood beside a hole and said that the Lord was his shepherd.

James was absent for a week. When he came back, he seemed fine. His father had lived so aloof that his death felt more like confirmation of his absence than like the loss of something vital. He had always been leaving; then he was gone.

Not that his dad's death was incidental. James' father had been a force as distant and strong and inexplicable as gravity when he was alive; in death, his effect condensed and strengthened, the way a collapsed star creates a black hole. Which may explain why, twenty years after his father's funeral, James had such trouble leaving the house and separating himself from the dense mass of his dad's stuff that was still stored in the attic.

That Thursday night he'd made it maybe a mile away, to Tavern. Tavern has the resigned attitude of an airport bar, one where all the passengers have already landed in their final destination but don't know where to go now and are vaguely thinking about catching a connection to Corpus Christi or Pensacola or some other place with an airport that has, they can only hope, a better airport bar, one where they might meet an interesting, attractive stranger. What I mean is, no one really wanted to be there, at Tavern, buying shots of Wild Turkey and bottles of Hard Lemonade. Everyone would've gone elsewhere if they could've thought of somewhere else to go. They couldn't.

They were at Tavern and Charles bought shots for himself and Chelsea while James shot a game of pool with a skeleton-thin Georgian who was named Franklin and who James had nicknamed Stephenson after reading an entry about the ninety-five-pound Vice President of the Confederate States of America on Wikipedia, which he spent long hours of late nights skimming, stoned, attempting to glean the information that he believed—or hoped, anyhow—would substitute for the education he'd abandoned a decade ago, a few months into his first semester of college.

I used to drive around Central Illinois all day on the weekends, with Grace in her car seat in the back, facing away from me. We'd drive through cornfields and the tiny towns that had been carved into them. I liked to imagine that there were new lives out there, waiting for us. I took pictures of houses where we could live without Allison.

James lost to Stephenson and ordered another round. Four tiny glasses lined up and filled. Can tabs cracked. Bills produced. Change made. Tip left. Some alcohol spilled in cumbersome transit to a booth by a window. Shots drunk. Beers sipped. On and on into the night, in a bar where young men played a video game that approximated golf, where young women worried about their bangs, their jeans, and their boyfriends.

Stephenson told of his long, bland days at his father's accounting firm, which he passed by watching short videos on a website where anyone could post anything, which had this one real funny clip that was like this and this other one that was like that and then there was this one that was like this guy in a bumper car and there were others as well. Chelsea told them that she was real excited for this interview that she had set up with a marketing firm in Irmo, and Charles claimed it was a just pyramid scheme, and she said he was just jealous, and he said she was just going to be disappointed, and she said he didn't know shit, and he said he just didn't want to see her get hurt, and she said she checked it out online and it was real good, and Charles said it was like Mary Kay for real estate, and Chelsea huffed outside for a cigarette, and Charles followed after, apologetic, and Charles returned without her.

James said, "Whatever," though not in response to anything, and then he recounted the few girls he'd ever kissed, each time desperately, furtively, apologetically, while drunk. It made him sad that he'd never had a girlfriend and that he'd slept with only one person, once, two years

before, when he'd broken his virginity with a thirty-six year old lady in her colleague's RV after an entire day of tailgating and a rare Gamecock victory over Tennessee.

Her name was Janice and she was an overweight alumna who lived in Charlotte and she'd accepted James' offer of a beer. They got to talking. The game hadn't started yet. They drank and drank and drank. James didn't have a ticket either, so when everyone else crowded into the stadium, he and Janice remained behind and watched the game together on a little kitchen-sized TV in the salon. She smoked pot for the first time in fourteen years. The Gamecocks won. They went onto the berth in the bedroom. She made an obvious, off-color pun: *Let me see your Gamecock, James*. He complied. She ridiculed his pubic hair, which was long, which wasn't trimmed. She took off her shirt, her jeans, her bra, and he recovered his erection. What happened next was a clumsy but enormous relief for James and an anticlimactic ordeal for Janice. Such an unpleasant disaster for her that when she awoke alone in a motel room the next morning, she resolved to marry her longtime fiancé and did wed him that fall and bought a house with him that winter in Fort Mill for their forthcoming family. Or so she told James when he drunkenly texted her and then, when ignored, called her a year or so after their sole encounter to see if she would be interested in coming down to Columbia for the Vanderbilt game, which he'd acquired a pair of decent tickets to.

But that was three years ago. Now it was tonight in a carpeted bar, and polished Southern rock that sounded like Lynyrd Skynyrd spelled correctly played loud on the Internet jukebox. James was stoned and somewhere near drunk and so he went outside for fresh air and a cigarette. A college couple was standing before his truck, admiring his statue. James went closer and heard the guy and girl discussing the Virgin.

I felt as unwelcome as the exterminator in our house in Normal. I tried not to be noticed.

“That’s Mary, isn’t it?” said the girl, who was holding a folded towel in her arms. “You should get me one of those for my birthday.” She was pleading but not needy. “I’d put it on my balcony.”

“We’ll see,” the guy said.

“Come on,” the girl said, gleeful, “let’s swim.” Then she ran out ahead of him and then stopped to let him catch up, then scurried after him when he passed, then passed him when he stopped, and so on until they were out of sight but presumably still playing their game.

I was always trying to convince my ex-wife to let me see our daughter alone. As I tried to tell Allison when she refused me: to be a child is to be denied what you want; to be an adult is to want what you are denied.

James wanted to hurry after them, he wanted to join them, swim with them, these two people who clearly knew how the world worked and what they wanted from it and how easily they would get it. Their ease was inevitable. And how was their swimming? Calm and graceful, relaxed and rigorous. They probably had their own strokes, variations on the butterfly, fluid versions that were faster and produced less splashing. They would show him. But they were already gone and now James wanted to swim. And Charles’ apartment complex had a pool. So he went in and found Charles and tried to convince him they should. Why not? was always the most compelling argument and it worked. Stephenson wanted to come too. Chelsea didn’t. Which was perfect.

So they left. They crowded in the cab of the truck and James drove. The Virgin Mary was mounted above them. James considered the night last month he’d spent reading romance novels in a Richland County jail cell and decided to be cautious and take side streets. He rolled the windows way down. The night breezed in. He cut through toward Millwood, avoiding Harden.

He turned and turned and went straight for a while. He draped his arm out the window, tapped along to the beat of “Crocodile Rock,” smoked a cigarette.

Then he turned hard and late onto the last block of Prince Street and saw a shape and stamped the brake and the car stopped and the shape disappeared and somehow after James heard a thump. It was so silent he could hear the buzz of the street light. The light flickered. The windshield was smudged with bugs. The world was poorly lit and unfocused, like a bad picture by an amateur crime photographer, but James now saw what he'd seen: a body lit up in his headlights, then hit, then brought down contorted. He'd turned too fast and hit something hard. Hit someone hard. James hit someone hard and stopped breathing and cut off the car and burst out of the driver's side door and saw in the headlights the limp form of a corpse. A human body heaped before the bumper.



## THIRTEEN

I guess the idea is to capture something so you can keep it forever, so you can save it for later.

I gave Grace a disposable cameras and she only wanted to photograph our house. When I got the pictures developed, I discovered that she kept missing, that she hadn't aimed the lens high enough, that she'd taken a bunch of blurry images of the front yard, of a green hose snaking its way across the lawn, of scribbled chalk on the front walk, of her feet beneath her. But once she'd aimed too high and there was beautiful picture of just the sky. Of just a bunch of blue. I kept it taped behind the driver's side sunshade in my car. And I kept that shade pulled down, even on gray days.

And once, years before Allison or Grace or any of this, I was in Helsinki. Which is the closest I've ever come to Moldova. I was visiting a friend in Stockholm and we decided to take a ferry to Finland. We booked a cabin on the Viking Line and a cartoonish white cat, the ferry-line mascot, was there to greet us when we boarded. We embraced him or her—I couldn't tell—and had our photo taken. We continued up the ramp, entered the harsh fluorescence and hard carpet of the ship. We smoked cigarettes on the deck and listened to a lot of Finnish pop. In the

morning, when we docked, we got off the ferry and walked up a hill and entered the first building we saw, a Russian Orthodox church. A mass was happening and there were all of those priests entering through all of these false doors at the back of the altar. Everyone there seemed to be aware of something that I didn't know about and I wondered if there were worlds before this one, if God constructed and abandoned previous, imperfect universes before deciding that this one would have to do, before settling on the one we have now.

Sometimes, I try to imagine them—these other worlds—but all I can come up with are ones as unconvincing as what's conveyed in science fiction, and now I'm here in the McLean County Jail and this place is run like a re-education camp: all I have for entertainment are donated romance novels. For three days now, I've read about nothing but how love resolves everything. So far, the propaganda has been ineffective: I still can't see what it ever did for me.

## FOURTEEN

Fritz and Karla and Mister and the twins all arrived back at the motel room.

Then Greg and Crystal brought their dog Piston and Chester came with a case of Natural Light and Mike arrived with a morbidly obese girl from Swansea who he didn't even introduce. The room contained two populations: one comprised of twenty-something punks, of Greg, Crystal, Chester, Double, Mike, and Mister; the other of middle-aged and older tramps, of Raleigh, Duke, and Karla. And then there was Fritz, who was wasted and so slipped off unnoticed into the bathroom when the rest left to walk down to Cocks, a rundown sports bar between the Bi-Lo and the Egg Roll Station.

After vomiting, after spilling his stomach into the toilet a few times, Fritz flushed. Then he lurched up one last load of bile, then forgot to flush, then passed out on the floor, on the damp, dark linoleum. After a sleep as brief as the space between two frames of a film, he awoke there.

Fritz told me that he hoped his story could help me. He wanted to redeem his suffering, make it meaningful. He'd spent the morning watching Dr. Phil reruns and drinking black coffee in the lobby.

When he awoke on the bathroom floor, his mind had been sunk and shocked blank by the booze and now it shuddered off sparks of feedback and surged with misfired electricity. His head, it hurt: his brain, swollen too big for it, throbbed against his skull. He knew light and movement would aggravate the pain, so he closed his eye and lay still. He knew that he was Fritz and that his memory had been lost and that light meant morning and that he was in a bathroom and that his face was on the floor and that the only sound was the typically ignored white noise of electricity coursing through the world. Now it was as loud and severe as a chainsaw. He opened his eyes, crawled up to his knees, resolved to right himself, swore sanity, and crushed his skull with his fists to smash whatever errors his brain contained, to steady his brain to allow for cogent thought. He needed to correct whatever it was he had done. He needed a way away from wherever he was. Which was a bathroom.

How had he gotten here? He'd grown up in a ranch house in Summerville, with two older brothers and a father and without a mother, as his mother was diagnosed with cancer when he was two, initiated an affair with her oncologist, ran off with him, recuperated, remarried, and never returned, though she did send the occasional postcard from Bermuda, where her beloved had been licensed and set up a practice. But Fritz had grown up anyway, even without her. His was a glad, unencumbered, unremarkable childhood that ended on time, when he turned eighteen, graduated from high school, and moved into an Isle of Palms apartment with his older brother Luke and got a job in a beach shop called Shore Thing, where he sold pails and bathing suits to sunburned customers and their antic kids. But he wasn't assigned enough hours, so he took supplementary shifts bar backing at the Beachcomber, where a forlorn prep cook named Paulo taught him to turn balloons into dachshunds during slow weekday shifts. Fritz had a penchant for it and practiced often and was soon shaping more exotic species.

I tried to shrink the distance between us, between me and Allison. I'd put my arm around her shoulder or take her hand. I'd find her asleep and I'd lay beside her and hold her. But I only felt like I was consoling her for the absence of all the intimacy I couldn't manufacture.

After he was fired from Shore Thing for insubordination—he told Karen, the beach shop's assistant manager, that he wouldn't work a Sunday shift unless “God Himself came down from heaven and put a *loaded* gun to [his] head”—Fritz walked the beach barefoot with balloon animals bunched to a string like distended grapes and hovering above his head like he might lift off and drift off at any moment, though he never did, though he remained earthbound and belted out an offer: “Balloon Animals: One Dollar.” Kids snacking beside red coolers, kids lounging on oversized beach towels, kids fashioning castles in hard sand that had been the bottom of the ocean when the tide had been higher—all kinds of kids hatched from their eggs of concentrated isolation, summoned bills from their parents, and, if their pleadings were successful, ran over to offer him the money crumpled in their fists, which he took and then let them take their pick from his menagerie.

Dogs were the default but he was most proud of the giraffes, as they best evidenced his burgeoning skill, his precocious dexterity. He made enough money to pay for rent, food, beer, and evermore balloons, but he knew that when the summer ended so would his income. He needed a new market, one that would survive the season, and he found one in the picnic shelter near the public parking lot: he happened upon a birthday party that lacked both entertainment and party favors.

The hive of kids scrambled and screamed. The haggard, distracted father who was hosting offered Fritz fifty bucks for his entire cluster plus a hundred more to twist a stable-full in front of the celebrants. Fritz did, with a flourish, with an aptitude for performance, for stretching

the balloons as long as they would extend and letting them snap back with a pop, for narrating creation myths for each new creature, for involving the audience, for inviting the birthday girl up to fit her for a tiara. For that, sixty-five dollars plus a ten-dollar tip and an offer to recommend him to other parents. *You have a card or a something?* the dad asked. Since Fritz didn't, he wrote his name and contact info on the back of a pizza-delivery menu: Fritz Hoffmann / 803 266 8112.

He began answering his phone *Fritz Hoffmann, Balloonist* and changed his voicemail message, but only his father and a few friends called. *Balloonist?* his dad laughed. *Are you flying hot-air balloons now or what?* Fritz explained. His dad was dismissive, his brothers were indifferent, his friends made fun of him, and no clients—not a single one—followed up, a misfortune he attributed to his lack of a moniker.

Imagine a magician—not to mention a clown—without some kind of catchy, whimsical name. What kid could get excited about a performer with a name as plain as hers or his? He needed call himself something exciting. At first, he fixated on the possible slant rhyme of *Fritz* and *Twist*. *Fritz Twist?* Too plain. *Fritz the Twist?* Nonsense. *Twister Fritz?* *Fritz In A Twist?* *Fritz Does the Twist?* He needed a name and the clients he hoped would come once he had one. Otherwise, he'd have to beg his way back onto the Falcon's payroll or move home a year after moving out or see if one of the motels needed off-season room-cleaning help or put in an application with his friend in the Merle's produce department.

Once, Grace and I drove into some tiny town near Decatur and watched the downtown being torn down. Government bulldozers ate the empty historic buildings with their animatronic mouths. I never found out why it was happening, what it meant.

Fritz walked along the shore the weekend after Labor Day and sold a single balloon to an Eastern European tourist who probably didn't even want it but who asked him his name. *Fritz,*

*the balloonist*, Fritz answered, just to answer. *Ah, Fritz the Balloonatic*, the Hungarian or whatever responded, garbling the English, if you could even call it that. But Fritz liked that. Fritz the Balloonatic. He liked it enough that that afternoon he photocopied hundreds of black-and-white fliers designed with a line drawing of one of his giraffes bulbous beneath the umbrage of a block of text:

FRITZ THE BALLOONATIC  
Amazing Balloon Twisting  
Parties, Events, and All Special Occasions  
\*\*\*Low Rates\*\*\*  
(803) 266 8112

He stapled them to telephone poles and, a day later, a woman with rich accent called. She needed a replacement for a magician called Mario the Marvelous who had cancelled an appearance at her daughter's birthday, which happened to be tomorrow. Could he come? He could. That was the only inquiry that night, but he was awoken by a caller who bargained down his hourly rate by half. Then there was a secretary scheduling a family picnic for the bank office where she worked.

He performed each assignment with aplomb and to acclaim, and after that the offers increased exponentially. His schedule became something to manage rather than fill. He bought balloons wholesale and printed new publicity materials in color. He worked weekday nights and throughout the weekends, performed everywhere from roller-rink party rooms to Sunday-school classrooms, made swords for boys and ponies for girls, marveled the kids and charmed the adults, ate cake and cheese puffs, drank soda and beer that fathers offered him conspiratorially from the stashes they'd secreted in supplementary coolers. He had his name stitched white on the back of a black tuxedo jacket and wore a series of plain pastel t-shirts underneath it. It was a look that lent him, he believed, both an earned seriousness and a quirky whimsicality.

It snowed so much one day and I put Grace in the lid of a storage bin and I tied a rope to the lid and I drug her around the neighborhood, to the park.

A woman whose father had recently opened a water park on James Island caught the last half of Fritz's act when picking her niece up early from a party. Fritz lingered after his performance, drank a beer on the back deck, which looked out on the ocean. Charon approached bashfully and complimented him on his skill. She held a glass. The carbonation bubbles burst to the top. The sun was softening into evening. She wore a red sundress and her black hair was held back with a thick, white band. She was beautiful. She said that no, actually, she didn't have a kid here. She was just helping out her sister, picking up her niece. She wasn't married. Neither was he, actually. He got her phone number.

They went out for seafood. They walked around downtown Charleston. They went to the beach. Charon worked at Splash City, her dad's water park. She did publicity and promotions. Fritz twisted balloons at private events. They dated for two years. Fritz proposed and she accepted. They were in love. And so on.

Once, when Allison and I first started dating, we drove to some small town in the U.P. from Chicago after work one Friday for no reason. We stayed in a motel attached to a gas station. We went to the only bar and they were glad to have some outsiders around, so they turned on the karaoke machine just for us and we sang to the regulars.

When Charon was twenty-eight, her father retired and she took over Splash City. Fritz began performing there occasionally. He started experimenting with new balloon designs. He focused on water-filled ones, but they proved exceedingly difficult. He spent a lot of time experimenting in his bathtub. All he could come up with were a few heavy sea creatures, most notably a blowfish that he would puncture with a fork and drain onstage as his finale. Charon



assigned him a pavilion and four shows a day, six days a week. It was a nice life. He'd slip down water slides between performances. He'd occasionally supplement his income with a party, but mostly he just worked at the park. He was drinking steadily but not dysfunctionally. He didn't wake up and pour vodka in his orange juice. He'd have a beer in the evening, after work, and then he'd have six more. It was enough to pass out easily each night, but it wasn't harming his life. He loved Charon still, and he had a couple of friends to hang out with. They'd rent a charter boat and go fishing. Or they'd bowl.

Fritz was twenty-seven. Charon was thirty. She decided she needed to become pregnant, before it was too late. Fritz was afraid. The thought of creating a new human seemed somehow sinister to him. It wasn't just that they'd be making a person: they'd also be initiating an entire life. Think of all that that would involve. All of the everything. There'd be no going back, once they'd conceived. It was too much for Fritz. He couldn't get it up. He drank more steadily to ensure his impotence. It worked. Charon threatened to leave him. Then she did. She moved into the Sunrise Motel. Fritz couldn't bear to be alone. He had two drinks—enough, not too much—and found her. Dave was conceived in Room 217, on a rainy Saturday morning.

Charon assured Fritz that all of his worry would recede when he saw their child and knew the love that all fathers feel. And Fritz did love their son as soon as he arrived. But his love was primarily protective and the main thing he felt was obligation. He'd forced this kid to exist. Now he was responsible for how his son's life went, and he was paranoid that he would do ruin it. He couldn't even hold Dave, for fear that he'd drop him. When Dave started walking, Fritz followed him everywhere, prepared to catch him if he fell. Fritz was exhausted by worry. He had a new reason to drink.

The weatherman on Columbia's NBC affiliate was given his own Saturday morning kids show. He went by the moniker Mr. Knowzit. He saw Fritz perform at the water park and asked him to come down and appear on his show. Fritz did. He wore a tuxedo and a top hat and it went well. He was offered a regular spot. He drove down to Columbia once a month and did a demo. The pay wasn't great, but the publicity was worth it. More people started showing up for his performances at Splash City. He was able to double his hourly appearance rates. He performed at the sixth birthday of the daughter of a former lieutenant governor. He did some corporate charity events that paid well. His career was going great. Then, hungover, he showed up on *Mr. Knowzit* a half hour late, blew up one balloon, told the crowd it was a sausage, vomited, and sat down at edge of the stage. He wasn't fired, but he was humiliated. His son had been watching, along with all of his Dave's friends and thousands of strangers.

I didn't see that episode and I never suspected anything. I was too young to know what drunkenness was, much less what it looked like.

Dave was a quiet kid. He was lethargic and unambitious but a very talented soccer player. When he was nine, his coach told Fritz that Dave was the best player he'd ever seen at that age. He said Dave could make a career of it, if he worked hard. This was when Fritz started to attend each of Dave's practices and scream during scrimmages. He hired a former player for Coastal Carolina, a brutish British guy named Howard, to work individually with Dave. Dave, of course, hated all of this. He wanted to quit. Fritz wouldn't let him. Their conflict increased. Dave discovered water skiing through a friend. He excelled at that too. And it was fun. You could learn tricks and stuff. Fritz discouraged him, then forbade him from doing it. He could get hurt, ruin his soccer career. This was when the episode with the model schooner occurred.

So that was Fritz's life. He worked at the water park with his wife, who resented him. Then he went home and fought with his son. He had a brief affair with a dental hygienist, Tracy. He drank way too much. Charon threatened to leave him. Dave quit high school—and with it, the soccer team—to pursue his dream of becoming a professional water skier. He succeeded. He spent five years on the pro circuit. He was third runner-up at the Sarasota Labor Day Invitational, a premier event. He competed against Trip Hathaway, star of the sport and namesake of the semi-popular videogame. He set a distance record—since broken—for a single-ski jump on Lake Murray. Then his career came into the end when he didn't land an elaborate trick on Lake Cumberland. His knee was never the same.

Hence the complex resentment and regret that undermined the Hoffmann home when Dave moved back in at the age of twenty-two. They all blamed themselves for how things had turned out. Fritz was fired from *Mr. Knowzit* for showing up drunk. Charon couldn't get rid of him, but his performance and the attendance at his Splash City performances tanked. Dave borrowed money from his mom to buy a boat and start offering ski lessons. Charon ravenously read romance novels and sunbathed on the beach behind their house. Fritz stopped mixing his Captain Morgan's with anything and started wearing Hawaiian shirts unbuttoned.

Everything was bound to turn around eventually. But nothing ever did. Now Fritz was there in that motel bathroom, so hungover that he knelt down and leaned his head over to toilet and tried. He couldn't do it.

Grace and I drove around Central Illinois and further south and once we got all the way to Paducah, Kentucky. According to a historical marker, the town the bought from the French for five dollars. We stayed the night and I didn't tell Allison where we were. When we got back, I tried to apologize but she just held Grace tight and refused to talk to me.

When Fritz finally stood up, the blood of his body rose to swell and flood his brain and he had to wait for it to subside and steady before he could move again. Everything settled and he creaked open the door and peered out to find that the room seemed submerged: the shifting, switching, aquatic Technicolor of the muted television flickeringly lit the still dark like sunlight filtered through waves. There was the complete, humming silence of being underwater as well. But it was dark and thus late and that meant (or might mean) that someone (Mister? Karla?) was asleep in the bed. The clock radio said it was 3:47 a.m. So with low steps, he waded carefully across the carpet, watched the bed for movement, waited at the foot of it, discerned no sign of life, and asked the silence, "Hello?" When no one answered, he was relieved to believe he'd spoken only to himself. "Hello? Mister? Anyone? It's me, Fritz." He ran his hands around the wallpaper like he was reading Braille. When he finally found the switch, fluorescence flooded the room and he found that he was right: he was alone.

The room was a wreck. Fritz kicked over a pyramid of beer cans to complete the job, surveyed the room, and decided that, like a landfill after a tornado, this was merely a further confusion of the prior chaos. He sat on the side of the bed, closed his eyes, again pressed against the sides of his head, and said, "Jesus *Fucking* Christ."

When the police were interrogating me, they kept saying, *We're only trying to find out what happened.*

Fritz considered the hard ache of his entire body and the grimy taste that stuffed his mouth and the ransacked room and the idea of Charon sleeping in the arms of some buff new boyfriend, beside a tanned and toned guy with the Chinese characters for *Justice* and *Honor* and *Lovingkindness* tattooed on his big bicep, in the consistent a/c breeze of his condo.

*I used to have a house, Fritz thought. A house with a gazebo overlooking the ocean. A gazebo with a built-in magazine rack. My God, he told God, I've got to get out of here.*

Apparently, He heard: Fritz looked down and saw one thing as bright and immediate as a single navigation light on a night lake: on the floor by his foot was a car key attached by a short gold chain to the pink fuzz of a rabbit's amputated foot. He plucked it from the ground and left, released himself into the relief of outside. He took in a deep draft of the empty night, crossed the parking lot, unlocked Mister's long, white, and dented luxury sedan, turned the ignition, backed up, and drove off with all the windows open, with a hard wind whipping through, with the idea that it might blast out all the muck, mucus, and mung that gummed up his brain.

He pushed the headlights through the dark the way a plow pushes snow, clearing a way forward as he went, finding his way toward sleep, which he soon discovered waiting for him in a strip-mall parking lot where he cut off the engine and the lights and patterned his in- and exhalations after the deep, slow breaths of Charon's slumber, which he still remembered, which he still heard, which he repeated, which helped clear his head, which had been buried by a hard blizzard of hopelessness about four years back, about the time he'd been arrested for trying to steal some presents from the last birthday party he would ever work. Or maybe it happened earlier, when Dave died. Or later, when he became homeless. It's hard to say when exactly, but there's no doubt that then, at 3:58 on that Friday morning, he was asleep in the front seat of Mister's car and no one knew or noticed.

## SIXTEEN

Once, I woke up and Grace was still and warm beside me. It was barely light out. In the window that the bed faced, there was a hooded man, holding a chainsaw, turned away from me. Had I arrived in one of Grace's nightmares?

I sat up and saw that it was a man in the basket of a cherry picker, floating slowly up toward the top of a tree. He ripped the chord and slashed at branches. I went to the window and saw his truck, saw that he was from a utility company. He was clearing the way for some power lines. I found my camera and took a photo of this actual apparition, as evidence, and fell back asleep beside Grace. I don't remember what I dreamed about after.

I looked for a Russian bride. I found a Moldovan one. I wasn't pathetic. Or I was. Or I was romantic. Or I thought pity and generosity and gratitude and possibility could add up to love. Or I missed my daughter so much that I would do anything to begin my life again, to start all over with a nineteen-year-old stranger, to be a stranger to someone else and find out if I could do better, if I could clear away everything, if I could begin again, if I could un-fuck up everything. Or something.

I don't know. I drove to Hartsfield International in Atlanta. Lady came over from Moldova. I waited for her at the security gate with a big bunch of flowers. Ladya arrived after four layovers and twenty-three hours from Chisinau, Moldova. I didn't see her, but then a girl in a leopard-print jacket made of imitation suede and a shin-length jean skirt with short slits just above her knees on either side approached me and said, in her severe accent, *I am Ladya*. Her y sounded like a *j*. She was pulling a suitcase behind her like it was a reluctant dog she was walking. I felt like that dog but I walked ahead of her.

A new human had arrived for me to take care of, for the second time in my life. Was I allowed to hug her? I met my fiancé at an airport and she was also a stranger and I wasn't sure what kind of affection that allowed or required. I was wary of doing anything inappropriate, so I didn't do anything.

She leaned in to kiss me on the cheek. Her lips didn't quite make contact with my skin but I could feel her breath. It was warm: she was real.

She garbled something about Cinnabon and I nodded, smiled, agreed. She was going to be my wife, so I took her hand when we were standing silent on the escalator, the staircase that collapsed us down to the baggage claim. Her hand felt hollow. But not fragile like she was delicate, like a bird. Empty. I thought she might crumble. Not crumble but melt. Not melt like a woman in love but like a wax figure: false and soft and sallow and menacing.

We waited for her duffel bag. It came along the conveyor belt like a chance you have to take. I grabbed it and tried to sling it over my shoulder but it was too heavy to lift that high.

"What's in here?" I asked her.

"My life," she said.

I dragged it behind me when we went out to car and went home.

## SEVENTEEN

Please believe me.

A body was splayed on the pavement, in the one working headlight of James' truck, and they all stood over it, wondering what it meant. The body groaned, moved, groaned, still breathing on that roughed-up pavement, in that headlight and the unsteady streetlight. Breathing hard.

“What the fuck,” it said, that body. Not a body but a person. A black guy who appeared somewhat older than all of them, though he was laying face down and so they couldn't see his face.

I tried to be cooperative. I didn't have anything to hide. But every answer I gave led to a new question. Talking to the detective—Detective O'Dell—was like talking to an annoying child who keeps asking *Why?* Eventually, explanation starts to falter.

James listened hard for the sound of sirens but couldn't hear them but they must be on the way. They must be, already, and this would be it: he'd go to jail now. There were papers and a bong and at least a half eighth in the car. There was this guy on the ground. There was beer on



his breath. There was a police station somewhere nearby. There was last month's arrest and a trial date already set. Would there now be two trials or would they just combine the charges into one or would they just pick his worst offenses and then allow him some kind of plea bargain? He was weak and white and wouldn't know the protocol and he'd be raped in jail and then, in a few months or years, he'd be released and he'd go to elementary schools and give motivational speeches about staying away from drugs and alcohol. One of those speeches where you really level with the kids and anticipate the disenchantment and admit that your story may sound corny but insist that this is serious and mention that there's an associated essay contest that encourages the students to think about their own personal stake in sobriety.

And that was definitely a siren coming from somewhere, for him. He was dumb, stupid, a fool, a loser, a sucker, a fucking goddamn motherfucker. He deserved this. This was good. It was OK. In the long run—when he was rehabilitated and released and remorseful—he'd look back on this and think back about how lucky he was that he hit this guy. The cops would arrive any second.

But they didn't arrive. They hadn't arrived and it had been at least sixty seconds and James no longer heard the sirens and the guy was moving, was groaning, was conscious and didn't have a broken neck and wasn't even screaming or crying and there wasn't a pool of blood and the guy was face down and he wouldn't be able to identify them and there was no else around to witness what had happened and it was night and James was drunk and they should just get they fuck out of there.

Allison told me she'd call the police if I didn't leave immediately. I left immediately and she called the police.

“Come on,” James said and went back to the truck and got in. Out the windshield, he saw that Charles and Stephenson were still standing over whoever that was. James started the truck and they both turned to him and made a gesture that meant *what the fuck* but then they both came and got in, crowded in.

“What the fuck?” Charles wanted to know.

“We can’t just leave him,” Stephenson said.

They were acting indignant but James could tell they were as afraid as he was. They wanted to get out of there too but they wouldn’t admit, wouldn’t want to seem like the kind of people who would abandon someone in need just to save themselves. But they were that kind of person: everyone is. So James put the truck in reverse and reversed and drove out of there as quietly and as quickly as he could. Like nothing had happened. Though of course something had. But the guy was going to be fine, he assured himself and them. And there was nothing they could do now. And they would’ve been fucked if they’d been caught. But Charles and Stephenson just kept saying *shit* and that they felt awful and that they couldn’t just leave that guy like that and that now they’d really be in trouble and that James was crazy and that they wanted to get out of the truck, that James should just drop them off, right fucking here. Fucking anywhere. But they were just talking.

“Look,” James said, “let’s just go swimming. It’ll be fine. There’s nothing we can do now. Just let me drive. Then you can do what you want.”

And so they were all silent while James drove exactly the speed limit all the way to Charles’ apartment complex.

When we were thirteen, James and I snuck out of his house at three in the morning and walked around town. We only ran into one person: a middle-aged guy riding a skateboard

straight down the middle of steepest Pickens Street hill. *Fuck you*, he called out as he plunged past. We laughed but it was hard to imagine how he could've survived the Blossom Street intersection, no matter how few cars were around.

“Fuck this,” Stephenson said when James parked. “I’m going home. I’m fucking walking.”

“Hang on,” Charles said.

“Whatever,” James said.

They let him go, so Stephenson had to go.

When he was gone, Charles said, “What the fuck just happened?”

James got out of the truck and went in through the chain-link gate that led to the pool, the water lit from within and wavering, wobbling in its concrete case. Unoccupied chaise longues lounged at all kinds of angles around the deck. James sat on one and took off his shoes, socks, and shirt. Then he took everything out of his pockets and dove in. He did the breaststroke for six laps. When he stopped, he saw that Charles was sitting on the side, his legs lingering in chlorine. James looked up and believed he could identify the Big Dipper but wasn't certain.

“Look, James,” Charles said, “I don't—”

“Please,” James said, “just let's not talk about it right now, OK? What's the point? I feel bad. I know. It's fucked up. But we can't go back. There's nothing we can do: I did it. I'll take the blame, if something happens. I promise. But nothing will. You'll be fine. And that guy—he'll be fine. He was moving around. He was OK. I wasn't going that fast. Point is,” he said, “that guy is fine and so are we.” He was attempting a strict stoicism that would allow him to push forward. The way athletes always discuss doing. And politicians. And other people on TV. “It's like my

mom says: The next twenty-four hours are the most important twenty-four hours of your life. You gotta make the most of it or whatever, whatever it is. There's no point—"

"But—"

"I just— I don't want to talk about it right now, all right? Not now. Tomorrow we can."

Charles looked like he might cry. "Sure," he said. "Whatever. It's your— I don't know. I'm going to bed. Jesus. You better crash here though." He stood up. "You shouldn't drive."

"I won't."

"I'll leave the door unlocked." He picked up his shoes. "Jesus."

"All right. Thanks, man."

Then Charles went out the gate and left James alone and it was all over as easily as that, for them. For now. So James swam some more. He tried the freestyle. He swam until he was tired, until he was no longer about to burst. Then he reclined in a chaise longue and closed his eyes. It was warm and quiet and dreams accumulated like shadows, crowded out the night, and James slept on the surface of them, on the thin skein of them. They were about, say, being frustrated in Richland Fashion Mall, mostly.

Then light leapt up from the other side of the earth and startled him awake. He awoke and discovered himself propped up beside a swimming pool to view a Friday sunrise, all pastel and vague, like bad art. He checked his phone: it was early. It was 6:33. He closed his eyes and tried to return to the still silence of sleep. He couldn't go back there. He'd been banished. He had a headache. He had to get up. He sat up and wondered if that man was still alive and assured himself that he was, that he was fine. The pool was cool and bright and it beckoned him but he had a lot to do. It was today and today is always a new day, when it's new. That was something his mother had said. Something like that. He wasn't certain. It sounded right. It was true.

For a few years after college, I was the staff photographer for a regional boating magazine. I drove around the Great Lakes taking pictures of harbors and marinas. I went to Ashtabula, Ohio, and Manitowoc, Wisconsin. I talked to people named Russ and Pat and watched free cable in motel rooms. I felt like I was being rewarded for something I hadn't done yet. Like I'd retired too early or something.

James meant to get up and go out the chain link gate that had a red Caution: No Lifeguard / Swim at Your Own Risk sign and trudge up to Charles door and knock hard on room 208 and awake him and talk to him about last night and look online to see if there were any reports of their hit-and-run and see how Charles was feeling and ask him if he was up to going out to the junkyard to divide the all the stuff up equally. He should do that. He wanted to.

Charles was his closest friend and James didn't want to do anything dishonest and Charles was the one who'd heard and shared the tip about the stuff's existence and they'd discovered it together and Charles had helped haul it all out of the woods. But they had, after all, used James' truck and it would've been impossible to cram it all into Charles' minivan and, more importantly, Charles had disparaged the quality of the salvage and he probably didn't really want to deal with it anyway and he'd seemed unenthusiastic about splitting it up and he always hated getting up early and, plus, Charles was doing fine for money and already had an apartment and everything. Besides, the more stuff he had, the more it would be worth. He hadn't even thought of that: that splitting the stuff up would devalue it. It would be bad business. It wouldn't help anyone. Not James and not Charles. There was a lot riding on this. Too much. Everything. All he'd be doing would be waking his friend up super early on a Friday morning so that Charles could work harder and make less than he would if James let him sleep and went out there himself and did all the work of reloading it all and then sold it all at once, in bulk, for a lot more. It

would be a sort of sacrifice. Kind of a favor. And anyhow, he'd split up the profits between them later, when he'd sold it all and had some cash and had a chance. Charles wouldn't miss out on anything. And he'd get some extra sleep. And some extra money, soon.

Besides, Charles would want to talk about what happened. He'd be nervous and remorseful. And James couldn't deal with it all right now. It would all be all right. As his mom always said, Focus on what you can control—and let the rest work itself out. There was nothing to do now about the guy he'd hit. And so James would do the right thing, the sensible thing—the only thing he could do—and head out to his junkyard and load up the truck and sell the stuff, all by himself.

First, James had to go out and get it. So he went. He went the speed limit. He listened for sirens. He heard a resigned silence in the streets of the former mill village when he passed through in the new dawn. He turned onto Huger Street and found sound: urgent bells ding-ding-ding-dinged at a railroad crossing and James idled beside a diesel-exhausted semi-truck while the graffitied cars of a freight train clattered past. He hoped the guy he hit was all right. He saw some bushy bushes near a Subway. He thought of the time his mom said, *Son, I just want to make sure that you're aware that God is not a metaphor.* He stopped at a stop sign. He reminded himself to remember to ask Charles how much his rent was. He drove the speed limit and the open windows allowed the clean and empty air to come breezing in. He liked that. He arrived at the junkyard, unlocked the gate, parked before the mound of new stuff, and got out.

I once dreamt of a keyboard whose letters had been alphabetized, of searching for B between V and N and finding it up near A.

James picked through the pile by the gate, reappraised it. He discovered that it was more broken than it had previously seemed. The books weren't just bloated: many were missing pages.

There were some good videos—but when he looked closer, he could see that the tape of many of them was twisted or torn. The cord of a decent looking vacuum cleaner was cut. Both the soccer ball and football were deflated. It was depressing and he was already overwhelmed with worry, so he stopped looking and instead started sorting. he put the obviously damaged in the bed, on the bottom, and set aside what was best preserved and most salable so he could stack it on top, so he could disguise the damage. James reloaded it all into the bed. It took him a long time, working alone, rearranging it as he went.

When he was finally finished, he was exhausted and hungry and sweaty and he wasn't stoned and he had to be low on grass—and probably gas—and he could use a clean t-shirt and he couldn't go home and he had eleven dollars and a truck full of what was turning out to be junk and he regretted not including Charles now and now he couldn't call Charles, not that he really had a reason to. And he wasn't happy. And he needed to go out to the flea market and everything had to work out because it had to and he had to eat. He had to. He was hungry. He was weak, weakening. He smoked a cigarette. He felt ill, awful. He felt his phone buzz in his pocket. He released it, opened it, saw a short text message from Charles: *Where you go? Whats up?* James snapped the phone shut, then thought better and opened it and turned the thing off. He'd say it had died. Whatever. He'd just drive. He drove.

## EIGHTEEN

I should've been more explicit from the beginning.

I didn't know anything about Moldova. But I imagined it as a place where women wore plastic hairnets to keep their perms in place while they pushed stolen shopping carts up boulevards wide enough to accommodate two Soviet tanks rumbling side-by-side to quell a coup. It was always dusk there. Stewardesses in tight polyester dresses drank coffee at café tables. Every breath made a heavy ghost. Children stole useful things, like mufflers and flour. Men converted telephones into radios so they could listen to propaganda. As I made it, Moldova was a place of morbid practicality, a place where resignation and resolve were indistinguishable.

Ladya and I had to be married within ninety days of her arrival. Otherwise, her visa would expire and she'd be detained and shipped back there.

As we drove home from the airport, she ate Skittles from a Ziploc bag and smoked what seemed like hay wrapped up in a scrap of newspaper but smelled like tobacco dipped in formaldehyde. She picked at a pimple on her chin until it bled a thin rivulet down her neck. Her shoes had a Cyrillic letter on the side. She didn't even try to talk.



I tried remind myself that she was Flirtatious/Playful, Kind/Friendly, Gentle, Persistent, Romantic, Self Confident, Sensitive/Nurturing/Loving, Serious/Responsible but I was burdened by her Lifelessness. Which she hadn't mentioned. She was as animated as a mannequin and I felt like the last alchemist: I was supposed to make a conversion I already knew was impossible. I was supposed transform her into my wife, into a mother for my new children.

I would have my new children soon.

We drove through the darkness and I wondered what she thought the night contained. She probably imagined some sanitized and Americanized version of Moldova existed outside the bounds of the headlights, beyond the pavement, which was all we could see and which must look the same everywhere.

When we got home, I gave her a shoebox wrapped in wrapping paper. It was a welcome gift. She scratched it open greedily, like a rodent clawing a hole in the ground. She let the paper fall beside her and took the top off the box and took out one of the slippers. She examined it and laughed and held it up to me like I didn't know what they were. Ariel from *The Little Mermaid* was embroidered on each one. Grace had a pair just like them.

Ladya giggled and smiled but she didn't spring up and hug me and kiss me like she loved me and I was the man she wanted to marry. I understood. I sat down on the couch beside her. I put my arm around her shoulder. Around my fiancée's shoulder. Her slim shoulders. Then I tried to kiss her. Ladya had traveled halfway around the world to marry me and I leaned in to kiss her casually, slightly, lightly on her lips and she scooted away from me and started to unlace her sneakers. I reached out and lightly rubbed her back. She moved another few inches away.

She said, "Please do not rush too fast."

She couldn't look at me when she spoke. She looked at her slippers then and so often afterwards. Ladya hadn't even been in America a night and I was already humiliated. My affection was already a burden. My desire something to stifle.

She slipped her feet into the slippers I'd spent eleven dollars on. I decided that I would return them in the morning, before she awoke, but she went to the bathroom with them on and watched television with them on and slept in our bed with them on.

I slept beside her, and that night I had an evil dream: I dreamt of sawing off her feet, of her anklebones being too thick to cut, of blood ruining the slippers that I couldn't remove.

## NINETEEN

This part is pure invention.

Karla was at Cock's, sipping a shot of well rum, when the bartender called last call and Mister came up behind her and massaged her shoulders. Though she found Mister phony and cloying and uncouth, she felt herself melt under his hard grip. She melted but she'd already been softened by all the drinks he'd bought her.

Because of the way she wore the racket, it acted as a kind of improvised brace that enforced a strict posture and so Karla's back was always tense. Now, however, she was slack in a paroxysm of relaxation, her eyes closed, her mouth hung open. Mister leaned into her ear and asked if she was ready to go. She didn't answer, but no, she wasn't ready to go. She was ready to curl up on the pool-table felt and fall sleep. He told her they had to go, that he'd go get everyone else and then they had to leave.

The others were elsewhere and so was Mister. So she stood up and walked waveringly toward the door, watching her feet as she went, as though they would show her where to go. They pointed forward and she followed. She pushed the door open, heard it shut, and felt it seal

behind her. She found herself out on the empty sidewalk: the wide street was silent, like a river or something peaceful, and she found something like solace in that. She looked down. She walked. She didn't decide to leave the others, but she left. She didn't decide where to go, but she headed instinctively home, which was the woods and Fritz's encampment and the La-Z-Boy before the TV. Which was this way. This way up the sidewalk.

In a journal of maritime history, I once read an excerpt from the memoirs of Robert Dollar, a Scottish-born timber baron on the Great Lakes. In it, Dollar recounted being out on frozen-over Lake Huron in the 1860s or so, on a trip to bring provisions to a wilderness camp on Georgian Bay. He went out foraging—I can't remember for what. He walked directly against the wind on the way out, away from his team, and so figured he'd return to them if he walked with the wind exactly at his back. He did this but didn't find his men. Soon enough, he realized that the wind had shifted sometime between when he left and when he returned, throwing him off track. Or not soon enough: it was too late; he was lost. Robert Dollar was lost. I never finished reading the excerpt, but he must've found his men eventually, since all first-person accounts implicitly give away the ending: the narrator must survive in order to tell his story.

Karla went about thirty yards or so, found herself at an intersection, noticed a lit gas station across the street, crossed the street, went in, heard the bell ding behind her, muttered hello to the attendant, and found her way back to the women's room. She needed to pee. She slung her racket bag over her shoulder, leaned it against the wall, sat down, closed her eyes, rested her elbow on her knee and her chin in her palm and saw blackness that became silence.

The silence was soon broken by knocking.

“You OK in there?” asked a man's unfamiliar voice.

Oh, she was here. She was in a bathroom with everything—the walls, the floor, the sink, the ceiling, the toilet, the door—coated in a slightly different shade and texture of dirty white. She was on a toilet. This was exactly all she knew now. “Yes,” she answered but could only hope she was right. “I’ll be right out.”

There was no answer. She got up and got her bag back on. She turned the sink tap, let it run until it was cold, splashed her face a few time, and avoided the mirror, which would show what she could not see: a woman she did not want to be.

“You all right,” the attendant called out as soon as she’d exited the bathroom.

She walked up an aisle stocked with Combos and beef jerkey and potato chips.

“You were in there for twenty minutes. Thought you fell in.”

She tried to smile as she passed the counter. She went out into the night and was blinded by the booming fluorescence emanating from the awning that sheltered the unoccupied pumps. She walked. She watched her feet and walked. She kept walking. She passed a closed Chinese restaurant and a closed McDonalds and an apartment complex with only two lit windows and walked underneath an Interstate and kept walking. Occasionally, a car passed. The sky slowly took a puddle-shaded shape as the sun started seeping up from the other side of the earth. A dog barked and it set off a cascade of yelps as she proceeded through a ramshackle neighborhood of chain-linked front yards and cars covered in pine-tree nettles. An elderly man sitting on a bench before a sandbox in a park called her sweetheart. A white child, a boy wearing pajamas, laughed from a front porch covered-over with Astro-turf.

“It’s all right,” she said to herself, though she meant it for the kid, “go back to sleep.”

I used to tell Grace that when she appeared at my door late at night, terrified. But she wouldn’t she go back to sleep. She’d come sleep in my bed, always facing the wall.

Karla thought of Fritz, of watching him sleep, of watching him twitch and shift and mutter, as though his dream world was a place where smaller gestures and voices were required to communicate. She thought of Fritz waking up in the night and looking imploringly up at her, beseeching her for assurance, which she unfailingly granted. She recalled the dumb frustration of insomnia and remembered how his need for watchfulness granted her sleeplessness a purpose. She liked telling him that things were all right. She liked telling him to go back to bed. When you have nothing else to offer, it's good to give comfort. And it's good to walk. So she walked.

The sun arrived on the horizon as a beaming half circle, the way it's depicted in elementary-school art. She cut across a strip-mall parking lot. She found a tennis ball in an abandoned shopping cart. The neon was dulled down to an olive green. She held it in her hand, squeezed it. She didn't know what had happened last night, but she was relieved that it was over and that she was away from it. She considered stopping to rest on a bench but worried that it was a bus stop, that a bus would stop, that she would not get on, that she would inconvenience the passengers, that she would annoy the driver. She should get back to Fritz and the house built from the woods, where she could really rest. The stores seemed to grow in size and get further away from the sidewalk the further she went. Then they were replaced by long, erratic lawns and ranch houses spaced far apart and churches built on parking lot islands and brief, flimsy forests and chaotic used-car dealerships and plots of land marked with large build-to-suit signs.

Then she made it to Solo Road and walked along the shoulder, with the road on one side and the Interstate on the other, with cars bursting past her on both sides. When she could, when there was a space in the traffic, she scurried across the road like a rodent. She was in the sandy rec center parking lot, alone. She crossed outfields and infields and soccer fields. It was quiet and verdant, and for a moment she felt like a rural kid, surrounded by space. For a moment, she

stopped and the world was as still and scenic as a diorama. But she was tired and almost there. She kept going. Kept walking. She walked into the woods, down the path that led, she imagined, into some magical kingdom, the kind you read about in children's books, ones where the animals offer noble advice, where it never rains but always just did.

Then the path opened up into the little clearing where the living room was, so Karla slowed down and tip-toed so she wouldn't awaken Fritz. She crept around the couch but found that he wasn't there, that the couch was unoccupied. Everything else was as she had left it that morning: ransacked. The model ship was still gone and the sorted salvage was still missing and the place still looked picked through, invaded.

"Fritz?" she called out.

A bird chirped.

"Fritz?"

Still, no answer. This was worrisome. Where was he? Come to think of it: Where'd he disappeared to last night? What happened? Oh, right: she'd left him at Mister's motel. He was probably still there. She should go back into town. She should search for him. She should. She really should, but the motel was too far for her to go back and retrieve him now and she was so tired from walking that she had to sit down. She had to sit down for a second on the recliner and recline and close her eyes and then she could decide what to do. So she did: she reclined—and then, for the first time in a long time, she slept deeply enough to dream.

She played mixed doubles with Fritz, against an aunt she hadn't seen since childhood and a high school social studies teacher who she ran into once at a wedding and slept with. But every time she sliced a ball into the alley, the line judge called out in a strict voice, "Wide." No matter

how loudly and vehemently she objected, no one heard her protestations that his call was wrong, that the alley counted in doubles.

For Karla, living and tennis playing were bound up as the same thing, like the red and white of a candy cane, a treat she had kept a constant stock of throughout her girlhood, sucking the long, straight ends into dagger points that she would jab into her pillow, pretending that it was her father, who she hated for what he would do to her in what they both pretended was her sleep but both knew was her playing dead, which was what she wanted to be.

I would've preferred to have been accused of anything else. I would've preferred anything to what happened.

The brittle tips of the candy canes would break off in her bed and Karla would cry while she chewed them, ruined both by what was done to her and by what she wanted to do, afraid of her father and for herself. Picking out the sugar gunk cemented in the rotting tops of her molars, she lamented the fact of love, which she considered coeval with evil, another cruel and unavoidable aspect of the world in which it seemed she was doomed to reside. How then could God, whose infallible benevolence her parents unceasingly invoked, not only approve of but also espouse love? Love was the just the apotheosis of all the gravest sins, of avarice and lust and wrath, of pride, of envy, of gluttony. A simple trick of transubstantiating compassion into power.

Honor thy father? Guess who said that? God, the Father, her father told her. You know what he did.

*Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.* Well, who wants their days long when they are like this? Hers were plenty long enough, especially without the mercy of their being shortened through the escape of



sleep. To reduce them would be the sole act of grace that might mitigate the suffering of insufferable love. If only He would. He didn't.

Her days were long, and on one of them, when she was eleven and her mother was taking her to a Saturday afternoon swimming practice, Karla asked what it meant for her dad to insistently love her in that way, with his hands, with her body, in the dark. Her mother said, *I don't know what to say*, and then turned around, took her to church, instructed her to go into the confessional and tell the priest just exactly what she meant, what was true, what had happened. Her mother assured her that he would have the answers, an answer, would know what to do.

I wouldn't do that to my daughter. I loved her.

There was a short line for the confessional. There was a child preparing for first communion, a middle-aged man who wore a bulbous class ring where a wedding band should've been, and a woman fingering rosary beads as intently as the deaf read lips. While her mother prayed in a pew, Karla paced nervously until it was her turn, at which time she went in and said, *Bless me Father for I have sinned*, to which he responded by asking how long since it had been she her last confession. For obvious reasons—his title, his menacingly calm voice, his invisibility—she felt as though she were speaking to her father and therefore she couldn't say anything. So she didn't speak, not even when the priest asked her if there was something she wanted to tell him, not even when he said it was fine just to sit in the silence and seek forgiveness, that as soon as it is sought it is granted, that God loved her, no matter what. At that—at the thought of more love—she burst out of there.

At mass the next day, Karla took a long draught of wine and felt a shudder of release unrelated to the alleged fact that what she imbibed was ostensibly the blood of Christ Jesus.

If anything were to transubstantiate, it would be the rum that she drank deeply as soon as she awoke in the woods and found that Fritz still wasn't there: the rum at once quenched her thirst, bestowed a buzz, and blossomed all of her taste buds, a triplicate feat befitting the Son of God. Though she was alone in the woods, she took solace in the fact that her drink was still there, that the thieves hadn't found her bottle, which she kept hidden under the recliner cushion. She had to find solace somewhere. Maybe she'd play tennis later. Maybe later.

For now, she just watched the television, which of course didn't work: it only showed the distorted reflection of a woman sitting in a La-Z-Boy in the woods. It allowed Karla to imagine that the person she watched was someone else, someone who might do something different at any moment, even if she hadn't ever yet.

## TWENTY

I'm making this as accurately as I can.

Online, on the *Myrtle Beach Sun News* website, I was able to track down a few articles about Dave's disappearance. I found a photograph of Fritz. He looks distinguished but distressed. He has a bushy novelty mustache that really sells the idea of him as a kid's entertainer. He wears a bow tie, a blazer. His hair is swept back instead of slicked back. He seems composed, intent.

He stands on a beach, with his wife. She is neat and composed, like a real estate agent. They stand side by side, on a beach, with a gazebo in the background and a bouquet of microphones in the foreground. Fritz towers over her, leans forward toward the camera, about to speak. The caption reads, "In a press conference yesterday, Fritz and Charon Hoffmann asked for any information regarding the whereabouts of their son, Dave Hoffmann. He was reported missing on Wednesday."

A headshot of Dave appears below. He's stubbly and, judging by his jowls, overweight. His mouth hangs open. His eyes are round and wide, and they are the only childish feature on a face that otherwise seems prematurely haggard. He conforms more or less to my conception: he

looks forlorn. But here's the thing about him: besides his weight, he looks a lot like James. The two could easily be confused. This would improve important later.

His caption says, "Dave Anthony Hoffmann, 27, was last seen on Wednesday morning. He is thought to have been piloting his 28' MasterCraft X-2, *Aquaholic*, from Skipper Skip's marina in Myrtle Beach when he went missing."

There's a feeling of speculative excitement in the article. I imagine a bored beach town reporter grateful for something to cover in the offseason—something other than county council meetings and planning-commission proposals and drunk-driving convictions. This reporter—Kent Rothenberg, Staff Writer—had a disappearance and then a suspected suicide to delve into. He had a tragedy to cover.

## TWENTY ONE

I have a tragedy to cover.

Dave was an only child. His mom was nice to him but his dad was a drunk and his dad pushed him hard to play soccer but Dave didn't really like it, so he quit the team his senior year of high school in order to pursue his passion: waterskiing. He was good at it. He was a success. He went pro. Which meant he drove to bodies of water around the country with Tony. Tony Volk. Tony drove the minivan with the trailer behind it. Tony also drove the boat, pulled Dave around on his skis.

But Dave's career ended early when he tore both of his ACLs and shattered an ankle while attempting a 360° flip during a competition on Lake Cumberland, in Tennessee. He didn't know what to do next, so he started teaching watersports to tourists for an exorbitant hourly rate. He was frustrated. He was known to be an unforgiving instructor and so he didn't have as many customers as wanted and he'd blown his savings buying *Aquaholic*, so he had to move back in with his parents.

Allison always chewed sugar-free bubblegum. She smelled artificially sweet.

Dave was bored, depressed. He moped around the house, opening the fridge and watching daytime television and smoking menthol cigarettes on the back deck and drinking lots of vodka and lemonade. Fritz's preferred combination was Captain's and orange juice but he was even thirstier than his son. So they were both drunk most of the time and they argued all of the time. They argued about everything but mostly about money: they were both always haranguing the other for more. Dave wanted to borrow a few bucks. Fritz wanted his son to pay rent or buy groceries or chip in on the electric bill. Charon just wanted them to get along. But Fritz was relentless in his efforts to get Dave to move out of the house. He even changed the locks once but Charon made a copy of a key and gave it to him.

Dave's life was in sordid and general disarray. He'd never paid taxes and didn't have health insurance. One of his front teeth was dying, darkening, and he refused to go to the dentist, even when Charon offered to pay. He regularly failed to show up for the few waterskiing lessons he'd managed to schedule. He borrowed a few hundred dollars from his mom and invested it all in an apparent pyramid scheme and never saw it again. He took out a restraining order against an ex-girlfriend, Jenny Christmas, for supposedly harassing him, though this was, in fact, a vindictive act, retaliation for her dumping him.

Dave didn't do much but he spent every day from five until two getting blackout drunk at the bar in the lobby of the Swamp Fox Inn. Indeed, he was seen there the night before he disappeared. Two witnesses reported him being belligerent and recalled that he'd spent all night writing furiously on napkins. Some hypothesized, in retrospect, that these were drafts of suicide notes. None, however, were ever discovered.

After our house burned down, we moved into a ranch house on Lake Catherine that my dad found through an old real estate connection. James came over once to hangout but it was awkward. It felt like we were on a set. Everything felt artificial over there.

Dave came home late that night and knocked over two full trash cans when he pulled into the driveway. An altercation with his father ensued. Fritz gave his son the same ultimatum he always gave: move out by the end of the month or else start paying rent. He added, as an addendum, that Dave was a disgrace. The garbage remained spilled out on the ground. Charon helped her son to bed. An altercation between Fritz and Charon followed, and Fritz gave her an ultimatum: either he moves out or I do. He slept on a couch that night, as he would so often afterward. He heard but didn't see his son leave early, probably around 7:30 a.m. And that was it, the final sign of his son: the slide and click of the glass deck door closing.

No one at the marina saw Dave arrive and take *Aquaholic* out of the slip. No one noticed anything amiss until a family of four showed up for their nine o'clock lesson and found that their instructor wasn't there. They waited around for a full fifteen minutes, then the father went into the marina office to complain. The marina secretary dialed Dave's home number. Fritz answered curtly, according to Francis, and said he didn't know or care where Dave was and then hung up. Fritz said nothing to Charon. The secretary, who was accustomed to Dave's unreliability, offered his customers an apology and a refund. They accepted.

That Dave wasn't home by dinner time or bedtime or midnight wasn't alarming. It was normal. That he wasn't home by morning was unusual but not unheard of. Sometimes, Dave would spend a night sulking on his boat. So that morning, Charon went down to the marina to talk to her son, to see how he was, to privately offer him a loan that would allow him to move out of the house, into his own place.

But he wasn't there. Neither was his boat. She went into the marina office and found the secretary, Francis, at her desk and asked about Dave, about his whereabouts. Francis told her that Dave hadn't shown up for his lesson yesterday morning either, that she hadn't seen him. Charon tried to keep calm, failed, called home, and told Fritz. When she wanted to call the police, Fritz talked her out of it, said that Dave was a grownup and that they had to treat him like one, that they couldn't constantly keep their eye on him. He told her that they should both go to work, that Dave was probably off drunk at some other marina and that he'd come home as soon as he ran out of money. He told Charon to calm down, that everything would be fine. He enjoyed a screwdriver.

Grace was born on a sunny afternoon, which seemed strange to me. I'd always imagined it happening late at night, when no one would notice her sneaking into the world.

Splash City attendance was low that day. Fritz twisted occasional animals near Crazzy Curl, the park's most popular water slide. Charon checked in at the office, looked through some paperwork, and left by eleven. She went back to the marina and sat on a bench near Dave's slip and waited impatiently for him to return. By five, she was as panicked as she was sunburned. She went into the office, borrowed Francis' phone, and dialed 9-1-1. She told the dispatcher that her Dave was missing. She filed a missing person report. She sat down on Francis' desk, put her head in her hands, and cried. Then she drove home.

On the way, only ten minutes after reporting his absence, she heard a bulletin about him on the radio. *Dave Hoffmann of North Myrtle Beach was reported missing today. He was last seen, etc.* Anyone with any information was asked to alert the Myrtle Beach Police Department or the local Coast Guard office immediately. Charon couldn't believe how quickly word was getting out. She took solace in this, but it was also alarming that the police were taking Dave's



disappearance so seriously. Even they were panicking. When she arrived home, Fritz was drinking another screwdriver and watching a rerun of *Home Improvement*. She told him everything. When she told him about the immediacy of the radio report, he believed her concern, felt it himself, and called the detective, to see how he could help.

It was vital that they get the word out, that as many eyes as possible were on the lookout for their lost son. The more people knew he was missing, the more likely it was he'd be found. A press conference was organized. A photo was taken. Dozens of people called and came forward, each of them with reports of having seen what turned out to be a different boat of a similar description. There was no evidence of foul play—indeed, there was no evidence at all. The local media, relieved to have such a salacious story to cover now that Bike Week was over, devoted their efforts to the tragedy, to Charon's desperate pleas for the public's help, to Fritz's stoic resolve, and to his ex-girlfriend Jenny's possible motives for murder (not, they reminded viewers and readers, that she had yet officially been named a suspect).

There was an article about my arrest in the paper, *The Pantagraph*. I was too humiliated to show up for work, so I just stopped going, mid-semester, mid-week.

Two days passed. Charon walked along the beach all day seeking a sign of Dave's boat on the water or of his body on the beach. She stayed awake through the night in the gazebo, which was perched atop a dune, and scanned the dark sea like a lighthouse keeper with a flashlight too dim to identify anything but the reeds shaking their heavy heads. Fritz spent his time at the police station, waiting impatiently at the desk of a vacationing detective and pestering passing officers with suggestions, with ideas about where Dave may've gone, about how to find him. He slept in an unoccupied cell. He spoke to his wife and tried to assure her, but he couldn't go home, couldn't see her. He needed to preserve the idea that he was doing his best, that he was doing

something, that he was active and involved, that he was pursuing their son and making progress, that he was too busy to rest, even though he was of course impotent to do anything.

A volunteer-led search for *Aquaholic* was organized. A flotilla of powerboats scanned from Wilmington to Charleston for any evidence of the boat or its pilot. They found nothing. Finally, five days since Dave had last been seen, some charter fishermen way down off the coast of Edisto noticed a boat-shaped image on their fish finder and notified the authorities, who dredged it up and confirmed (from the serial number) that it was Dave Hoffmann's. A shoe the same size (11) and type (Topsider) as his was found further down the coast the next day. This, according to the coroner and the cops and the Coast Guard, was sufficient evidence of drowning.

There were persistent rumors that *Aquaholic* had been intentionally sunk, that there was a bullet hole in the bottom, near the bow. There had been no squalls or storms that day. Dave was an experienced boater. There was no other plausible explanation. The officials officially dismissed this theory—there was no reason to cause greater grief than was already inevitable—but the newspaper reported it. Charon privately believed it was true but didn't blame her husband; Fritz pretended not to know that such a suspicion even existed. Indeed, he denied that Dave was dead at all.

If Dave was dead, Fritz had killed him. If Fritz had killed his son, he couldn't live. If Fritz couldn't live, he'd have to die. He couldn't do that: he had to find Dave. I think this is called a tautology. It allowed him to live.

He borrowed a fishing boat from the marina where Dave had worked. He tried to enlist Charon but she wouldn't take part. She wanted to believe that his delusion was just hope corrupted by grief and she wanted to be around when he realized his confusion and needed

consolation—but she'd been scared off of boats and she didn't want to indulge him. She guessed he'd go out for a few days and then return to her, ruined but righted. She was wrong.

I tried to explain everything to Allison but she just kept saying, *I know, I know. I'm a nurse.*

Fritz followed the coastline all the way to Mobile. He stopped at every marina and asked around and posted his missing-person flyer. He slept onboard and drank bottle upon bottle of gin and rum and all kinds of juice. He hardly ate and never wore sunscreen. He wrote Charon cryptic postcards (*You can't be lost when you're looking / Love, Fritz*, for example) from various ports of call but he never called home. Since he discovered nothing, there was no reason for his search to end. So it didn't. He made his way back around the tip of Florida, cruised through the Keys, and made it as far north as Newport News, Virginia, skipping only one marina the entire trip: Skipper Skip's in Myrtle Beach. He didn't want to risk running into Charon without good news.

Then, in Jacksonville, North Carolina, when he was on his way back down the coast once more, Fritz called a suicide help line and sobbed to a woman who called herself Rhonda, a woman with a voice as bright and smooth as neon. He told her everything. She told him to allow himself his method of grievance but not to attempt it alone. Then she broke from the script and said that sometimes we have to be like a kid and let the balloon go, because watching it bob and drift into the sun-erased sky is the most beautiful thing a balloon can do. He said this was not the most beautiful thing and hung up.

He went back to his stool in the marina bar. His neighbor, a young guy wearing Oakleys despite the low light, asked if he was all right. Fritz told him his situation. The guy told him that he was sorry, that he'd always liked the name Dave, that, as a matter of fact, he'd just recently

met a really nice guy named Dave. *Yeah? Where was that?* Fritz asked, willing to let any shard of information become a clue. *Columbia*, the guy answered and ordered them each another.

Fritz was drunk and had been for the past however many months. He grabbed his bag, left his boat in its slip, walked to the bus station, bought a ticket with the last of his money, and awoke the next evening in Columbia, without anything. He'd lost everything—everything from his Bonneville to his beachfront home to his son to his wife to his career. Now he was just a guy carrying a duffel bag that contained a model schooner, a change of clothes, and a dopp kit through a Wendy's drive-thru because the dining room was already closed. Now he was dipping French fries in his Frosty and considering the probability he'd be stabbed before sunup.

That morning, when I was trying to say goodbye to my daughter and Allison was yelling at me to leave, Grace's child eyes filled with disconsolate confusion and she started to cry like an adult, like she understood.

Fritz found his way to the shelter after a sympathetic cop awoke him from some fitful sleep on a bench on the State House grounds. He searched desultorily for Dave with a phonebook and a few probing calls. There was a guy named Yuri who worked at that shelter, the one on Taylor and Assembly. I don't know him. He was kind to Fritz. He encouraged him to get sober but didn't judge him about his drinking. When, after a week or so, Fritz hadn't gotten any closer to his son, he agreed to attend meetings. He made fast progress, quit cold turkey. Fritz told me that Yuri was impressed, was grateful for his effort, and invited Fritz out for lunch. Over egg rolls, Fritz confided in Yuri, told him everything, told him about his pursuit, his past. Yuri heard him out, listened patiently while Fritz tried to explain. When he finished, Yuri asked him if there was any history of mental illness in his family. Schizophrenia? Manic depression? Fritz excused

himself and never returned. Things were already uncomfortable at the shelter, as I've already mentioned, and now Fritz felt accused.

He found his way to the woods. He found himself alone and sober in the woods. He began salvaging, saving, organizing, accumulating so that someday he could sell it all and resume his search. Dave was out there, somewhere. He had to be.

We've already been over this.

Denial allows the doomed to continue. Fritz hid away from a world that didn't want him, that he wished he could do without. A year passed.

## TWENTY TWO

I'm looking for energy.

Ladya couldn't work until after the wedding and her visa had pass through the I.N.S. And I'd spent my savings flying her over. So I applied online for a job at Wendy's. I was hired to work nights, when only the drive thru was open and customer interactions occurred through a window and a muffled microphone. It was less humiliating that way. The manager, Vanessa, a retired accountant who'd taken the job as a diversion after her husband's death, liked me and was sympathetic and so she let me put a different name on my name tag, to make it harder for people I knew from the past to recognize me. But they still sometimes would, when I was leaning out of the second window to hand them a bag of chicken nuggets and french fries or whatever. They'd say, "Oh my god," and ask how I was. I always just said, "My parents died," so they'd apologize and pity me and drive away.

While I worked, I thought about Ladya a lot. While I cleaned the fryers, I thought about her dirty slippers and how the night before they'd felt like two rodents intruding under the covers. While I mopped the walk-in, I thought about what she would look like pregnant. While I

added ice to the fountain machine, I thought about fucking her from behind. She had been living with me for a week and we hadn't even really hugged. Her slippers had gotten dirtier and dirtier and she didn't take them off ever. Her visa would expire in eighty-three days.

Then one night I came home from work at two a.m. with Food Lion flowers and heard her speaking English—actual unbroken, if uncomplicated, English—on the phone.

“Yeah, of course. . . . OK. I said I'll be there.”

Then she must've heard the front door click behind me, because she switched over to what I assumed was Moldovan. I asked her who she was talking to. She hung up. She went upstairs and lay on the floor, beside the bed. I asked her again.

“Dad,” she said, laying there, reverting to her accent. “My dad.”

“In English,” I said, “that's called a lie.”

I gave her the flowers. She lit a cigarette and got up and went out back to smoke it.

## TWENTY THREE

You can forget about me.

James held a lit cigarette between two of his fingers as a potential explanation for why he was sitting in a cloud of smoke in the cabin of his truck should an employee of the fast-food fried chicken place where he had just bought a thirty-two ounce ice tea come out and inquire as to the nature of his actions or should a cop do the same, as the nature of his actions was illegal: he was getting high, so high that he could feel the bones in his feet, so high that he was only thinking, *I'm so fucking high*. And God knows he couldn't be discovered doing anything illegal. He was operating the water-bottle apparatus. He took a fourth and then fifth and then sixth hit and eventually finished the bowl, though he'd promised himself he'd only take one, and only to loosen himself for the laconic joviality required for salesmanship, so he wouldn't be as tense and anxious and awkward as he would be sober, but now he was so high as to be incapable of driving, which made him anxious because he was in possession of about two grams and because he'd hit that fucking guy last night and because he'd been arrested last month and because he was conspicuous with his drink, his cigarette, and his rolled-up windows, which were keeping



the pot smell and smoke inside the cab and would release it all should an authority figure knock with one knuckle and make the antiquated international sign for him to roll them down, though he (like pretty much everyone else) had power windows, which to be operated required that he start the car, which might be misinterpreted as a sign that he was trying to flee, which would only increase the suspicion, which would lead to a search of the truck, which would lead to cuffs and the backseat of a cop car, in which he would be taken down to a jail cell, where he'd have to shit on a metal toilet in front of a pedophile or something, which made him really nervous even though he was no longer a child, so he decided that he had to get out of there but he really didn't want to drive, since doing so might take him to the exact same place, to the police, if he got in an accident, which seemed not only likely but inevitable seeing as how he was so fucked up that he was stubbing out a cigarette in an empty cassette case in order to avoid opening the windows and allowing his imaginary pursuers to confirm their case against him.

OK, he had to calm down, had to take a long pull on his straw and allow the cold caffeine to course through his body, sober him up, straighten him out. He did that, then he improved his posture, sat up in his seat, turned the ignition, checked all his mirrors, even turned this way and that to confirm there was nothing and no one anywhere that he might hit, then kept his foot on the brake, moved the stick down to R, took a deep breath, double-checked that he was in reverse, took his foot off the gas, and got out of there slowly, deliberately, hunched over the steering wheel to ensure that he handled the world with care and concern befitting a non-criminal, that he exited the parking lot and pulled into traffic without incident, which he did successfully, accelerating into the open right James and then immediately stopping at a red light to breathe and assure himself that he was fine, that he could do this, that it was cool, that everything would be OK, that the light was green, which meant go, which he did somewhat suddenly, lurching into

the intersection before steadying himself, confirming the thirty-five-mile-per-hour speed limit, which was posted on a misaligned sign to his right, and traveling at exactly that rate while he rolled the windows all the way down and felt relieved when the afternoon air replaced the smoke, dispersed the main evidence, felt cool like diving into a swimming pool, which he'd done this morning and also last night, which he was surprised to remember doing, which pleased him because it seemed like confirmation that he was carefree and therefore, in some way, winning, since hadn't he built his entire life around the notion that industriousness was just evidence of acquiescence to worry? Or anyhow that was the story he told himself so he'd have some notion about what would or should come next in this narrative, his narrative, the plot arc of his existence, which began in sixth grade when he'd identified his D.A.R.E. officer's hypocrisy: here was a man who obviously took steroids—a guy with the physique of an action-movie antagonist, with strangely bulbous muscles and a little pinhead—telling all these fifth graders about how horrible drugs were, passing fake samples (flour for cocaine, oregano for weed, he couldn't remember what replaced heroin) up the classroom rows, assigning essays about the evils of things they'd only seen simulacra of, rewarding their blind obedience with a teddy bear—a fucking D.A.R.E. Bear. Meantime, this Officer Minemiar—even this seemed a mockery, this huge man with a name that sort of slant rhymed with *Minimizer*—was injecting himself with Arnolds in a Gold's Gym locker room.

James didn't know what else to think, except that this drug made him aware that he was ninety-nine percent water—or whatever the percentage is—and that he was seasick, swelled and unmoored on the polluted little lake of himself. Out on Lake James, in a little skiff. Maybe he should just leave.

My dad was so cheap that he once bought a hundred Whoppers at one time because they

were on sale for ninety-nine cents each. They wouldn't fit in the fridge, so he kept them in a cooler in the family room and ate them while he watched TV.

James pulled over in the parking lot of an abandoned strip mall that had once housed a Big Lots and a Michael's and Budget CDs. He put the truck in park, found an atlas behind the seat, turned to a full map of the United States capillaried with highways, wondered what Idaho was like and how one found an apartment in a place like Pocatello, used his thumb and index finger to approximate the mileage between here and there via the varicose veins of Interstates, gave up when he realized he couldn't even keep track of that many hundreds (thousands?) of miles. He tossed the atlas on the seat beside him.

He felt in his pocket for his phone, confirmed that it was off. He needed to concentrate on what was in front of him. After he'd sold everything, after he'd been paid, he would definitely call Charles. But not yet. He restarted the truck, drove this way and that, crossed the Congaree River into West Columbia's deteriorating textile-industry architecture, and entered the fading suburban aspirations of Lexington County. He passed the #1 Highway Flea Market and then a little later Pops without an apostrophe, where Charles had his booth, and continued on to Barnyard, where he knew this one guy Calvin who had a huge stand and would probably be interested in a bulk purchase and where he also knew this other guy Wayne who James used to hang out with before they had a disagreement about some kitchen appliances James sold him. But that was awhile ago and it was in the past and not worth worrying about anymore. One of them would be buy the stuff, he was sure. And there were a couple other guys he'd sold stuff to before. Guys with smaller stands, which wouldn't be ideal but might work, if need be. He'd see. He'd figure it out.

He'd start with Calvin, who had a big and variegated booth and who sometimes bought in bulk and who sometimes bought from James. Just a couple weeks ago, James had sold him a DeWalt chop saw for twenty bucks and then just last week he saw Calvin again and Calvin said he'd sold it pretty much right away and told James to be sure to come back if he had any more that he wanted to get rid off. James said he would. So he would.

He parked. He walked past empty booths and boxes overflowing with random over-the-counter medications and displays of supposedly-silver jewelry and toaster ovens allegedly large enough for an entire frozen pizza and stuffed animals trapped in cellophane and CB radios and novelty camouflage-patterned Onesies that said *Heavy Doodie* in a punning location. He saw a man with a French-African accent and a woman in pink-framed reading glasses and a guy in a cap proclaiming him a superlative dad and an elderly man demonstrating the advantages of a particular serrated bowie knife by cutting a piece of PVC pipe he had on hand for just this reason.

I had a step-grandmother named Fawn who'd once worked as a park ranger at Death Valley National Monument. She was a Mormon and had eight kids from a previous marriage.

James came to Calvin's booth, which was actually two booths, and saw Calvin at the back, sorting through a box of something, and decided it would be best not to seem too eager or anxious, to avoid appearing desperate, to spend a little time sifting, to wait, to let Calvin approach him. He flipped through a table stacked with books. He watched an elderly man push a mower past. A young man nodded hello, headed straight toward a section meant for new parents, looked at a stack of car seats, shook a crib to see if it rattled, and messed with a mobile.

James spent some time reading the backs of VHS tapes. He was seriously considering buying a copy of *Hot Shots Part Deux*, which he'd somehow never seen, when Calvin came up behind him and said, "Oh hey. How you been?"

Calvin was real tall—six-six or something—and sorta slunk down to try to hide his height. He was thin everywhere except his belly, which spilled out like he'd just been gutted and his shirt was holding everything in and it was all sloshing around in there. He was middle-aged and balding and had a brittle, gray goatee. His breath smelled like salt-and-vinegar potato chips.

James said he was fine, but he was hot, nervous. He scratched his neck. He tried hard to relax. The effort only made him more anxious but he tried explain: "Well, the thing is: I just got a whole lot of real nice stuff that I thought you might like. Might like to take a look at." He tried to confide, to convey that this was a secret and thus an opportunity. "And you're the first one I'm bringing it to. Thought you might like to have first shot at it. Before someone else gets it."

Calvin laughed and agreed. He'd go have a look at James' truck, at what he had. He called out, "Trish!" and a frail woman in a loose housedress and askew glasses appeared from somewhere. Maybe from behind a tall stack of stuff. James hadn't noticed her. Calvin told her to watch the stand a minute, while he was gone. The woman didn't even nod in acknowledgement, and James led Charles toward his truck.

Grace was so shy that she'd cry when I took her out of the house to go to the grocery store or somewhere.

Calvin noticed the statue on the roof of the truck and offered James thirty dollars for it.

James declined. "It's kind of a collector's piece," he explained.

"If you say so," Calvin.

“See these?” James leaned over the tailgate and pulled out a hand auger. “Think there’s another one in here somewhere too.”

“Yep.” Calvin went up to the truck, rummaged around, and pulled out the model schooner. “This I could probably get rid of. How much?”

“That? Well see that’s the thing: I’m not really looking to sell it in parts. More trying to do a bulk thing.”

“What? Like all of it?”

They both turned to the sound of a small, untuned engine and watched two children (a girl hugging a boy from behind to hold on) pass slow on a moped.

“Yeah,” James continued. “Yeah. All of it—but at a discount.”

“I’d have to go through it—” he adjusted his glasses— “but it looks like there’s a few good things in here and then, well, you know. . . Then there’s some stuff I don’t think I can sell.” He held up a rake missing most of its tines.

James tried to negotiate but Calvin wasn’t interested. James offered it all for five-hundred but Calvin was interested. James was nervous and insistent. Calvin was polite but uninterested.

“But look,” Calvin said firmly, “I appreciate you bringing it by,” then he turned around, headed back toward his booth.

James leaned against the tailgate of his truck and said, “Whatever,” when Calvin was out of earshot. Then he foraged for a cigarette, smoked. It tasted hard, gave him a headache. He’d had too many today. He’d finish it anyway. Calvin hadn’t even taken the time to see what he could’ve had. He could’ve had inventory for an entire month, for five-hundred dollars, for nothing. His loss. He’d lost, not James. James had Wayne.

In high school, I met an overweight girl at a punk show. She invited me to her place, which turned out to be an uninsulated shed behind a house, and we started making out. I'd never kissed anyone. I went down on her, then I left and never saw her again. Someone told me she was a heroin addict.

Wayne's stand was only a hundred yards away. He'd be interested. Even though there was that incident with those vintage kitchen appliances. A blender. A mixer. A toaster. A crock pot. A couple other things. James had found them and had showed them to Wayne and had assured him that they worked, that he'd tested them himself. Which wasn't exactly true. And Wayne gave James a good price for them. Eighty bucks. Wayne stocked them and sold them. And then the buyers returned, one by one, to complain, to claim that their hot plate wouldn't get hot or that their toaster didn't toast and to demand a refund. Wayne had a no returns policy but he bent because these were expensive items and he felt wrong about taking forty dollars for a blender that didn't blend. He had James' number, so he called him. But James didn't answer. So he left a message. James didn't call back, so Wayne left another message. Then another. Then another. Each one was increasingly curt and coarse. By then end, all he said was, *Fuck you.*

But that was last spring or something. Awhile ago. A long time ago. And this was business. And this would be an act of reparation. A gesture, a favor. An offering. Wayne would be grateful for the opportunity at all this stuff. He'd have forgotten, if not forgiven, by now. After all, it was only over eighty bucks. What was that compared to this? James turned to look at all of the everything confused in the bed. All of that.

When James arrived at Wayne's booth, Wayne was facing the other way. James stood for a second and listened to a schematic, tinkling version of "Jingle Bells." When the melody arrived where the lyric is "away," Wayne turned around and James saw that he was holding a little mallet

and a child's xylophone. Each of the instrument's bars was a different color, and only one was missing.

"Well shit," said Wayne in a way that combined mockery and threat with sly bemusement.

"How's it going?"

"Stop by to sell me some broken shit?" He managed to play a note in a threatening way.

"Look, man, I'm sorry about that. But—"

"James. Come on. I don't want to hear it. I don't really give a fuck about that. Whatever. It doesn't matter. But the thing is, I'm not gonna buy whatever it is you're gonna try to sell me so you may as well just save it." He turned around and played the NBC jingle.

"I know. I mean, I hear you. It's just that—"

"James. Go away. I'm telling you. I don't want you in my booth. That's it."

He turned back around, put the xylophone down, started rummaging through a box of something.

"Wayne. Hey Wayne." Wayne didn't respond, but James had to go on, couldn't go now. Not now, with nothing. "It's just, I've got a whole bunch of great stuff and I'm only here because I want to make it up to you. You know, for what happened. Which was an accident. But, you know, that doesn't really matter now." Wayne was arranging toy cars on a table. "It's just, I came across this huge—*huge*—haul of stuff. Good stuff. Really nice pieces. A lot of vintage. Books. Um, tools. Some really nice tools. All kinds of stuff. Got it all in my truck and I came out here so you could see it. You're the first person I'm taking it to. And I'm telling you, you don't want to miss out on it." Wayne was putting D batteries in a remote-controlled car controller. "I'm doing you a favor. Trying to. I swear if you just check it out— I can bring my truck around. I parked on



the other side, but I could bring it around and you could just have a quick look and if you don't like it I promise I'll never bug you again." Wayne was holding the car in one hand and the controller in the other and testing them, letting the wheels spin in the air. "Please, man. Please. I promise—"

A woman brushed past him, interrupted him, said, "Excuse me," went to a table, and began to feel around like she was fumbling for a light switch in a dark room. She browsed a table littered with analog clock radios, each one stopped at a different time, as though keeping a record of various past and future moments, souvenirs of all the 11:27.09s and 4:51.48s (to take two examples) that had ever happened or would. She picked up a pumpkin orange one and turned it around it in her hands. Her face was all warped and worn down except for a top row of immaculate, artificial teeth that stood out like a red convertible in a wreckage yard.

Wayne turned to her, to acknowledge her. "That's a nice one."

"Hey Wayne." James shifted in his slouch, pushed his fists into his pockets like he wanted to break through them, was defeated by silence, by indifference, by an obese flea market salesman selling second-hand toys and scratched souvenirs. "Wayne, I just . . ."

Thunder tumbled forward from somewhere toward them. James looked at all the times on all the clocks, searched for one that worked, that ticked, that told the truth. All of them were paused. He was defeated. "All right," he conceded. "Whatever," he said, retreating.

My grandfather owned a linoleum store in New York City. According to my mom, a few episodes of *Candid Camera* were filmed there. This was in the fifties. Actors were hired to pretend to be employees and play tricks on potential customers.

Rain began to type a memo about the weather on the corrugated roof as James loped beneath it, past empty and occupied table, past a conversion van that was backed up with its

double rear doors opened to show a sewing machine swung out on some kind of arm and a sign at the roof that read “Reginald’s Mobile Clothes Repair” in a thick cursive script. A kid pushed his obese parent in a wheelchair up the middle of the flea-market shelter and James moved out of their way. James hurried. A woman pushed a stroller. A teenage girl punched cell phone buttons. A man offered sunglasses for sale from a backpack that he held open so James could see the range of colors and styles he had. A sullen white woman wearing a translucent, green visor held a copy of *Field of Dreams*. A man told his son not to run. And James was like a horse in a boat adrift on a sea: capable of so much movement, but confined to allowing himself to be carried wherever he was taken. Lightning shocked the sky. It rained and James watched it. Then he remembered his stuff, considered that it was getting soaked and ruined, and jogged off.

When he arrived at the end of the market, he saw a group of four people assembled before his truck. He approached, despite the gathering storm. He found a father holding the hand of his five-or-so-year-old daughter, an elderly woman with a plastic bag wrapped around her perm, and a black man wearing the desert camouflage of a contemporary Army uniform. He found that they were looking up at the statue tied to the roof of his truck. He tried to see what they saw in it. He found that rain rolled down its cheeks. That she cried.

“What is it, Daddy?” the little girl asked.

“Mary,” the man answered. “Jesus’ mom.”

The sergeant said, “The Virgin Mary,” to the kid, to clarify.

The lady nodded, her head like some strange produce contained in the bag. “The Mother of God,” she said, to glorify.

“No, it’s just a statue,” said James, to demystify.

“In that case,” said the dad, “I’ll give you fifty bucks for it.”

“Yeah?” James said. He saw that this was the thing that would salvage him, somehow.

“No thanks. I think I’m gonna hang onto it.”

Then it started to rain harder, with a new density. It started to storm, and everyone fled and James was left soaked and alone with Her, who he needed for the usual reason one requires someone: because he believed she would bring him to something better. He wished she’d lead him home.

I’ve written Grace hundreds of letters. I end all of them, *See you soon*.

James wanted to take a hot shower and eat. He wanted whatever was for dinner. He was drenched and desperate. He was James and he couldn’t sell his stuff and last night he’d hit a man and today he had nowhere to go. He should go talk to the proprietors of other booths, try to make a sale. But everything was wet and no one would want to come out to the truck to appraise the stuff while lightning slashed down on them, so James sat parked in the flea-market parking lot, staring at the empty screen of the windshield, and watched a rerun of last night. He saw a figure appear and disappear. He saw a man prone on the ground and fidgety streetlight fracturing everything. He saw this but he couldn’t locate himself anywhere in all of it.

He was wet and cold and he cut on the car so he could turn on the heat. He idled awhile. He needed new clothes, a towel, somewhere where he could kill some time. He could call Charles. He turned on his phone and saw four missed calls, two new voicemails, five new texts. All of them were from Charles. He couldn’t call Charles. He turned the phone off again. He couldn’t sit here forever. He could go out to #1 Highway or Pops, try again. He could but he couldn’t. Not in this weather. He needed to go somewhere dry. He could go to a movie. But that would cost what? \$8.75 or something? He was supposed to be making money today, not spending it. He could call Stephenson but it wasn’t even 3:00 yet—it was 2:24—and he’d still be

at work, wouldn't even answer. He could go to McDonalds or whatever and buy a coffee or whatever and sit there awhile, until the rain abated. But it might not and then he'd have spent his entire afternoon in a McDonalds.

What could he do? He had an entire wardrobe in the bed, but all of it was even wetter than what he wore. He had an entire wardrobe at home, all of it laundered and folded, and he could drive past his house and see if anyone was home and sneak inside if they weren't. He could take what was his, take a short shower, forage in the fridge, flee. He could. Even if his mom were home, he might stop, might explain just that. That he was there to pick up a few things, even though he couldn't pick up everything or even very much because his truck.

"OK," James said to himself, deciding that's what he'd do and turning on the wipers, which plowed glimpses of visibility into the glass. After last night and with this rain, James drove the speed limit to his house on Southwood.

I remember that house: it was gray and seemed soggy almost, slumped, as though it was made of too-wet papier mâché. Made and then left to sit in the sun for a day. It was two-stories tall, with identical single-story addendums on either side. The portico was a couple of concrete steps and a wooden, unvarnished bench that James made in shop class in eighth grade. Along the front of the house, there was a line of hedges that had been neglected and become bushy bushes. The grass was so dry and dead that it looked sharp. Rolled-up newspapers littered the lawn. The curtains were all drawn. The lightning rod looked like a paper clip somebody fumbled with during a boring lecture. His mom's haggard Buick was marked with a couple of generic religious bumper stickers—*John 3:16, Jesus Saves*—and was buried in a thick coat of brown pine nettles. His house was a block away from where I grew up. It was an artifact of neglect in a neighborhood, Shandon, defined by diligence. By automatic sprinklers and new shingles and big

back porches with water features and ceiling fans. By wrought-iron fencing and backyards with a swingset and a dog.

James pulled up and got out and went up to the door and tried the knob. It was locked. He looked down: it was a different knob. It was gold. Gleaming. New. He didn't even try his key. She'd done what she'd said she'd do: locked James out of the house where he lived.

He rang the door bell. He didn't wait long enough for anyone to answer and then he rang it again. He rang rang rang it. No one came. No one was home. James sat on the bench he'd built. It rained. It was still raining and he couldn't sit outside in the rain. Maybe she hadn't changed the backdoor yet. Probably but maybe not.

He went around the house, into the unfenced backyard, where there was one of those prefabricated sheds and some more blanched grass and a pile of sand that was leftover from when James was supposed to make for his mom a poured-concrete patio but never did. A wheelbarrow filled with rain was out there awaiting the same aborted task. The orange back door was the only burst of color on the entire exterior. It had a new knob too.

But he couldn't stand out in the rain and he'd locked himself out enough times that he knew a way in through the family room window. He'd always referred to this method as *breaking into his house*. The irony occurred to him. He pressed his hands against the window glass and pushed up to open the window and pushed hard to press the screen out of its tracks. Then he crawled through, into the family room.

He arrived on the carpeted floor before the television his mom so often watched like it might tell her something new. He was wet in the dark hollow of that empty house.

"Hello?" he asked.

The lights were all off, but he'd memorized the locations of the switches and he found one and he found himself inside something that was suddenly warm and and bright initiatory, a room like an incubator, except with a turned-off television and a floral couch with a faux-Indian blanket folded up on the end and self-help books scattered around and a fireplace that James had never seen used and a mantle crowded with photos from his childhood and seashells that his father had once collected. He was home and also an interloper. He felt like he was intruding on himself.

I thought a lot about just showing up and knocking on the door and being polite. I thought about Grace running to the door, about lifting her into my arms, holding her, the smell of baby shampoo.

“Hello?” James asked again, before going up the soft stairs and entering his room. He closed the door and felt contained. James needed clothes that were dry and creased and smelled of dryer sheets. Need is a new feeling for someone who has always relied on reliance. What he needed was available here. He could allow himself a kind of comfort that the world wouldn't offer. He stripped down to nothing and lay on his bed, which was made. His mother had made it. She always had. The green comforter was comfortable and the weather was insisting on sleep but James reminded himself to remain awake. Deep clouds had smothered the light out of the afternoon, darkening the room enough that the star stickers on the ceiling shone. They seemed to perforate the ceiling, making James like a frog in a box with air holes forked into the top. He'd crowded the stickers up there when he was a boy but most had fallen off and now there were only a dozen or so and they were arranged like constellations, suggesting without describing shapes. James, laying there, could see a gun and, somehow, a Queen of Spades and maybe a top hat. He wished they could be made to conform to some private astrology but this sky told him

nothing. He'd always liked planetariums for the way they contained the world, condensed it. That concision led to simplification, which allowed for comprehension, not that he'd ever achieved it. He hadn't even even figured out the question. He knew couldn't sleep here.

He scooted back and up against the headboard. He looked down and saw his dick, felt deflated and got up to dress. His old clothes were heaped on the floor like stranded sea life, a jellyfish or something. He went to his bureau, a remainder from boyhood, each drawer painted a different primary color, and found new socks and blue boxers and shorts that had been khakis and a black t-shirt that was thin and loose and comfortable. He held all of it his hands and decided not to put any of it on but to shower first.

I used to know this guy Henry who made his own dynamite and took pictures of stuff blowing up. But they all looked the same: like something exploding.

James showered. He flossed. He brushed his teeth. He brushed his tongue, spit, rinsed. He dressed. How much do you need to know? Here's what I'm getting at: he'd broken into the house he'd been banished from. He'd been there for fifteen minutes and he stuck his head out of the bathroom and listened to the still silence. It was still silent. "Hello?" It wasn't much of a question. He didn't get a response. He wasn't wearing shoes. His only dry pair was in his room. His only dry pairs were soccer cleats and loafers and some bright red high-top Converse that he'd bought to appear knowingly alternative (rather than inadvertently eccentric) a few years before but never worn because he was embarrassed that they would make him seem willfully whimsical. He guessed he'd have to wear them. He wore them and looked down at himself and felt dumb and undone, like a clown on his day off. The shoes, he said, were what acclimated him to his status as interloper, as an intruder who couldn't be allowed to belong. He was disguised, he could see. He had to be. To be here, where he shouldn't be. He said that he felt like a burglar. He

was disguised, was a thief. Which is why, he explained, he did what he did. Why he went into his mother's room and stole.

He said that he knocked on the door to be sure. He said he pushed the door open and discovered a darkness deep enough that it was cool. But he didn't need light to know where to look and, besides, he was calmed by the idea that he couldn't be seen, even if he was discovered. Not that he was nervous. He wasn't. He was just opening the jewelry box on his mom's dresser and taking a handful of stuff, of her stuff. He was putting it in his pocket and leaving the room. But he tripped on a laundry basket and fell forward, landed loud. The whole house seemed to rattle and jangle and James was sprawled on the floor. "Fuck," he said. Then it was silent again. He got up and hurried downstairs.

Out of habit, he went for the front door but stopped when he arrived there: he wouldn't be able to lock it back behind him and so would leave evidence of his presence. But maybe he should, since clues always meant a crime and a crime meant a criminal and he was an impossible suspect. He was her son. He considered the television, too. And the stereo. And how he could ransack this house, which wasn't his house any longer, but he didn't want to overdo it. Didn't want to do it. Didn't want to take more than he needed. He needed whatever was in his pocket: some necklaces and bracelets and broaches, enough gold and other precious metals to get him through to tomorrow, when he'd be able to sell the salvage he already had. So he left out the front door, left evidence of intrusion.

My dad lived in Brazil for a few years, when he was a kid. He went to a British boarding school that was run by a husband and wife. Every night, he told me, the students were lined up before their showers. The male headmaster inspected the fingernails of the girls. His wife inspected the fingernails of the boys.



By locking him out, James' mom had forced him to take, since he could no longer borrow and he still had such need. He needed money, so he could eat and sleep and afford gas. You can't even sleep without money. His plan was to pawn the jewelry and then buy it back when he'd sold the salvage and had some cash left over.

He drove down Rosewood, toward the stadium, to Liquid Assets, which was in a strip mall with Peking Palace, a Chinese restaurant that advertised XXXtra spicy chicken wings, and Joni's, a wig shop, and Grime Busters, a laundromat. He parked and went in.

Bells dangled from the door and they ding-dinged behind him. Guitars hung by their necks, like executed criminals. A drum set glittered on a riser. There were several five-disc CD changers and a shiny red scooter and a flat-screen TV and a couple of bowling balls and a golf bag with the club heads sticking out, swaddled in plush covers. James went up to the long row of glasses cases, in which cameras and engagement rings and cellphones were displayed and behind which were guns locked to the wall and an employee sitting on a stool, chewing his thumbnail intently. He was enormous but a thin frame was detectable within what had become of him. He'd become fat, but it looked like it all might slough off as soon as he stood up. He said, "How can I help you?"

"Hey," James said. "I'm looking to pawn some of my wife's jewelry."

"Your wife's?" Jake, as his name tag labeled him, looked incredulous, and started to chew on his thumb again.

"Yep." James took everything out of his pocket and dropped it on the glass. It was jumbled together and James started to separate it. "We're having some tough times."

Jake wiped his mouth, dropped his hand, and said, "Where's your ring?"

"Huh?" James looked at his left hand. "Already had to pawn it," he said. "Unfortunately."

“Yeah?” Jake hitched his black pants up by the belt and said, “Well we don’t buy nothing that’s stolen. Not getting mixed up in that.”

James looked at him, tried to look confused and offended. “Look,” he said, “this is my wife’s jewelry, whether you like it or not.”

“All right,” the employee said. “I’m just telling you the policy. That’s all. We work close with the police department. That’s all. I’m just telling you.”

“Yeah? Well that’s fine.” He finished untangling the jewelry. “This is my wife’s stuff.”

Between them, there was a gaudy bracelet made of bright oversized beads that middle-aged women find at craft fairs and assemble and sell to their friends to supplement their income as a public-health professional or whatever; there was a pin made of a hammered-metal triangle with a few dull jewels dangling from it; there was a thin, unadorned, silver necklace; there were several undistinguished rings; there were a couple of buttons that didn’t belong; there was a penny from James’ pocket; and there was a thin, gold necklace with a large, elaborate crucifix depending from it. Christ was pined there. You could even make out the thorns of his crown and the overlap of his punctured feet. It was, if James wasn’t mistaken, a gift she’d been given on the occasion of being Born Again a few years before she’d met his father.

“Wanna give me a second to look through these?” Jake said. “Figure out what I can offer.”

“Sure,” James said, even though he was only really borrowing these things. He was going to get them back and return them tomorrow. Even so, he couldn’t quite suppress his reservations about taking them today. He went around the store and fondled the items, ran his fingers over them without really feeling them, without noticing quite what they were.

When things were getting especially bad with Allison, I started going out to bars by myself. One night, I met a woman who claimed that when she was younger she'd been in some improv troupe in L.A. with Lisa Kudrow, the woman who played Phoebe on *Friends*. She told me she was doing stand-up now and she had a show in a couple of weeks, in a hotel lobby. I went, to be nice. It turned out to be open mic night. She told a few jokes, didn't get many laughs, got off the stage, and was so humiliated that she pretended like she didn't remember me.

James was distracted. He was trying to compute the value of what he was selling. He needed to know what would constitute an acceptable offer, so he could know whether to accept or to haggle or to take his stuff elsewhere. He'd never dealt in jewelry before. It isn't exactly the kind of thing people throw away. He didn't even know how to guess, but he guessed he'd maybe get a hundred bucks or so. He picked up a vase that was shaped like a fish flying up out of the water.

"Sir" he heard from behind him and turned to Jake, who was soliciting him over to the counter with raised eyebrows and a slight smile.

"What's up?" James said when he arrived.

"Well, I'd buy this," he said, holding the crucifix with pinched fingers, dangling it above the rest, which was spread out on the glass. "Give you fifty bucks for it."

"What about the other stuff?"

"Not really what we're looking for. It's fine but not really valuable exactly."

James considered haggling, arguing, getting indignant, but he was exhausted with selling and negotiating. With trying. And fifty bucks was enough for what he needed. He had thirty-seven dollars and all he really needed was dinner and a tank of gas and a cup of coffee in the morning. He could probably talk the guy up ten dollars, but then that would just be ten more

dollars that he'd owe tomorrow. He better be prudent and take what he was getting, keep everything easy. "Whatever," he said. "I'm gonna buy it back in the morning anyway."

"All right," Jake said and put the necklace on a shelf behind him.

James grabbed the rest. Jake gave him two twenties, two fives, and a clipboard with a pen on a chain and a few documents to sign. Within a few minutes, James was fifty dollars richer. Then the bells on the door ding-dinged behind him again and he was returned to the rain. He took refuge in his truck.

Now what? Now it was late afternoon and raining. It was Friday. He had to go somewhere. He'd go out to his half acre of land, his scrap of earth, of Earth, of a planet not far from the sun—he'd go there and unburden himself of all the salvage in the bed. He went there, where he could belong by himself.

There were stoplights, a bright Bi-Lo sign, and a fast-food drive thru. But the rain slowed while James drove. The further he went, the thinner it got. When he arrived at his junkyard gate, the weather was only a drizzle but his wipers were still on high, furiously beating back and forth, like they were trying to break and escape. James unlocked the gate, drove in, locked it back. Then he took everything out of the bed of the truck and climbed into it. He was tired. He watched the sky shift until he fell asleep. He slept for a few hours, until, say, 8:30. Until 8:47. Specificity implies accuracy.

I'm six-one and weigh 154 pounds.

James awoke in the dark country quiet, disoriented, lost about his location like when you wake up in a new bedroom, in a beach house or something. He sat up on his elbows, saw the mountain of salvage, and laid back down, aware of where he was. Here he was, exhausted in the back of his truck. Even sleep tired him out and he was baffled about leaving his dreams. The

night air felt laundered by the day's rain. It was lighter, light enough to move, to allow a little breeze through. James lay there, remained where he was, let it feel good while he could, before the world compelled him on elsewhere, like he knew it would. The thought alone was enough to interrupt him. He sat up. He couldn't just lay here. Shit. He sat up, leaned back against the back of the cab, discovered a cigarette.

He could stay here but he couldn't just stay here, compelled to sleep outside like he was homeless. He had to find somewhere where he wouldn't be lonely but where he could be alone, where he wouldn't see anyone he knew, anyone who'd ask him to explain. He smoked his cigarette and guessed he'd go to Art's, because he went there at least once a week without ever telling anyone and because he found something kin to commiseration in the general desperation of the population and because the drinks were relatively affordable, considering it was a strip club, and because it would be easier than dealing with Charles or his mom and because how else was he going to see a naked woman tonight?

## TWENTY FOUR

My lawyer's advice always boils down to advocating indifference.

A few days ago, in a motel room, I was flipping through the channels and stopped on T.B.N., the Christian station. An interview show was on and the guest was an elderly man who called himself Arthur Blessitt. He said he'd walked through every country on Earth with a huge crucifix on his back. During a recent trip to Central America, he'd bought a parrot and taught it to proclaim the word of God in Spanish. He'd planned to release it in South America. He got as far as Nicaragua but there the bird died, apparently poisoned by a companion's mosquito spray.

I heard that and I thought of my pet birds in their cage, dead but rescued. When, I wondered, is it too late to be saved? James and Fritz and me—we didn't quite make it in time. Luckily, Grace is so young.

Ladya would steadily drink Moldovan vodka that was as strong as propane and then pass out early, on the couch, watching TV. When I was finally tired, I'd carry her to bed. Then I'd undress and get in beside her. She was always still wearing the slippers under the covers and I'd

hold her to help myself fall asleep. I'd dream of my daughter. When I'd wake up, Ladya would be lying beside our bed, on the floor, snoring softly. I never knew how she escaped.

I've always liked Andrew Wyeth paintings best when they aren't finished. They're as accurate as photographs but they do what a camera can't: leave things out.

## TWENTY FIVE

Fritz's fingers were jointed loosely, like a marionette's.

Fritz awoke hungover in Mister's car on Friday morning. His neck stiff from sleeping upright, his mouth cumbersome due to dehydration, his left leg numb, his right leg stiff, the creases of his clothes and skin filmy with sweat, he shuffled up in his seat and found the keys still in the ignition. He fingered the rabbit foot, hoped for good luck, and started the sedan that wasn't his.

He didn't know where to go. But he was pulling into traffic, so he had to go somewhere. He needed some direction, some directions, but all he had was a destination: the truck with the Virgin Mary on top, even though he already had the car he needed. He was driving it. He'd find Dave next but he'd first find them, the men who stole his stuff, not because he necessarily needed the stuff now but because it was his and because he wanted the schooner back and because recovering and selling a few of the more valuable things would help get his search going again.

The story I want to tell is about Grace, about how she slept beside me, about how she was my daughter and her hair smelled like baby shampoo, about how my ex-wife came home one



morning and found me holding my daughter and yanked me off of her and slapped at me and called me a fucking creep and picked up my daughter and carried into her bedroom and cried to the police, who came over and arrested me. I want to tell that story but my lawyer advised me against it. He said, *Try to think about something else for a while.*

Fritz turned right and drove. He looked for any kind of sign. He saw none. He was accustomed to this kind of search, one with an aim but no means of aiming. It was reassuring to set out and seek. But he didn't know Columbia that well. But the thieves would be conspicuous with their statue. Unless they'd removed it, in which case his one clue would become false and he'd just be driving blindly around town, looking for a truck that was red and had metal bars scaffolding the sides of the bed and was stuffed with his stuff. Or had been. Who knew if they'd already removed it. Sold it.

That was it: they'd probably take his stuff to a flea market or a pawn shop to sell it. What else would they do with it? Maybe they'd already done it. Either way, it limited the scope of his search, gave him some aim. All he had to do was drive around to those kinds of places and ask about the guys with the Virgin Mary on their truck. Someone would've seen them by now, would've noticed that statue. Maybe this was all a good thing after all: maybe it was the impetus he needed to really rid himself of all that was weighing him down. He was searching again. He hadn't eaten in awhile. He was really hungry.

He didn't know where the flea markets were. He'd been to one of them once. He'd walked downtown and then taken a city bus on which he was the only passenger save for an obese black lady with an oxygen tank by her feet and a mask suffocating her face, but he couldn't really remember the route, though he sort of had a sense of where it was. He'd gone

through West Columbia and kept going. It was out that way. Southwest or something. He wasn't sure. Without a car, he hadn't learned Columbia.

He passed a Bi-Lo and continued on into Five Points. He kept an eye out for the truck and drove up the hill to the Carolina campus. He got turned around kept driving, turned right on Gervais, passed a carwash, turned left on Harden. He saw a dog tied to a shopping cart pushed by a man in a motorized wheelchair. He passed Allan and Benedict, two black colleges across the street from one another. He saw kids smoking cigarettes in sweatpants on the porches of rental properties. He passed a housing project and the new municipal natatorium. He went under a railroad trestle, turned right, bore left when he could, and took Two Notch Road past all the enormous and forlorn car dealerships. He turned left. He turned right. He was going the wrong way. He passed a boarded up KFC and a lot empty except for a swing set erected amidst the high grass and weeds. He crossed over an Interstate and passed a house with a horse grazing in the front yard. He had no idea where he was. He made what he thought were two lefts that would turn him around. He saw a trailer without a roof and with a kid holding a football on the front steps. He passed a school bus with the lettering erased by a slightly different shade of yellow paint. He stopped to let a loose pit bull pass. He kept going.

My lawyer was appointed by McLean County. I think his name is Jeffrey or Richard or something. He looks like a minor league third-base coach: basic and a little overweight.

Then Fritz stopped because the street did, at a dead end that was curved like a cul de sac, though there weren't any houses. He was in a gated low-income community that was never completed. A wall of kudzu was built on a scaffolding of pine trees. He was lost, but he had been lost so long that he felt he was where he belonged: he was comfortable here where his inability to go elsewhere was explicit. He let the car idle for a while and watched the road go back from

wherever he'd come in the rearview mirror and saw it go nowhere through the windshield. He did nothing but sit for a few minutes, thinking of building a new encampment there, in these deeper woods, with denser privacy, a kind that couldn't be penetrated. He thought about how he could build a tree house and hide it behind a curtain of kudzu. He was thinking of this new future when a teenage girl wearing a Braves hat pushed a BMX bike out of the woods and stood before his car, Mister's car. She stood before him, crossed her eyes at him, and laughed not like a kid but menacingly, like it meant a threat he would not understand until it was realized. It was only then that he made a hurried four-point turn and drove away as lost as he'd arrived, still looking out his window and seeing everything but what he wanted to find: the Virgin Mary.

Like that until he found his way again and worked his way downtown and then through to the other side, to Huger, and onto the Interstate. When he'd accelerated up to sixty-five and crossed the Congaree, the car lurched and wheezed like it was dying of thirst, which it was. Fritz could press the pedal to the floor, but the car didn't respond, only slowed forward on its diminishing momentum while Fritz guided it onto the shoulder, where the car shuddered and rumbled and died ignobly. The orange Empty pump in the corner of the instrument panel wasn't lit. In fact, the gauge indicated the tank was full. But Fritz knew it lied. The indicator was broken. The car was out of gas. He gripped the steering wheel with his hands and scolded it: "Fuck you, you fucking piece of shit. Fuck."

Then he sat there a second and calmed himself from breaking a window and a hand. Then he tried the ignition again, turned the key, and heard only a halfhearted lunge of electricity, heard nothing from the engine. Even so, he tried again and again and again, harder and harder, as the effort of the car only dwindled. He did this until he realized that the key might break off, thereby

rendering the entire machine unsalvageable, whereas now he only needed a few bucks for enough gas to get going again.

He needed a few bucks but he had only this dead car and whatever was in it. There were fast-food wrappers and containers and cups and bags and an atlas and an empty box of tissues and a pine-tree air freshener dangling from the rearview mirror. But maybe he could find something more. Something. Anything.

When I worked at the shelter, I'd go out on my break and bum cigarettes to bums. They had to tell me something about themselves to get one. This one lady told me she used to have the world's largest collection of pennies. She was in the *Guinness Book*. If only she'd sold her collection, she wouldn't have been there, at the shelter. But she couldn't bear to do it, couldn't part with it all. So there she was. She was missing both of her front teeth and who knew where her collection had gone?

When Fritz saw in the side-view mirror that no oncoming car would rip the door off when he opened it, he got out. The hood was so hot that he felt like he was being branded when he sat down on it, so he stood back up, kicked up a ghost of dust, and hoped the sun would be an incubator, would hatch some solution for him, since he could come up with nothing on his own. The sun only sapped him. He'd have to find his own way out of this. He went to the trunk. When he opened it, he found that it was completely empty, that there wasn't so much as crumb in the entire thing. It even smelled clean, like it had recently been vacuumed, except that it was cleaner than that, clean like it had never been used, like it had never even been opened, like Mister had never known it was there.

Fritz slammed it shut, rummaged through the backseat, found the garbage he'd expected, and discovered, buried beneath it, a penny and another penny and a dime and a quarter and a

nickel and another dime and three more nickels and two state quarters and six more pennies. He burrowed his hand under the front seats and ran his fingers through the creases of the upholstery and came up with thirty-six more cents. He counted it. He had \$1.59. Not enough for gas but more than nothing. He went into the passenger-side door and found nothing but a dirty floor mat on the floor, some maps of southeastern states in the door pocket. He opened the glove box, took everything out, put it all on the seat, and sifted through. There was a thick owner's manual, a year-old parking ticket, years of insurance cards, some other stuff, and, oddly, a free-admission pass to Riverbanks Zoo. Odd, because it, the zoo, was maybe a quarter mile away. It was up the next exit, as the green sign not far ahead of where Fritz broke down indicated in white, reflective lettering. Fritz decided that the zoo was where he'd go, since he had to go somewhere and had nowhere else to go.

He discovered a few more pennies mixed in with the butts in the ashtray, rolled up all of the windows, ensured he had the keys in his pocket, locked the car, and left it. Fritz ascended alongside the exit ramp and found himself walking against the traffic of a busy four-lane road. There was no sidewalk and he had to cross the interstate overpass, so he pressed himself to the low concrete wall and tall chain link fencing that prevented cars and suicides from spilling over the side. He crossed over. It wasn't far now. The road curved and declined and ended in the zoo parking lot, which was about half occupied, predominantly with school buses.

What if I'm sixty when I get out of here? What will I do then? It would be like being born at a very old age.

Fritz found his way to the entrance, tore a pass from the booklet, gave it to a woman in a booth, entered through a turnstile, and was confronted by the thick, dull stench of shit and sweat that he would've expected if he'd remembered the last time he'd been to a zoo, at least a decade

ago, probably in Atlanta, with Dave, who would've wanted to leave as soon as he saw the penguins, which he always claimed were the only animals he liked. But Fritz didn't remember and the smell only announced the callous containment of the place. Fritz tried to imagine the smell of a jungle or a forest or a tundra. He couldn't, of course, but he knew this wasn't right. He was glum. He was an elderly man alone at a zoo and his car—a car that wasn't even his—was broken down on the side of the highway and what was he doing here and what was he supposed to do? Fritz really couldn't explain, except that the free-admission pass had seemed maybe like a kind of sign and that he was desperate for clues and that he figured he'd figure it out, because he had to.

He walked around and noticed the true despair of ensnarement in the languorous shade shifting of the animals, in the clipped flight patterns of the caged birds, in the kids squirming for shaved ice in their strollers, in the parents lamenting concession prices, in the grandparents exhausted from a lifetime of looking, in the zookeepers carrying the stale-dirty smell of sterilized animals home to their families, in the custodians sweeping cigarette butts into their long-handled dustpans. Why didn't the flamingos just fly away? It would be nice to sit down, but it was Saturday and the afternoon and too hot to bake in the sun on a bench, so Fritz found his way to a plastic booth at the back of the Giraffeteria, an overpriced restaurant that was louder with children than the Richard "Sparky" Blocker Indoor Simian Habitat had been with apes. Fritz longingly watched a family eat an order of "Hippo Tails" (i.e. mozzarella sticks) until he was distracted by a couple of elementary school-age brothers bashing each other with inflatable souvenir boa constrictors.

Then an elderly woman in a Giraffeteria uniform shuffled past and emptied a stack of trash- and food-strewn trays into a garbage can. Watching the waste of all those unfinished

hamburgers and baskets of fries, Fritz considered how he could sneak his arm unnoticed into the trash and search out at least a meal. Maybe two. Enough to get full, easily. But the room was full with families and employees, and surveillance cameras peered down from the corners. But Fritz hadn't eaten all day and his hangover wasn't going anywhere with nothing to soak up the alcohol and, speaking of which, he could go for a drink, which might be an even quicker cure for the sharply sludgy hum of hurt that was concentrated at the base of his brain but that seeped through him like a stain. Fuck he was hungry. And thirsty. And he had that dollar and whatever in change rattling around in his pocket like a disassembled tambourine but it wasn't enough to buy anything and he really should just get up and get what no one else wanted anyway, even if it was embarrassing, but he couldn't bear to publicize his ruin, which he'd been so careful to keep hidden behind the false walls of the woods. He was in the world now and in the world he was the Southeast's preeminent balloon twister, not some homeless man scavenging for scraps before children and husband and wives. He scavenged in secret. In public, he performed. Or did. Or should. He should. He should twist balloons, sell them, make gas money and more. Of course.

I once tried to read a book that explained string theory to non-specialists. It claimed that there were nine dimensions. There was a diagram that didn't clarify anything.

Fritz went into the gift shop, which was separated from the Giraffateria by a thin wall, and found a twenty pack of commercial party balloons with a leopard-print pattern, which wasn't ideal. What would be ideal was a bag of multi-colored 260s, which are the long, thin type that professionals use. But those weren't available and these only cost ninety-nine cents, which Fritz could afford. And by investing that money, he could multiply it, because a zoo, he realized, was an ideal place to sell his inventions: there was a captive audience not only of kids but of kids looking at animals. They'd be clambering for souvenirs of their visit. For tigers and elephants

and monkeys, all of which Fritz could create, even if his versions would have to be scaled down and simplified because of the thick, bulbous balloons he'd be forced to work with.

So Fritz bought them and found a spot on a bench, in the sun, and worked for a while on a lion. He was out of practice and the plastic was thick and slick, so he struggled to manipulate that orb of air into something fierce, something with a torso and legs and ears and a snout capable of a snarl. He popped a balloon or two in the process but finally figured it out and put the creature on his knee and called out an appeal for one-dollar zoo animals.

“Balloon animals,” he hollered. “One dollar.”

People avoided him, until a girl—she was eight or so—approached, bashfully appealing for a sample. Fritz showed her the lion.

She laughed, shook her head, and said, “I want a hippo.”

Her dad said, “One dollar?”

Fritz agreed and got to work. Rotund and uncomplicated, a hippo should've been easy—and once it would've been. But now it was difficult, like a riddle. With his lungs and his hands, he had to turn this limp sleeve of plastic into something both bulbous and brutish. But how? Like this, he told himself, figuring he'd figure it out.

Richard or Jeffrey or whoever said, *Just keep your mouth shut and make it easier on yourself. At least until we figure something out.*

OK. Fritz blew up the balloon. It swelled out like doubt until it was full but not yet on the verge of bursting. He stopped his breath and tied it tight. The knot left something like a navel beneath it, an orb above it. Fritz considered it, how he could manipulate it. There was a crush of doubt. But there was a girl there—dark disheveled bob, bright brown eyes, loose dress, green sneakers—and she awaited, reservedly and expectantly, the impossible. Fritz loved this attitude



from children, this casual bafflement about everything—about, say, the tiger she saw earlier or about her father’s face or about the dreams that shaped themselves while she slept or about this balloon, which would become an animal before her, for her.

Fritz took the tip of the balloon and twisted, shaped a head. It squeaked. The skill was somewhere in the fingers. The knuckles, more exactly. Wherever a pitcher finds his pitches. Because it wasn’t a 260, one of the professional ones, and he was worried it would pop under the pressure, he’d left a little room in the balloon, left out a little air, which did prevent it from exploding but which, on the other hand, made it so the hippo’s future head hung down, like it was disappointed. But what could Fritz do? He took the tip and spun a snout, then ears, then went back to the torso. He made legs and a nubby tail that didn’t stick up but drooped down like a bad dog’s. He gripped it by its back and the whole thing sagged, so that the hippo was limp, as though it had been poached. Fritz gave it to the girl. She took it, considered it, said, “Is it dead?”

“No,” Fritz said. “No. Just tired.”

She hung her head, in imitation. Her father gave Fritz a dollar and a look of resignation. Then dad and daughter walked off, holding hands, leaving Fritz on the bench with his lion, which he saw now was slack and imprecise. More like a cheshire cat than anything, if it looked like anything at all. At least he’d made his money back. A few more sales—he’d aim for fifteen—and he’d have enough to quit. Until then, he’d have to resign himself to substandard work, to a merely mercenary art. He didn’t like doing this. He told me it made him feel like a fraud. He told me he was light-headed from hunger and worried he’d pass out after he blew up the next balloon. Fritz petted the lion on his lap and said, “Balloon animals, a dollar,” to an approaching boy, but the boy was too old—ten or so—and seemed embarrassed even to be

offered. The boy ignored Fritz and hurried away, in the direction of the Rainforest Room, a humid structure that housed mostly South American lizards.

Fritz didn't tell me about every animal he sold, but he told me that he sat there all afternoon and that a gaggle of girls stopped and bought five and that a boy wanted a sword and that a toddler just wanted a blown-up balloon and that it went pretty well and that he'd made twelve dollars by the time it started to rain. He told me that the money arrived as a relief but that the possibility of productivity—of making more—came as a thrill. He told me he could see it all already. He'd buy gas and dinner and maybe a beer. He had an occupation, an income. He had balloons, and he could buy a pack of 260s. He could seek his son. He could twist and sell his creations when he needed cash. He'd become Fritz the Balloonatic again. He'd find Dave. And then he'd find work, a steady gig at some water park out West, in a place so new that it hasn't even begun yet.

I guess I thought we'd make it to some remote, undiscoverable place and disguise ourselves in the local population.

His pockets were soft with dollar bills and party balloons and his heart was alight with hope, even if he hadn't showered in weeks and hadn't eaten anything more than mixed nuts in several days and hadn't seen his son in years and hadn't spoken to his wife in almost as long and didn't have a home and had a stolen car that was out of gas. By time we spoke at the shelter, he saw the folly in this. But then, on that Friday, he didn't. He thought only that he needed gas and that he'd get it. His needs were available now. And that was all he'd ever been after.

All? It was everything.

He crossed the zoo parking lot, then the interstate, and found his way to a gas station, where he bought a gas can for \$3.42 and filled it a third of the way with \$4.56 in gas. It rained.

He got wet. He returned to the car and emptied what he had into the tank. Now the car started. Now what?

He was hungry. He was thirsty. He had a little more than four dollars and a dozen or so balloons left. He guessed he'd go to a Taco Bell and buy a burrito and enjoy it in the dining room. He did. He said it was pretty good. He said he had a cup of water with it.

I'm trying to tell you what happened without getting bogged down in a kind of accounting, in the trivia of action. It's raining right now.

Fritz was down to something like \$2.09 and it was around 7:00 p.m. And he owed himself a beer.

You see where this is going: the sun was down on the other side of the Earth and Fritz was leaned against the wall of a liquor store. He was lit hesitantly in the outdoor fluorescence and his second 40 was waiting on the ground beside his foot and he was saying "Balloon animals, one dollar" to the patrons as they passed him to buy the booze he was after. Fritz remained there for another couple hours and sold only one animal—a kitten to a middle-age woman who looked like she'd just ended a long shift in a toll booth—before he gave up and wandered off for some better location, a place with more children. It was almost eleven at night. This was his life.

He walked down Rosewood Drive. He passed within a half-mile of the duplex where I was living, because he mentioned passing the Family Dollar and KFC that were just up the street. He found the Ci-Ci's Pizza beside Target. It was open until midnight and there was a lethargic traffic of teens and forlorn families and they were more receptive to Fritz's offer. He made six dollars and made his way back to the liquor store. He could always make more money in the

morning. He drank a six-pack of Colt-45 tall boys and walked into the night like he was searching for something he'd lost. He wasn't. It was only by accident that he stumbled upon it.

## TWENTY SIX

There are so many people alive on Earth.

I know it's dumb, but that's what baffles me awake every morning: the amount. How much there is. Considering only myself at just one moment—and all the everything that that takes. Then extrapolate to everyone. The world must be about to burst. Just the lamps alone. The vitamin bottles. Or the pillows. The rooms. The daughters. The ex-boyfriends.

That's what I want to do: document one shard of all of that. One convoluted scrap of that. Fritz and James. Two people, barely intersecting. And the amount that entails. A couple of marginal men involved in garbage picking. Trying to glean something. How little comes from so much, from all that involvement. Of course I can't do it. There's too much to include. The time James took out a payday loan and drove all the way to Miami just to see it. The time Fritz watched a movie theater burn down in Savannah. The color of their eyes. Any mention at all of Fritz's four siblings. James' mother's miscarriage of a girl who would've been James' younger sister. Mister's recent homosexual experience. The name of Karla's ex-husband. That Karla ever had a husband. Ladya's last name. The photo of a dalmatian that Ladya kept in her wallet and

never explained to me. The cake at Grace's first birthday party. That Grace's left leg was a little shorter than her right one, so she sort of listed to the side when she walked. That turning on the ceiling fan helped her sleep. That we slept with the ceiling fan on high for an entire winter. That Ladya was ungrateful for everything.

When I brought home dinner from the Egg Roll Station, Ladya took one bite and said, "Taste like garbage," and put her plastic fork down on the place mat I'd set out and refused to take another bite. When I said I'd be glad to make her something else, she didn't answer. When she shuffled out in her slippers to the living room for her nightly viewing of *The Little Mermaid*, I sat near her but not beside her on the couch, aware that I shouldn't press intimacy on her. When the crab was doing some percussive number on the ocean floor, she waited until the scene ended, then stopped the movie, got up, and said, "I go walk." When she left, I laced her Moldovan vodka with lemonade and drank until I couldn't see. When she finally returned six hours later, around one a.m., I could smell and tell that she'd done more or less the same.

I asked her where she'd been.

She said, "Ernie."

She meant Ernie's, the bar next door to the La Quinta Inn near Fort Jackson. It's the place where soldiers go to get laid. We argued. I told her not to go there ever again. She told me not to tell her what to do. I told her that she shouldn't be so cruel, so ungrateful to someone who spent his savings saving her, bringing her over here, someone who was willing to love and marry her, to take care of her.

I couldn't distinguish her laughter from her sobbing. She buried her face in her hands and convulsed and I went to bed.

## TWENTY SEVEN

I'm not worth remembering.

Art's Performing Center is a strip club in a strip mall not far from the football stadium. It's small for a strip club, and it seems to draw mostly the same core of resigned regulars. Ten or so men who linger in their stools like birds on a telephone wire, except none of them are about to take off for anywhere. So more like decoys. Inert. I've been a few times.

Back when Art's was called Dr. Feelgood's, they had bands play there. The stage is the same. It's nothing special. It's just a rectangle recessed in the back wall and painted blacklight black, with strings of white Christmas lights running along the perimeter and a broken disco ball hanging just off center from the ceiling. It doesn't spin anymore, so it sends out lines of colored light that stripe the strippers when they dance. The drinks are pretty cheap, for a strip club, but the dancers are disarmingly insistent about tipping. They'll come and confront you and you sort of have to be an asshole. Which is hard, since you're really just haggling over how many singles some woman's pride is worth. Which is sad. James went once in awhile and always alone. He felt shy about it.

I don't think desire is something you can deny someone.

That Friday night, James drank a beer, faced the stage. He'd been there for an hour already when a redhead the DJ introduced as Tina removed a cowboy hat, a slip, a lace bra, and red panties to the beat of a Big 'N Rich song. Then she gathered her things and left the stage and the DJ implored everyone to welcome to the stage Betsy, which seemed to James a strange name for a stripper. Then a Roy Orbison song came out of nowhere. It swooned over the strip-club sound system. It was "Crying," and James wondered what it could mean. It meant Betsy.

Betsy wore a black, sequined slip that was something like a ball gown, except halter-topped, with a high hemline. He noted the simplicity of her smile and her full cheeks and pleading eyes and shell-shaped ears and lithe neck and freckle-dappled shoulders and loosely curled hair that bobbed like some slow-mo shampoo commercial—and he saw that she was pretty. He saw too that she was young, that she was, at the oldest, twenty-one.

According to James, there was something burlesque about her. By which I think he meant that she kept herself somehow distinct from the, um, debasement of her circumstance, that she sort of lingered within the song, that she wasn't willing to allow herself to everyone. But it was her job to do so. But she was reluctant about it. A coyly coquettish expression overcame her and she began to trace her fingers along the inside of her thigh as she licked her lips, bit them. She closed her eyes. Someone hooted. Someone slid a five-dollar bill onstage. The song swelled around her. She was inside it. She wasn't here.

I've never met anyone who didn't wish they were elsewhere.

James watched a stripper and his lust transmogrified into love. She was beautiful. Maybe his attraction was that simple. It wasn't. Betsy didn't belong there. She was able to will her own absence and this compelled James' desire, since it didn't require him and he couldn't offer her



anything. He wanted to be considered superfluous. It was easier. She'd need nothing from him. Which was good, because he had nothing to give.

He told me that she spun slow on the pole, that more money was offered. She removed her underwear, revealed that it was white cotton, let it fall to the dirty floor. She still wore her slip. James had seven dollars in his pocket. He took two of them and tried to make eye contact when he left them for her, but she had turned around to bend way over and reveal her closely-shorn pubic hair. James returned to his stool. She tugged her tight dress down over her taut breasts, her thin waist, until it fell and she could step out of it like it was the shallow end and she'd just finished her laps. She did this for a gaggle of men so alienated from women as to believe a nude woman dancing suggestively fifteen feet away was a suitable substitute for intimacy. She did this for James, he somehow believed.

The song faded out and she stood before everyone wearing only a pair of semi-translucent platform high heels. She seemed embarrassed, as though she'd been caught unaware doing something wrong. She found her slip and slipped it back on, and James thought to himself: *I bet Betsy's barely even an alias. I bet she's really named Betty.*

Then she graced her way down from the stage and began working her way down the dashed line of customers hedged up to the bar, to solicit tips with all the dignity of a beggar asking for alms. James said it broke his heart to see her in need, to see the tall black man who was the first stop on her pilgrimage enthusiastically responded to her mercenary flirtations with a kiss on her hand. His mock chivalry mocked her, which was the last thing this girl, this Betsy or Betty, deserved. And now the man seemed to offer to buy her a drink. And she accepted, remained with him, feigned flattery. Southern rap slurred over the speakers for a new dancer, and James wished he had more than five dollars to give her. He had an ATM card that he could

overdraft to buy drinks, but this was the last of his cash. Betsy was five people away from him. He'd have a long time to wait, at this rate. He needed a drink, something more distinguished than a bottle of Miller Lite. He ordered a scotch on the rocks. What kind? Whatever. He put it on his tab, took a long sip.

I was twenty-five five years ago and I had surgery to remove a benign tumor on my arm and I was prescribed a lot of hydrocortisone and I was bored so I went out and went to the Art Institute. This was in Chicago. Before Grace. Just after Allison. I fell asleep on a bench in the Impressionist section, my mind tangled in a gauze-swaddled haze, and I awoke to find Christ being taunted on his way to the crucifixion. I awoke from my derelict dreams to find Manet's so explicitly fulfilled. It was strange.

Betsy rubbed the back of black man and took her drink down to the next patron, whispered something in his ear. James tried not to imagine what she said, tried not to stare, tried to play to casual and watch the new performer, who was named Ronda or Wanda or something like that. But James was distracted: he noticed that Betsy's hand was on the thigh of an Asian guy her father's age, a guy who wore off-kilter wire-frame glasses, who kept pens in the pocket of his white, short-sleeved collared shirt. James watched as he—this corpulent accountant, this middle-aged lecher who masturbated to underage porn in his messy apartment—put his hand on the small of her back, as he moved it fake accidentally to the top of her ass, as she sort of shuddered with what James could only hope was false interest, as she leaned again to speak into his ear. For an instant, James thought of alerting someone to this blatant rule breaking, to this *touching of the dancer*: he even gestured his dismay to the nearest bouncer, who of course didn't respond, who remained oblivious, with his arm crossed, and then turned to check an ID. James wanted this Chinese guy to be pushed out into the street with his arm twisted behind his back,

but he saw instead that Betty or Betsy or whoever this pretty young woman actually was, was leading him by the hand toward a black curtain, behind which was a private room wherein she would give him a lap dance, which he imagined would involve her naked and curled up on his lap like a kitten while this guy he was certain was a pervert stroked and petted her. And James thought—he actually thought, *She better not purr*.

That's a quote.

It was such a strange thing to think, such an odd sentence to say to yourself, such an unlikely imperative, such a bizarre image, that he sort of snorted to himself, coughed out a kind of half laugh at his proprietary jealousy about this stripper, this stranger, this girl. He couldn't imagine how she'd ended up here. As for him (who also was here), he was just stoned. Oh yeah. Now he remembered: *I'm high*. That was explanation and excuse enough for him, for now: he drank scotch and watched some other woman do some other dance to some other song.

James drank and bought a nine-dollar pack of cigarettes and smoked and tried to get turned on by a middle-aged woman revealing her soft body to a Smashmouth song. He failed and ordered another drink. Then, finally, the Asian man emerged from the curtain and stumbled back toward his stool dabbing his forehead with a crimson handkerchief, a histrionic gesture of exaggerated fatigue that felt to James like a taunt, a feeling that was compounded when Betsy followed him out a few seconds later adjusting the tube top of her slip. Then though, when she was about fifteen feet away from him, after she had adjusted her cleavage and straightened the high hem of her dress, after dancing nude on the lap of some Asian man she couldn't possibly care about, she looked up: she looked up and looked into the eyes of James, who had been staring at her, who was watching her meticulously, who was appraising the slight curve of her calves, the slim shape of her hips, the rippled ridges of her shoulders, the taut lines of her long

neck, the way she held her plump bottom lip in her top teeth to concentrate, the way she released that soft lip, the way she curled it up coyly, the way she smiled at James. She smiled at James. Then she turned away from him, in front of the stage, toward wherever the dancers went to relax privately. She turned and walked past him, a few feet away from him.

When she had passed him, she left behind a cool little breeze, a breeze that smelled sweet, that smelled to James like baby powder and bubble gum. Like baby powder and bubble gum and peppermint and Dove soap. Like a meticulous mother carrying her radiant daughter. She smelled to James like love, just as she looked to him like lust.

I guess the idea is, I'll pay for what I've done. Time being all we're allowed.

Then James bought a shot of 100-proof bourbon, slugged back the liquor, felt a dry back burble of vomit claw up his esophagus, and chugged the bile back down into his stomach with a tall glass of water. Then a guy in painter's overalls argued with a woman who was apparently his wife and who left the club crying. Then a dancer called Penny went down the line of men putting their faces in her chest and jiggling her tits to solicit extra tips. Then James wondered whether his mom worried about his whereabouts. Then he thought that he should really call Charles and try to apologize for jilting him. Then he started to worry about the Virgin Mary and whether she were all right alone in the parking lot. Then the Asian guy huddled over the small light of his cellphone to compose a text message. Then a man bought a round of Jager bombs for the six men around him, after the first few bass beats of certain rap song gaveled Art's to further disorder, to hooting and hollering and whistling.

Then, finally, nearly two hours later, Patsy Cline swelled from the speakers and Betsy slinked back onstage to "Crazy." She smiled at the rowdy remaining patrons, though it seemed to

James that she lingered on him with a particularly complicit look, perhaps with a wink, though he assured himself it was just a blink, so as to not get his hopes up.

Still dressed, she teased her audience: she affected a demure innocence by tilting her head and batting her eyes, then fondled her breasts, bit her bottom lip, climbed the pole like a kitten, gripped the top with only her legs, hung there, slid down upside-down, crawled across the stage floor, bit her bottom lip, looked up, smiled suspiciously at the audience, looked at James, and then she definitely winked. She winked at him. He could've sworn she did. He swore she did.

And then someone hooted and someone else hollered and someone else whistled and James watched as Betsy started to shrug her way out of her slip, slowly. She tugged it down a single centimeter at a time to reveal that she wasn't wearing the customary bikini-style top underneath, that she wasn't wearing anything at all underneath. She did it like she was doing it for James, but everyone must've believed she performed only for him: a new chorus of high-pitched appreciation and a confetti of tips came. And this elicited from Betsy further and evermore tantalizing tugging and wiggling that led to her revealing the bright bling of her belly button ring, which James hadn't noticed and which she must've just added. It was probably a clip-on. Her slip now was around her hips, and then with one final push down with her thumbs, it melted into a little pool at her feet, leaving Betsy again entirely nude save her shoes, revealing that underneath her slip Betsy hadn't been wearing anything. Nothing. Not a thing.

All I remember about being Grace's age is that the monkey bars sectioned the sky and that the preschool sand followed me everywhere, in my shoes, and that the metal slide was too hot to touch and that the teachers ate sandwiches on benches and that GI Joes were proxies in the war between me and this sullen kid named Ben White.

Betsy knelt down before the crowd, pouted her lip, let her knees spread out slowly toward a split, crawled forward, crawled left, crawled toward the back of the stage, stopped, shook her ass, looked back at everyone, winked, again let her legs slide apart—and James could no longer look. Not because he didn't want to watch her—he did; he desperately did—but because he heard someone call out to her, “Fuck yeah, you little slut,” and he looked over and saw that it was the Asian man and that his hand was inside his pants, that his pleated pants were unbuttoned to allow room for his wrist, that his hand was moving in there, that there was an old man further down who either had an unflattering bulge in his pants or a boner, that there was a group of guys even further down giving one another high fives and that one of them was humping toward the stage, at Betsy, who James could only presume was still on all fours and revealing more than she should. He couldn't watch. He heard someone else called out, “You bad little girl.”

So he turned away from Betsy, to the bar, to his beer, and elicited a familiar pity for her, a sadness about his idea of what she should be, and decided he needed to do something. He needed to save her.

He went to the front of the stage, where dollars were strewn, and tried not to look up at her but couldn't help it, couldn't stop himself from seeing that she was laying back on her back, with her legs spread up in the air. He was desperate. He called out her name: “Betsy. Hey Betsy. Come here.” She didn't respond, so Lane took a five and put it on the stage as bait. Kept his hand on it. Looked at his hand. Waited until he smelled baby powder and bad perfume.

This was when he saw that she was crawling toward him on all fours, smiling like she was here to offer him whatever he was after. This was when he noticed that one of her teeth was dead, that one her cuspids was gray. And he could see the cracks in her lips, despite the thick application of cherry lipstick. And he could smell her breath—and the cigarettes and soda that

corrupted it. And he could see the bone of her collarbone and the freckles on her breasts and the dry acne scars near her hairline and the way her heavy earrings stretched her earlobes, elongating the holes that held her faux pearls.

“Thanks,” she said, reaching out for the money, hovering her hand over his.

“You’re amazing.” He couldn’t look at her, so he look down at her hands, at the veins that ran like county roads through the landscape of her hands. “I think—I think you’re beautiful.”

She laughed.

“You don’t need this.” He looked at her. He looked up at her, at her round face, at her soft features and strict jaw line, at the perfect part in her blonde-highlighted (but not bleached) hair, at the slow spring of her curls, at the tortoise-shell barrette that held it back behind her left ear, and he felt a kind of affection that he could only call love. She was the kind of woman you want to find—will find—looking good in a gray sweater on a winter Sunday morning, the kind of girl who will become the kind of gracious and grateful woman who will make your small life comfortable. “You shouldn’t be here. You don’t need to be. You’re, you know—you’re beautiful.”

“Thank you,” she said with a honeysuckle voice, a sweet accent that suggested wealth or the Lowcountry or both, and then she turned away, to crawl away—but before she could, James snatched at her hand. Took it.

“Please,” he said. “Please, let’s leave.” He begged and she pulled away, put her hands up, stood up, snapped completely out of character, out of her act, and said, “Don’t fucking touch me.”

“I’m sorry but please. I might could save you.”

This was when a bouncer gripped James hard by both of his arms and yanked him away and James felt a burst of vomit lurch up into the back of his mouth, swallowed it back into his belly, felt himself forced out of there.

And the world through James' eyes—eyes unmoored on a rough sea of six beers and three double scotches and four shots of four kinds of liquor and three bowls worth of weed—was as shaky, grainy, and unfocused as a home super-eight movie: it flickered between frames, wobbled and stuttered, panned too fast in search of a subject, drooped down to the ground, spent most of its time looking for something to see. For Betsy. But there was only darkness and light and a Hispanic guy and the Asian guy and other men and all of them laughing at him. And then there was the door he was pushed through and the bouncer saying, “You little bitch.”

And then James discovered himself in the silence of outside, stumbling down the sidewalk, drunk and defeated, toward the strip-club parking lot, where his truck was. Where he discovered a guy who looked like he would chaperone a youth group to a Christian rock concert and a girl who looked like one of the chaperoned youth group members. They looked at James like they'd been awaiting him, expecting him, and like he was a few minutes late.

James didn't remember this part well, but I'd seen the same pair of missionaries in the Art's parking lot once or twice, proselytizing, handing out pamphlets. They're polite. I heard about an old guy, a regular, who was Born Again after an encounter, but I was never been moved, even though I always accept the small copy of the New Testament they invariably offer. I had a row of them with variously colored covers lined up on my bookshelf at home.

The guy greeted James: “Hello,” he said. The guy was clean-cut like hygiene was a religious matter and he was a saint: his white collared shirt was ironed and tucked into his creased khakis; his teeth were as immaculate as display dentures when he smiled widely; his hair



was parted and combed over like he was preempting a bald spot. “We're taking a survey on spirituality. Can we ask you some questions?”

James just said, “What?” and the girl said, “Great.”

She was petite and pert, and she looked eager to instruct others about ease, as though it was a mere matter of learning a few facts that she already knew and wanted to share.

The guy took an official-looking form from a leather shoulder bag, clipped it to a clipboard, and said, “So. First question. What do you think happens when you die?”

“What the fuck is this?” James wanted to know. James was here, outside Art’s, and he was drunk and Betty was inside and this stranger was asking him this strange question and he had nowhere to go and he couldn’t get anywhere and he couldn’t reconcile all of this with any kind of sensible response and he looked over at his truck, saw the statue tied to the roof the cab, realized that the Mother of God was turned away from him. He turned back to his interrogator, away from the statue. “What are you asking?” Then he went toward his truck.

“Sir,” the girl called out to him when he’d almost arrived.

James stopped and looked back at her. He saw her: she looked concerned. Which was all James really wanted. In the streetlight behind her, a black man rode by on a girl’s bike, the streamer’s blowing back from the ends of his handlebars, and James waited for her to say something more.

“Sir,” she said. “I know it’s not really my business, but I don’t think you should drive.”

“I know,” James said, though he’d been planning to. “I know. I’m not going to.”

“OK,” the girl said. “I just—”

James turned, walked a few more feet, and opened the tailgate of this truck. Then he sat on it. The guy remained near the sidewalk, with his clipboard. The girl approached, holding a

few small books in her hand, but stopped, cautious, about ten feet away, and said, “Is that your statue?”

“She’s supposed to protect me.” He laughed. “Guess not.”

“It’s very beautiful.” The girl stepped one closer. “Do you mind,” she asked, holding out an orange copy of the New Testament, “if I leave this with you?”

“What’s your name?”

“Emily.”

“Emily. Emily, I just tried to do the right thing.”

She approached, gave him the little book, and stepped back like she’d just fed an animal at a petting zoo.

“So,” James said, “this is what’s gonna save me?”

“If you want it to.”

I was a kid—six, maybe—and visiting a great aunt or something in Missouri and we were staying in her house and I had to sleep upstairs, in a converted attic space, and there was a nun dying on the other side, in a hospital bed, with an oxygen tank keeping her alive and I wondered, Will they really allow someone so grim into heaven? She’s a nun, I decided, so they have to. But I doubted, in that case, that I wanted to go.

James lay back in the bed of the truck intending to see stars, though he immediately realized that such a search entailed a focus of which he was incapable: all he could see was a swirl of white light and black night. He felt sick. He sat up and said, “I’m fine.”

“OK,” said the girl. “But do you need anything?”

“No,” James said. He looked back at the back of the Virgin Mary, who was still there, who was simplified into just a shape by the dark, which was a relief, as a shape is just a shadow

and a shadow is just a ghost and a ghost does not exist, and he couldn't stand the idea that she was still there, aware of him. "I'm just gonna rest here until I'm all right."

Then he closed his eyes and set off into the dark behind his eyelids like a ship leaving harbor on a stormy night sea. When it started going down in a swirl of black, James let it sink. He sunk into sleep.

Though he didn't remember it, the girl must've brought James a blanket after he passed out, because when he awoke, he was trapped beneath a wool green one.

## TWENTY EIGHT

I guess I was wrong about everything.

I came home from work one night around nine and Ladya wasn't home but there was a Post-It on the counter that said, *By by*. I figured she'd gone to Ernie's, so I went down there, to find her.

I didn't find her because she wasn't there. No one was. No one but me and the bartender, an elderly man wearing a P.O.W./M.I.A. cap and playing Dr. Mario on a gray Game Boy with the volume turned up. He was drinking what looked like a tall glass of ice water but turned out to be a tall glass of vodka that he refilled six times in the three hours I sat there. He didn't even say hello but he'd promptly pause his game and pour me a Jack-and-Coke when I asked for one, when I passed the time as calmly as I could while I waited for my mail-order fiancé to show up. I sat there until, sometime after midnight, the bartender lost a game and finally spoke: "Well, I'm fucking closing up," he said, "if no one's gonna come in." Then I left and he followed me out, locking the door behind me.

I wasn't that drunk and I was driving down Rosewood when I saw her. She was sitting on a bus-stop bench near Midlands Tech, smoking. It was way too late for any bus to be running. I pulled over and burst out of the passenger door. She saw me and ran off—scurried off down the sidewalk. I caught up to her easily and grabbed her arm, hard. Her hair was short and uneven and there was a chip clip pinching her bangs to the side. She was wearing jean shorts and a tank top I'd bought for her. She was wearing the slippers. They were dirty: the sea where Ariel lived was polluted and Ladya looked like a prostitute who'd just woken up.

I asked her where she was going.

“Nothing,” she said.

I asked her where she'd been.

She didn't answer, but she looked at me like she might laugh.

I gripped her bicep, crushed the scaffolding of sinew inside her, led her to the car, pushed her into the backseat, and went through all of the stoplights and stop signs without stopping. I didn't want to give her an opportunity to escape.

When we pulled in front of the duplex and made eye contact in the rearview mirror, she said, “Your daughter lucky she don't have see you.”

Her broken English was like hearing her smash everything. Like listening to her wreck everything with her malicious ignorance.

But I didn't drag her out of the car or yell at her or remind her of all that I'd done for her: I stayed calm, got out of the car, went inside, and locked the front door behind me. Then I went to bed. To be alone.

When I was undressing, I looked out the window and saw her curled up in the backyard dirt like a dog. Like a fucking dog.

## TWENTY NINE

I'd rather confess other people's errors.

Fritz was feeling good, loose like a marionette, and he still had one unopened beer to go, to help him pass out wherever he decided to sleep. He was a long way from his living room and the backseat of the car would be cramped, especially for a man accustomed to occupying all the room of the woods. Maybe he'd find a well-manicured little-league outfield or an open garage behind an abandoned-seeming home or a long enough bench in a neighborhood park.

He couldn't remember ever being in this part of town before. He passed a Gold's Gym and a Hardees. He walked under a railroad trestle and crossed some tracks. It must've been past midnight. Sometimes, a semi would wheeze past or a car's oncoming headlights would compel him to turn around, only so he could be blinded by the brightness. He passed a Chinese restaurant advertising twenty-five cent wings. He walked past a strip club and said hello to a dancer robed in a purple bathrobe, talking on a cellphone and smoking a cigarette.

Fritz didn't know where he was going or what he was aiming for until he'd passed Art's and looked to his left and saw the Virgin Mary elevated at the back of a parking lot.

Hovering above it. Standing on top of a truck. Facing away from him. Facing the wall of the club. Illuminated by the hesitant orange light of a streetlight.

Fritz stopped, stared: it had to be her.

This was the truck that took all his stuff. Except now the bed was empty, except for some low hillock of something, covered by some sort of tarp. He thought of the schooner, wondered if it could be under there, protected, perhaps with a few other valuables. Maybe he could recover something after all. He walked through the parking lot. There was only one other vehicle there, a rundown Hyundai sedan with a peeling Hand Middle School bumper sticker affixed to the back windshield.

When he arrived at the truck, he found that the tarp was a blanket and that it was tucked under the chin of a young, sleeping man and that guy's body must be beneath it. He found James, though of course he didn't know his name. Though the strange thing was, he looked so much like Dave. Not like Dave, exactly, but like Dave in disguise. Dave without his beard, with unfamiliar clothes, with a buzz cut. Dave after two years on the run, incognito. But with the same slack mouth of sleep that revealed teeth disorganized and stained exactly like those of his son, who never wore his retainer and was a bad brusher. He had the same wide, rounded nose, inherited from his mother, and the same soft jawline, which encouraged a double chin. He had the pronounced cheekbones that made his brown eyes seem recessed and the extra-long eyelashes that all women—and dental hygienists, in particular—had always ogled over. He even had the staple-length scar stitched down from his hairline, onto his hard forehead, and the same awkwardly small ears that he'd always hidden behind long, unruly hair. Though now he'd shorn it all off. Which changed the aspect of everything. Made him almost unrecognizable. Almost. But not quite.

Fritz was Dave's dad and he saw his son.

When he told me this a few weeks after that night, Fritz acknowledged the role of his will in allowing this delusion—he used that word—to take hold. That said, like I said, I've seen photos of Dave and I know James and, the truth is, they do look uncannily alike. And they were—would've been, if Dave had been alive—almost exactly the same age. So I could see someone confusing the two. But it wasn't as though they were identical. They weren't doppelgängers. They were two thirtyish men with similar facial features and Fritz was a man finding what he needed to find. Which doesn't seem so unusual to me. Consider Christian television. And most marriages. And that every parent believes their child is a genius of something. So I wouldn't necessarily describe Fritz as being mentally ill. Not that I have any diagnostic training at all—or any kind of training, really—but I did work in a homeless shelter for nearly two years, so I've spent a considerable amount of time around men and women with medical-grade delusions. And Fritz seemed to me categorically different than the guys who mumble their lives away to the devil or the ladies who warm themselves by wetting themselves.

Fritz had been drinking that night and he'd been seeking his son for two years and all of his belongings had been stolen and now he'd found the Virgin Mary in a strip club parking lot and he'd found the truck that yesterday had been used to steal everything he owned and he'd found in the bed a boy who looked just like Dave and this couldn't be incidental. It must amount to something, to this: to the end of his search for his son. Not that he'd thought it all through and considered, much less reconciled, all of the glaring inconsistencies. He was too overwhelmed by the improbability to notice the implausibility.

“Dave,” Fritz whispered, attempting to ease his son out of sleep. “Hey Dave.”

James didn't respond.



“Dave. Hey Dave.” He didn’t want to have to shake him. But he’d have to, he guessed. He had to. So he did. He put his hand on his son’s shoulder, felt his bones, his structure, and shook gently. “Dave,” he said.

James sort of said, “Huh,” as he turned over onto his side, but he didn’t wake up, as he was sunk deep in drunk sleep.

So Fritz shook harder, spoke louder. And James awoke. James turned up to find the shadowed face of an elderly stranger mooning over him, a face without origin, an incomprehensible image.

“Dave,” Fritz said. He recognized his son’s confusion, sought to correct it. “Dave, it’s me. Your dad.” He saw that this wasn’t clarifying anything, but wasn’t sure how to explain, so he just said, “Dad.”

James was still drunk and completely disoriented and this man was claiming to be his dad, who was dead. Who wasn’t this gaunt, gray-haired man. This ghost. This ghost who called himself his dad. Unless maybe this was how he’d aged after death. And this was a dream. No, a nightmare. James wasn’t even aware of where he was. And who was Dave?

James told me he couldn’t explain, couldn’t really remember. He said he was scared, that he flinched away from this figure, who frightened him into fumbling for some kind of sense that wasn’t available. This confusion came like a threat and James scrambled to escape. He said he tried to push himself up and get away—but found that he couldn’t move. That he was trapped. Captured in what felt like a net but what was, he realized, a blanket, which this old man had pinned down to the bottom of the bed with his hands. James said that he struggled to extricate himself, that he squirmed and wriggled and resisted, that his captor wouldn’t relent, only strengthened his hold and repeated that he was his dad, insisted that James was his son.

Fritz didn't mention this. Fritz said that James lay there confused but calm while Fritz tried to explain. He said that he'd begun to doubt himself already—that he started to see in James' animation and expression the possibility of a difference between this kid and his son—but that James didn't protest, didn't disagree, and that, therefore, he'd persisted. Fritz told me that he only tried to explain and that he asked James if he was Dave and that he told him that he'd been exhaustively searching for him, that he'd never doubted he was alive, that he was his father, that he loved him, that he didn't want anything from him, that he only wanted to know he was OK, that he would leave him alone if he wanted him to, that he understood his urge to flee, that it wasn't his intention to return him home, that he only wanted to know that he was alive.

But the boy, Fritz said, just lay there unresponsive—as though stunned by being caught—in the bed of that pickup truck, with the statue of the Virgin Mary tied down above them.

This was when James yelled, “Somebody help!” and a woman wearing a bathrobe and smoking a cigarette came around the corner.

This was Betsy. “What the fuck?” she said in a stern voice.

Whether or not Fritz had been holding James down, whether or not he let James go—whatever had happened before—Fritz stood up suddenly and James sat up suddenly: it was like they were spring-loaded and her voice had released them.

“Sorry,” Fritz said.

“Shit,” James said.

“It's nothing,” Fritz said.

“This guy just attacked me,” James said. “I was just here and this guy comes up out of nowhere—”

“No,” Fritz said. “No.” Crushed by the panic of his predicament, shocked back into sobriety, Fritz heard the whine of this guy’s voice and knew that he wasn’t Dave. His apparent error asserted itself: this wasn’t the son he’d been searching for; this was the thief he was after. He saw it all of a sudden for himself. “No, no. That isn’t it. *He* stole from *me*. He took everything I had.” He was yelling at a stripper, trying to explain. “He’s a thief. He came out to where I live and he took everything I own. I was just— I didn’t attack him. I just want my stuff back.”

“What the fuck is happening?” Betsy looked exhausted. “Whatever. I don’t want to know. I’m calling the fucking cops.”

Fritz turned back just in time to see James—who glimpsed the size and shape of everything and saw that it was an anvil and that it would crush him—burst up from the bed of the truck and run off through the parking lot, past the bathrobed stripper and into the street, into the night. Fritz was too stunned to pursue him. Too old and baffled about everything to go after another young man fleeing him.

Circa 1989, Hurricane Hugo swept through the South Carolina night, tossing up trailers and toppling all the faulty steeples, providing a generation of meteorologists something to measure storms against. Nothing is ever as bad as the past.

“What the fuck is happening?” Betsy said.

“That guy.” Fritz tried to tell her. “He took everything I had. In his truck. This is his truck.” He looked back. “See the statue? That’s how I knew. I knew it. I swear. I didn’t do anything. I just wanted to get my stuff back. That’s all. He’s scared. He knows what he did. That’s why he ran.”

“What are you talking about? That guy—”

“He stole from me, I swear. He—”

“Whatever. I don’t know. I’m not dealing with this. I’m just fucking—” She flipped open her cellphone.

“Don’t,” Fritz said.

She dialed three digits. While she awaited an answer, listened to a ring, Fritz lumbered up into the bed, to free the Virgin Mary and take it, as a token, since he’d never recover what he was actually after. Since his thief had gone where they all go, into the dark, and Fritz could almost feel the ropes that held her, that came over her shoulders and around her neck, that were tied tight to the roof of the cab. He could almost feel them cinch her neck.

By now, the robed stripper was asking a dispatcher for assistance: “Hi. Yeah. . . . I need the police . . . . I don’t know. Assault or something. I’ll explain when they—. . . . Yeah. Art’s. On Rosewood. . . . You know where? . . . Right. . . . OK.”

Fritz was untangling the statue from the rope that tethered it to the roof of the truck. He was undoing knots, tugging. He was extricating her from the net James had fitted her for. Fritz was getting what he could get before the cops showed up. They were coming and he had to take her away. He alone could liberate her. They could escape together. They could escape. *We could escape*. The thought dropped like a trapdoor.

That’s what he told me.

“What’re you doing?” she asked Fritz while he worked. “They’re coming.”

Finally, the statue was free and Fritz picked her up. He lifted the statue from her pedestal and found that she was surprisingly light: as light as a balloon, almost. He held her the way he’d once held his sleeping son: hugged to his chest, faced over his shoulder, looking back with her absent eyes. Then he hopped down from the tailgate and fled.

Now Fritz was hustling up Rosewood Drive, carrying a statue of the Virgin Mary.

Now James was catching his breath in the dugout of an alternative middle school baseball field.

Now what?

## THIRTY

I have a confession.

You believe that you will love someone and then you see her curled up like a dog in your yard, gloating in grief that isn't hers. That's yours. That she's trying to take, claim, demonstrate to the neighbors next door, to the world. You notice someone's misfortune and you want to help them and so you buy them a \$1,200 plane ticket and you offer your love and they hate you and they take the one thing you've got: your grief. They go in the backyard, in public, and become the victim. Which they have no right to be.

So I went back downstairs and went out back, where she was curled up, and told her, "Get in here." I said, "This isn't Moldova: you can't do that."

She said, "Go way."

So I went to her and pulled her up and inside. I pulled her into the kitchen. The kitchen was as clean as one on TV but it smelled like all the chemical butter of all the microwave popcorn that Ladya ate. That was the only thing she ate. It was a smell that made me want to

brush my teeth, rinse my mouth with mouthwash. My fiancé and I were in the kitchen and I wished we could be clean and she was struggling to escape and I couldn't let anything else go.

Everything is always always leaving.

We were in the kitchen when she swung around out of nowhere and slapped me, hit me, scratched me. She scratched me hard and deep. Greedily. Like she was trying to rip me open, tear through me, like she was trying to get at what was inside.

I gripped her wrists and wrestled her through the living room and pinned her to the foyer floor. I had her pinned to the ground and blood was smeared along the walls, was streaked into the thick beige carpet, was splotted on her frustrated face—and I imagined the cops coming in, discovering us like this, discovering her held to the ground and me holding her down, seeing the blood spread everywhere, seeing the blood mixed with the mascara running down her face. I saw them arresting me. I saw the scratched plexiglass that separated me from the police in the front seat. Even though this was my blood. Even though it wasn't hers. Even though she was completely unharmed. Even though I never hurt her. Even though she was the one who scratched me with her pink-painted fingernails, who dug four long trenches of skin from my cheek. Even though I only touched her to calm her, to still her, to prevent her from attacking again.

I'd be handcuffed and I'd be in violation of my parole. I'd be arrested and I'd be sentenced to twenty years in the South Carolina prison system. My cellmate would be a morosely obese man who never spoke and spent his time scratching his scalp until blood trickled down the back of his neck. He'd pin me down and harm me. He'd harm me.

So I let her go and got off her and left.

I ran out to my car and I drove and I drove all the way to Normal, since my daughter was there and now I had nothing to lose. It all being already lost.

## THIRTY ONE

Life is a last chance.

Exhausted from his escape, from fleeing his possible pursuers, from running fast for what must've been more than a mile, James breathed hard on the dugout bench and again—for the second time in a few days—searched the empty night for an intrusion of police sirens. He didn't find them, so he hunched over, with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, and tried to steady himself, to regulate his breathing.

He calmed himself some but still felt awful. Fear had sobered him some but he'd drunk way too much and slept way too little and sprinted way too far and now his head hammered as hard as his heart. The world would wobble and spin and he might vomit if he lost his focus on his feet, which he stared at as intently as a mentalist attempting to move a safe across a room.

James remained there awhile, until he felt calmer about his body and more panicked about the police discovering him with a searchlight. Betsy had betrayed him and that delusional old man would accuse him of theft, of stealing everything he owned, and James would be



arrested and given a breathalyzer and returned to jail. He'd be in violation of his parole. He'd be charged with public drunkenness. With assault.

The police were probably in the Art's parking lot now, taking statements, spreading out for a search, slowly cruising through the neighborhood, lamps scanning for a man matching his description. White male. 25-35. Buzz cut. Jean shorts. Dark t-shirt. Red shoes. Wanted for assault and theft.

His truck was probably being impounded. His glove box searched for evidence. His pipe placed in a Ziploc bag. His water-bottle bong laughed at. His insurance card consulted for his name and address and phone number. His mother called to elicit information. His record viewed on an in-car computer. His name radioed to everyone on the nightshift. Everyone on the nightshift excited for something to do. Everyone on the nightshift trolling through Olympia, intent on finding him.

James told me that he cried at the thought of it all.

He laughed when he told me. I'm not sure why.

He laughed and told me that he was so scared of being caught that he removed his new bag of weed from his pocket, wiped his fingerprints from it with his t-shirt, and tucked it up under the bench, so it wouldn't be on him if he was arrested but so he could come back and try to retrieve it if he had a chance later, once everything was clear. For now, he knew he couldn't cower in a schoolyard, waiting like a coward to be caught. No matter how much he wanted to remain there and rest and maybe even sleep, he had to keep going and find somewhere safer. Somewhere secret.

He got up, crossed the infield, and exited through a chain-link gate. Where could he go? Well but first: where was he? He was in Olympia. Outside an alternative middle school he'd

never heard of. On the far side of Bluff Road. Not far from the football stadium. Which meant not far—if he went this way—from the river, where there was nothing but water and woods. Which could be good. He could hide out there for the night and decide what to do in the morning.

Grace will always think of me as what's missing.

James tried to run but could barely jog. He avoided a street that was well lit and found an alley instead. Dogs barked hard at him, followed him along a fence, rattling it as they leaped up at him. James hurried as best he could. He came to a corner and was startled by headlights but discovered they were just from a Checker Yellow Cab that was dropping an elderly woman off at a trailer. The driver retrieved her walker from the trunk and James cut through an empty but overgrown lot, got caught on weeds that tangled the land, forced his way through, and ended up at a barbwire fence that blocked further progress. He followed it out to an industrial street: long warehouses ran along both sides of the pavement. A semi-truck idled before the only lit building. Otherwise, it was entirely quiet, except for the buzz, like a bug in your ear, of occasional streetlights. James kept close to the buildings, trying to hide.

Then the buildings stopped but the road kept going, past what seemed like nothing on either side, and James continued. As he ran through the blank blackness of the night, he remembered that there was a sand quarry dug into the emptiness off to the right. Which meant he was close to the river. Then the road opened up and ended in a broad, unoccupied parking lot, which meant he was even closer. Maybe a hundred yards from the Congaree. Down that way, there was a boat launch and there was a trail that led from it along the bank, toward nowhere. In high school, he'd come here sometimes to smoke by himself and wade into the cold water but he hadn't really been back since. Not in a decade or more.

He slowed down and walked toward the water, which he could now hear. It sounded like radio static. It got louder as he approached. He arrived at the boat ramp and listened to the dark water tumbling over itself to get wherever it was going. James went left. The moon was half-full: bright enough for him to assume that this path of packed dirt was the trail but not bright enough for him to tell where it went. He fumbled his way forward. He went for a while, made it maybe half a mile, before he decided he'd just push his way into the brush and try to find space enough to sleep. It's amazing how his ambitions had shriveled. He ran his hand along the foliage on his left, feeling for a gap. He found space between two pine trees and entered the woods.

James was in the center of the night, in the tangled confusion of a semi-tropical forest, with trees and bushes and vines that tumbled and wove together as thickly as the river water on the far side of the trail. He had no light and no way to navigate his way to a decent spot, to a clearing. He couldn't even know where he was. So he sat down on the damp ground and lay back and felt the soggy earth seep through his shirt. It was cool. A relief. He tried not to think about anything. He thought about bugs and bums and cops. He thought about his mother. He said that he considered sending Charles some sort of text message but that when he opened his phone, he found it was dead.

He didn't want to say too much about how he felt laying there. He told me it was unnerving—but that was about it. He didn't lament his situation. He wanted to see it all as a choice, as a good decision he'd made. And maybe, in some ways, it was: he'd gotten away.

But then, on that first night, forced to find refuge on the bare swampy earth, in those confused riverbank woods, he must've been frightened, must've felt hounded and pursued. He was a fugitive from everyone.

It must've been sad—so sad to find himself there, like that. To be there in those woods.  
But he didn't say so. He said he just slept.

I didn't believe him.

## THIRTY TWO

Love is just a refined form of avarice.

That's what Fritz told me when I told him the basics of my case, when I told him about how much I missed Grace.

It was why he'd searched for his son. It was why everything had happened with Ladya. It was why I needed to see my daughter.

So I left Ladya and Columbia and drove through the night, through North Carolina and Tennessee and Kentucky to Normal, which is so ugly it's photogenic, the kind of place Stephen Shore should've shot. A little city of vacant strip malls, confusing traffic patterns, insurance agency bureaucrats, and drab dorm high rises surrounded by flat, rich farmland forever. I lived there for three years. It took me twelve hours to get back.

I arrived in the late afternoon and went by the daycare Grace used to go to. It was housed in a house. There was a swing set in the yard, a chain-link fence to keep the children in. I sat in my car and waited. Kids came out and played but none of them were Grace and I left when the first parent, a dad, showed up to pick up his kid.

Then I drove by our old house. Their house. Allison's Tercel was in the driveway but the blinds were drawn and I didn't dare stop.

Instead, I booked room 209 in the Red Roof Inn near the Interstate and waited for a way just to glimpse my child. Grace was the opposite of a specter: I knew that she was real and that she was there somewhere—but I couldn't see her.

## THIRTY THREE

The idea is to get somewhere.

Fritz couldn't really run while clutching the cumbersome statue but he was hurrying as fast as he could up Rosewood when a police cruiser glided beside him, lit its churning blue lights, emitted one warning *whoop* of its siren, bounced a front wheel up on the sidewalk ahead of him, and stopped. Fritz was headed for Mister's car and guessed he'd flee the city—maybe the state—in it, but now a female police officer burst out of the passenger door with her hand on her holster, so he halted.

“Stop,” she demanded. “Put your hands up.”

Her partner, a stout Hispanic man, came around from the other side and sharply repeated her demand.

Frightened, Fritz dropped the statue and raised his arms high over his head. The cops ordered him not to move and asked him if he had any weapons but Fritz couldn't respond: he was too afraid he'd say the wrong thing.

“Sir, do you have any weapons,” the man asked again, impatient.

“No,” Fritz said. “No. Course not.”

“Sir, could you please put your hands on the car. On the trunk.”

Fritz complied: he was leaned over like a boy prepared to take a spanking. He told me it was humiliating. He told me the male cop then came up behind him and patted him down from his waist to his ankles. When he was done, the officer said, “You may turn around, sir.”

The insistent use of “sir” annoyed Fritz: it conveyed respect that was obviously false. When Fritz faced them, he saw that their hands were both still poised for their pistols. “What is this?” he asked.

I like to imagine not waking up one morning. What that would be like. I think of something so clean and empty. Something like the inside of an empty eggshell.

“Sir,” the guy started, “we got a call from Art’s, down the street, of a disturbance. Were you there tonight?”

“Where?”

“Art’s.”

“Huh? Yeah. I guess. I was in the parking lot. This guy, see— I was just there because there was this guy there who stole from me. I didn’t do anything wrong. I swear. I just—”

“Sir, have you been drinking?”

“Yeah. I mean some. But not much.”

“Sir, is that your statue?”

“No. It’s this guy’s who—”

“Sir, please turn around and put your hands behind your back.” It sounded like a script. “We’re placing you under arrest. For larceny.”

“What?”



“Sir, please. Whatever you say can and will be used against you in the court of law.”

He went on with the standard spiel but Fritz didn't want to hear. He'd watched TV, knew how this worked, knew he couldn't resist. He complied, felt the handcuffs cinch his wrists. The male officer prodded him forward, toward the cruiser's back door, which his partner held opened. Fritz's head was pushed down, and his body collapsed itself in and onto the seat.

I'm speaking from experience. The sound of sirens gathered behind us like clouds becoming a storm and I pulled over and they came with guns and got Grace. They cuffed me hard and shoved me in the backseat of their cruiser. I didn't want her to see me like that, so I lay down on the long vinyl seat until they drove me to the McLean County Jail. They told me I had the right to remain silent but of course silence was just another form of punishment.

When the door slammed shut and Fritz was sealed into this uncomfortable cage, he was caught. He'd finally been found. He was the one who'd been pursued and discovered, not Dave. It was a relief to be captured, a conclusion. This—being sought and discovered—was what he'd been after all along, not his son, who was dead. Dave was dead. He had to acknowledge it now, so he did.

Pain and relief often coincide.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry,” he said and kept saying it. He was lamenting himself. He was bowed forward, with his forehead pressed against the plexiglass and his arms bound behind him. He was constricted into an approximately prayerful position. “God damn it,” he said. It was the only way he'd ever addressed Him. “God damn it,” he said and kept saying it. Then the two phrases elided: “God,” he said, “I'm sorry.” As soon as he said it, he saw what he'd spoken: a prayer. So he prayed that simple way. It calmed him, somehow. And then Fritz heard the door across from him open and looked up and saw that the female police officer was placing the

Virgin Mary in the backseat beside him. It was as though He'd been listening and that this—the statue—was His answer.

“We’re gonna have to put this back here with you,” the officer explained. “As evidence.”

Fritz told me that when he looked over at her, he felt comfort. He couldn't explain it, said he wouldn't want to anyway, since what he discovered in her was “the grace of mystery.” I'm not sure what he meant by that, though I think he was saying that he'd discovered some reward for acknowledging his ignorance. He said that he saw in her dolorous posture and downcast eyes an attitude of resolved resignation and that he tried to assume this attitude for himself, to accept the burden of his errors and failures without allowing their weight to collapse him. He said he felt stronger now, more solid.

“Sir?” The female officer was leaned down in the open door, peering from behind the statue. “Are you all right?”

“I'm fine,” Fritz said.

“We’re going to have to take you in for the night,” she said. “But you can call someone to get you in the morning.”

Fritz didn't respond.

“OK,” she said and shut the door.

Then both cops were in the front seat and Fritz was in back with the Mother of God and together they drove through the city, downtown, to the city jail. Fritz told me he was glad to be guided somewhere warm, where he could sleep. He said that he was exhausted, more than anything.

I'm so tired, but I never sleep so I don't have to dream.

Fritz was booked, fingerprinted, photographed, shown to an unoccupied cell. He slept so deeply that he had to struggle to get out of it when a guard came by in the morning to wake him.

“Sir,” the guard said, “let’s go. Time to get up, make your phone call.”

“Huh?” Fritz said from the bottom bunk.

“You want someone to come down here and bail you out, you better get up and make your phone call. Otherwise, stay comfortable.”

Fritz had never been arrested and didn’t know the protocol and wasn’t even certain that he wanted to leave, even though he knew that he should. But a phone call? He hadn’t made one in how long? A year, maybe. It was time to. It was time to call Charon, he decided. Now that his search had ended, so should hers. Assuming she’d even been looking for him. He sat up.

“Sorry,” he said to the guard. “Thanks. I’m coming.”

The guard looked like the kind of guy who’d been kicked off a Division II football team for check fraud. He fumbled through a huge ring of keys, unlocked the door, and slid it open. Fritz slipped his feet into the standard-issue slippers. Their soles were as thin as construction paper. His uniform was made of the same material as hospital scrubs, which made Fritz feel sort of like a patient in them, like he was here to be ameliorated. He’d do the right thing and call his ex-wife and she’d be relieved to hear from him after so long and she’d insist that she come down here to bail him out, help him out, but he’d refuse. He’d say that he needed to work his way back from this, so that he could learn something from it. He’d say that it was the only way for him to recover what he’d lost: himself. Also, maybe, if she was interested, her.

Fritz followed the guard down a fluorescent hallway, past cells holding inmates as lethargic and forlorn as zoo animals. This wasn’t like the movies: the other inmates didn’t yell at Fritz or leer at him or rattle the bars. They occupied the space they’d been assigned: they sat on

the edges of beds or paced back and forth or leaned against a wall. That was all. They were waiting and waiting occupied all of their time.

In prison, they issue you these thin white slippers that are impossible to keep clean.

The guard turned down a small hall, and Fritz followed. A few payphones were attached to the wall on one side. There was a plastic chair at the end. The guard went down to it, took a seat. Fritz awaited instruction.

The guard must've recognized Fritz's confusion. "All you do is just dial the number and it'll make a collect call to whoever it is. They gotta accept it. If they do, you got five minutes. That's all. It'll hang up on you—so you know, keep it short."

Fritz of course became nervous as he dialed the number. An operator answered, asked for his name and the name of the person he was trying to reach. Then he could hear the operator talking to Charon, asking if she'd accept a collect call from Fritz Hoffman, who was calling from the Richland County Jail.

"Oh Jesus," Charon said. "No," she said. "No I won't." Then she laughed a little, exasperated. "It's too late." Then she hung up hard, leaving Fritz alone in the jail hallway with the receiver in his hand and the guard watching him warily, pityingly from a few yards away.

Allison didn't even answer.

"Bye," Fritz said to the operator and returned the phone to its cradle.

This time Fritz led the guard back to his cell. Now, though, it was occupied. A black man sat Indian style on the floor before the bunk and played solitaire. He was gaunt and watery-eyed and loose like everything had been taken out of him with a syringe. The guard slid open the door and Fritz entered.

His cellmate didn't look up but said, "You play cards?"

“Not really,” said Fritz, who wanted just to lie on the bottom bunk and look up at the springs pressed beneath the mattress of the bunk above him until tomorrow and he was free.

“You know war?”

“Yeah, I guess,” said Fritz, who didn’t want to offend the guy.

“All right.”

The guy gathered up the cards and shuffled. Fritz sat down on the floor across from him while the guy dealt the deck. They played all day, discussing nothing but the game. Fritz won some, lost some, and soon enough it was night.

Then it was morning and Fritz was released. He walked down to the shelter. Sheila was at the front desk. It was around ten a.m. when he came in. He looked like a wandering prophet who has realized that all of his visions were hallucinations. He looked like a grandfather who needed a meal and a bed and a shower.

He stayed and we met the next day and he told me his story, this story.

We talked. He wanted to work and I told him I’d try to help him find something. He said he’d do anything, that it didn’t matter. He just wanted to make money, start over. I said I’d see what I could find. I should’ve turned his case over to a caseworker, someone with a social work degree and contacts at employment agencies, but I wanted to help him myself. I wanted to do something good.

My cousin Julie had an ex-boyfriend, Doug, who was a manager at Frankie’s Fun Park, which seemed like the one place in town that might actually hire a balloon twister. So I called Doug a few of days after Fritz arrived and asked if they were hiring. He asked me what a balloon twister was. I tried to explain. He wasn’t interested but he told me that actually, as a matter of fact, just two days before a girl had quit the concession stand by the go-kart track mid-shift.

They'd need someone to replace her, he said. Could Fritz work a register? Did he have any food prep experience? I told him what he wanted to hear. Doug wouldn't promise anything but he agreed at least to look at his resumé, conduct an interview.

I told Fritz and Fritz was grateful.

He went to the Salvation Army and came back wearing a black suit and yellow tie. He looked like he'd looked long ago, on Mr. Knowzit: alarming. He looked trapped. I tried to convince him that the suit wasn't necessary but he wouldn't listen.

"I'm taking this seriously," he said. "And I want them to know that."

Then that Friday, six days after he'd arrived, Fritz, all dressed up, waited for the city bus at the stop outside the shelter. We shook hands and he thanked me again, for everything. The bus arrived, empty except for the driver, and Fritz went up the steps when the door sighed open.

I haven't seen him since he waved goodbye through the window.

I imagine that he's living in an apartment somewhere out toward Irmo, that he's been promoted to shift supervisor, that he twists balloons for special events, for extra income. But I never went out to Frankie's to find out if I was right, because I'd rather not know that I'm wrong.

## THIRTY FOUR

My daughter is just a dream I had.

Laying on the thin and slick comforter in room 209, I tried to imagine her. Across town. Inside. In the shade-drawn living room. One of Allison's magazines open on the arm of a chair like a napkin on the wrist of a butler. Grace on the green, floral-covered couch. Watching cartoons, intently. Brown hair disheveled. Cow licked. Cow licked and innocent as a calf. And clean. And glad. And the sun booming in the windows. Booming, beckoning.

It hurts to be betrayed. It will dismantle you.

I hadn't seen Grace since she was three and her brown eyes still saw everything. Maybe they still do. Maybe they still will. But as far as I can tell, aging is the process of looking less. There's so little to see now. There's only one thing left for me: her. Yawning. Scratching her neck. Holding her mother's hand and trudging down the hall, into her room, to change. Removing everything. A child. My child. My daughter. Grace. Glad. Sullen. Something. Alone in her room, wondering where I went.

But the closed captioning on the motel TV was riddled with errors that night. This was an omen: it would all come off wrong.



## THIRTY FIVE

Sometimes I wake up and wonder whose idea all this was.

When James awoke, he discovered the sun seeping through a dense tangle of leaves, sorted through shuffled images of last night, and oriented himself in the woods, as a fugitive, pursued by the police, who'd no doubt issued a warrant for his arrest. Who were after him. Which thrilled him, since everyone else resisted him, wanted rid of him. And it occurred to him: their resistance—his mother's, Charles', everyone else's—was predicated on his presence. You can't want what you have. But escape had made him a wanted man. Now that he'd fled, he was sought. And absence, he reasoned, would only allow his value to increase. Disappearance, he extrapolated, would turn their desire fervent. His impulse was to retreat, to return home, but he decided then, while laying there, to remain. To become a refugee from the world, to make it seek him.

He imagined a newspaper article about his whereabouts. He formulated a quote from his mother: "All I want is to just see him come home." He conjured a search party organized by Charles and spread through the city, posting to telephone poles and shop windows Missing

Person posters that featured a photocopy of his face. He wondered if there'd be a tip line, a website, a Facebook group, a fundraiser. It would be by leaving that he'd be allowed to return. When he was eventually discovered in the woods, his errors and failures would be forgiven and forgotten in the rush of relief that he was alive. Which is all anyone would ask him to be.

Someday, Grace will look for me. She'll find me here and find out that everyone was wrong, that she can allow me to love her.

That morning in the woods, James' mouth was as dry and filthy as a vacuum-cleaner bag and he was stiff and sick and he was sore from the uneven ground and sweaty from the hot, sluggish air and he wanted to shower, to bathe, to cleanse and clear himself. There was a river right there. He could hear it clambering downstream. He sat up, got up, emerged from the woods, crossed the thin, sandy trail, descended a brief bank, and stood on a beach barely wide enough to accommodate his feet. He stripped down his boxers and stepped in. Then he tucked himself underwater and it loosened him, unburdened him. He felt stripped and new. Then he felt cold, got out, removed his wet boxers, and stood naked and minor for a moment. He was further from the world than he'd realized. Both banks of the river were a jumble of dense brush. He put on his dry shorts, shirt, socks, and shoes and went off to find a more permanent place to encamp.

James returned to the path and continued away from the boat launch. As he went, the trail thinned and eventually, after a mile or so, whittled away entirely. So James pushed forward through thick brush that seemed to reach out and grab him back from where he was going, which was forward and further away.

When he'd gone a half mile or so, he saw a twin-size mattress beached like a lost whale on the opposite bank of the river, on a rocky beach. He stripped again, put his wet boxers back on, held his dry clothes above of his head, and swam cumbersomely across. The mattress, he

discovered, was soaked and stained. But it smelled fine. It had probably been dumped upstream and then drifted down. It was like it had been delivered here for him. It would dry out soon enough, if he left in the sun, if he found a hidden but open place to put it, a place where he could both hide out and find shelter, somewhere like where he'd found that living room a few days before.

He left the mattress to search for an enclosed clearing. He soon found one a little way downstream. He wouldn't say where exactly. He said it was a rough rectangle of high grass. He said it was about half the size of his bedroom back home, which was more than enough room for a mattress, plus maybe a chair or a couch or whatever else he could find in these woods. The trees and bushes and vines that surrounded the space were dense. He imagined the foliage interlocking and extending and overlapping to form a surface as solid as plaster, to form walls. He went back for his bed, brought it to his room in the woods, and remained there for three weeks, furnishing his improvised home with discarded stuff—a highchair he used as a nightstand, a rocking horse that he never rode, a coat rack he used to dry his clothes—and waiting for the world to want him.

He waited and then he came to my duplex because he wanted to see someone he knew and could see without conceding. He wasn't ready to be discovered yet. He wouldn't reveal his encampment's exact location and made me promise I wouldn't tell anyone that he'd stayed with me. He swore me to secrecy. So I swore.

He stayed with me for three nights. Late on the last night—around four a.m.—he got back to the beginning and finished his story: he told me about living in the woods, about liking it. He told me that he'd only left because he was out of weed. Which was why he went straight to Hayes' house.

“Which is how I found you. As you know.”

Then he packed another bowl and passed it to me. We were stoned and he looked satisfied. Smug. He started to go on and on about how, see, it’s just a matter of just being free.

“I mean,” he said, “it’s like all that stuff I found in those woods. All that shit. All that junk. It was just a burden. I’m lucky I lost it all. I’m lucky I lost everything. Even my truck. Otherwise, what? I don’t know.” He took another hit. “I just think, you know, that sometimes you’ve just got to let things go.”

I’m paraphrasing.

He passed me the bowl and it was harsh and everyone always wants everything to be OK. Everyone wants everything to have worked out for the best. They want to get to the end and realize that, hey, it was all—everything, even the worst things—worth it. Even their errors and indignities. Even all of the cruelties. All of the suffering. All of the harm. They want to realize that, turns out, they were right all along. Despite everything. They want to believe that what happened was for the best because it happened. Because there’s nothing they can do now and so there’s no going back and so the best you can do is just accept it.

But they’re wrong: everything isn’t OK.

“Your errors aren’t only your own,” I said. We’d been best friends and it sounded like a lecture, I guess, but we were in the living room of the duplex I rented and I hadn’t seen my daughter in more than a year and I had something to say. I said, “You could’ve done things differently.” Then I told him about Fritz. I said, “Look, here’s the thing.” I was high and I said, “The thing is, I know the guy whose stuff all that was. Whose stuff you stole. His name was Fritz. That was everything he had and you took it.” And then I kept going. I told him about Dave and the schooner and the shelter. It wasn’t fair. I should’ve said it all earlier but I hadn’t, so I told

James everything then and I tried to explain what I knew: which is that everything matters. “You shouldn’t accept that this—*this*, of all things—is the best.”

James laughed. He was stoned. “*You?*” he said, laughing. “Why do you keep saying *you?* What about you? I’m just trying to stay out of the way. Disappear. Not get involved.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I know.”

“You can make things better or whatever. If you want.” He lit a cigarette and lay back. “But I for one am going to sleep.”

Then I went to bed and felt weak for leaving, for letting everything go. I smoked a bunch of cigarettes and slept a thin sleep. I barely slept. My dreams—if they were dreams—were about being unable to sleep. About lying awake and hating myself. I got up after a few hours, before dawn, and James was already gone. And so was my TV and the quarter of weed I’d just bought. All he left for me was a note that said, *Thanks. / Sorry.*

I don’t know what happened to him after that but I imagine that he sold the TV, bought some provisions, returned to his room near the river, got stoned, and waited to be found. I imagine that he’ll wait forever.

## THIRTY SIX

This is the end.

I sat in my minivan all morning and watched the daycare playground and waited to see her. I waited. I'd waited and waited and so I kept waiting. I've never been impatient. Some younger kids came out and fumbled around on swings and tricycles, with kickballs and shovels. Then they went in and a spring snow started.

The snow came down slow to muffle everything, to smother everything silent. The snow smothered everything and I rolled down the windows and heard how quiet the world had become. A lady pushed a walker up the sidewalk and said, "Hello," through the passenger-side window but I didn't respond.

Then the daycare's side door opened and kids wearing knit hats and clumsy mittens poured onto the paved playground and Grace was one of them. Grace was one of the kids. Grace was there. I saw Grace. I saw my daughter. I saw my daughter a few days ago. There was Grace.

Grace was the last one out. Trailing behind. Unhurried. Calm in the cloud of kids, in a yellow sweater, her hair pulled back in a pony tail. Glad about what had happened to the world

while she wasn't looking. Admiring how the snow was covering over the outside, how the ground sounded when she broke the smooth surface of white with each step.

I saw my daughter.

I saw my daughter on Monday and love detonated inside me, collapsed me. It was like letting everything be lost so you can swell with something all new, with a jumble of relief and release and need.

It was like nothing.

I saw my daughter and she was older now. She was sturdier, somehow. She was firmer and bigger. She was my daughter and she was older and she wore a red knit hat with earflaps and she had brown hair and she kicked a kickball into a chain-link fence. Kicked it hard, like she was trying to pop it. Make it explode.

*Make it explode*, I thought when I watched my daughter. When I saw her for the first time in thirteen months and all of this love was about to burst inside me and I wanted it to and it wouldn't and it was swelling up inside my like a cyst, like a balloon, about to burst, so I got out of my car and I crossed the street and my shoes left the trail in the snow that the authorities would follow later.

I knew they would find me. But why would that matter?

I had to get something before it could be taken away.

I went to the fence and Grace was turned away from me, whispering some secret into the ear of a girl I recognized but couldn't really remember.

"Grace," I said. The fence was only about waist high. "Hey Grace."

She turned to me. She was wearing a yellow sweater. She had on a red knit hat that had earflaps. She looked at me like I was a question she couldn't answer.

I said, “I missed you,” and she came closer and she said, “What?” and only a low fence was between us and a young woman who was clearly her teacher called out across the playground, “Grace. Hey Grace. Grace come here,” as she approached with a halting combination of intent and reluctance.

Grace was right there and looking up at me with her wild eyes and her flush face and with more teeth than she’d ever had before and this woman was coming to interrupt, to make talking to my daughter impossible, so I leaned over the fence and the peaks of chain link stabbed my stomach and I picked up Grace and she was lighter than I remembered—as light as a balloon—as light as the statue James found—and I held her—I held my daughter—and I carried her over the fence and back across the street and she sat on my lap when I drove away, while her teacher kept calling out, “Hey,” like all she had to do was get my attention, like then I’d turn around and return my daughter, like I would give up the one thing I wanted if I just knew I should.

I wouldn’t.

I drove and I held Grace and she asked where we were going and I said, “Wherever you want,” and the snow came down to erase everything—everything except us—and it felt for a second like everything would be all right forever.