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TRAPS: STORIES & A ONE-ACT PLAY

By

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B.A. English, California State University—Fresno, Fresno, CA, 2005

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Weight

When Frank finished showering he wiped steam from the mirror and stared at his reflection. He flexed and tried to tighten his stomach. In a week he would be forty. He dressed and sat at the edge of his bed, tied his shoes, and stomped into the kitchen. There was no French toast on the table. No eggs or sausage or biscuits with chocolate gravy. Cheryl was eating something white and thumbing through a magazine. Without looking up she pushed a plate across the table.

“Eat this.”

Frank moved food around on his plate. “What is it?”

“Watercress and cottage cheese.”

Frank ate a forkful of cottage cheese. It was bland. “I can’t drive my routes without my sausage links.”

Cheryl sighed and put down her magazine. “I read an article that says we can lose twenty pounds in three weeks by restructuring our bodies. We’re changing our metabolism.”

“But this is breakfast.”

“It also says to avoid being limited by social norms—breakfast, lunch dinner. Those terms are too confining and set up unhealthy eating expectations.”

Frank took the plate to the sink and washed the cottage cheese and watercress down the disposal. He opened the refrigerator and looked around but couldn’t find anything he wanted. He picked up his keys and put on a coat. “I’m turning forty and you treat me like I’m dying.”

“Keep eating sausages, watch what happens.”

When Frank was almost out the door she yelled to him. He stood in the doorway while she looked in the refrigerator. She handed him a paper bag and kissed him on the cheek. There was a sandwich inside the bag. “It’s for lunch,” she said. She put air quotes around the word lunch. “It’s tomato and cucumber on whole wheat.”

In the afternoon Frank drove a busload of high-school students along his route. He didn’t pay attention to them except for the thin girl in the back. Ashley. Frank recently built up the nerve to speak with her. He felt they might become friends.

She was the only student left by the time four o’clock rolled around and the bus trundled through residential streets, coughing exhaust out the back and hiccupping each time Frank changed gears. She was not very tall, with wispy brown hair pulled back in a ponytail. Loose strands fell limply on her cheeks. The more he looked at her, the prettier she became. She stood and walked unsteadily up the aisle.

“Can’t move while the bus is in motion,” Frank said.

Ashley slumped in the seat across from him.

“Is that your boyfriend?” Frank said.

“I knew you’d say something,” Ashley said.

Frank stuck an arm behind his seat, feeling around for the paper bag. “It’s just I saw you two having fun back there and I thought maybe you liked each other.”

Ashley smiled. “I let him think that.”

“You’re doing a pretty good job, from the looks of it.”

“Gets me whatever I want.”

Frank opened the paper bag and pulled out his sandwich. “Want this? Diet food.”

She leaned forward in her seat and stared out the windshield. “Boys at my school are dumb and immature. They’re all like, want to hook up? Like that’s something a girl wants to hear.”

“They’re young,” Frank said.

She reached out and patted his leg. “Exactly.” Frank looked down. She swayed, squatting in the aisle, gazing out the front window. She removed her hand and sighed. “I need a man. A cute, athletic man. You know?”

“Maybe they think you *do* want to, you know,” he paused. “Hook up.” He tried to keep his eyes on the road. “Do you want to hook up?”

Ashley laughed. “That’s exactly how they say it, too.”

He reached her stop, the corner of two residential tree-lined streets, and opened the double doors onto the sidewalk. She slid out of her seat and stepped outside, and then she stopped. “You know? A diet might do you some good.” She turned and walked away. Frank took a bite of his sandwich. Tomato juice had soaked into the bread and it came apart in wet chunks. He tossed the sandwich in the trash and drove back to the station.

When he got home that evening, Cheryl was cooking. Frank unbuttoned his uniform shirt and slumped in the living room easy chair. He picked up the newspaper and tried to read through it but his eyes slid over the words. He hadn’t felt this way since high school; maybe tomorrow Ashley would sit up front with him again. She would laugh at a joke he told her and then her laughter would fade and they would just sit at her bus stop gazing at each other until she said she really must be going but he wouldn’t let her walk home, but would instead drive her right up to her door. She would thank him and run to her front porch and wave happily as he drove off. He chuckled to himself and shook the newspaper.

Cheryl called from the kitchen. She was reaching into the oven to pull out a metal pan. Her thick legs stuck out behind her, loose flesh sagging down around the kneecaps and padding her ankles just above her flat naked feet. She set the pan on the counter with a crash. “Baked chicken parmesan and pasta with thick cream sauce.” She wiped hair out of her face. “And a chocolate pudding pie for dessert.”

Frank entered the kitchen. A health book lay on top of the trash, and he lifted it and flipped through a few pages. Cheryl opened the refrigerator and took out the pie. “Life’s too short to limit ourselves,” she said, “health be damned.”

Frank dropped the book on the counter. “Health be damned? No, this won’t do.” He crossed the kitchen and stood over the food. It smelled delicious. “I’d like boiled beets and cabbage.”

“But this is your favorite dinner.”

Frank shook his head. “We can’t use those terms.”

Cheryl smiled and nodded. “Finally he comes around.” She kissed him, and Frank kissed her back thinking of Ashley. Then Cheryl wrapped her arms around him, moving him against the refrigerator, and the image of Ashley faded. Frank tried to free himself.

“The food’s getting cold,” he said.

“Come on, before I go to work—”

Frank pried Cheryl’s arms away from his waist. “Is that all you want to do?”

“What?” she said.

“Hook up.”

The food sat on the counter the rest of the evening. Later, lying in bed, Frank thought of Ashley, of her slender legs and her arms crossed over her chest. Sweet sixteen,

he thought to himself. When Cheryl came in to put on her work clothes for her night shift at the hospital, Frank pretended to sleep.

The next day he studied Ashley and her friends. She had a lovely smile, and a way of turning her head slightly when someone spoke to her. She was wearing a light blue sweater and jeans; her damp hair was tied back with a blue ribbon. He drove faster than he should have, blowing through school zones and crosswalks, rushing the other students to their stops until she was the only rider left. She sat silent in the back, running a finger along the windowpane.

“So, how’s school?” he said. His voice sounded unnatural over the rumbling bus.

She picked up her bag and made her way up the aisle. “You know me, more boy drama.”

Frank looked out the front of the bus. The sky was gray. Leaves stuck in the gutters and on the sidewalk. Water ran lightly down the street and the road was slick. “I’m starting this diet,” he said, “well I’m not supposed to call it a diet, and in three weeks I’m supposed to lose, I don’t know, like twenty pounds.” He waited for her to react, but she leaned against the window across from him. “I just don’t know if it’ll work out or not. See my—my trainer’s the problem. She’s always cooking these fatty meals and I tell her I need to count calories but it’s tough, you know? I don’t even think she’s licensed.”

“You should exercise,” Ashley said.

Frank nodded as if considering that fact. “Like weights and stuff?”

She tapped her feet on the floor. “Who knows?” She sounded bored.

“You’re lucky you don’t have to worry about these things,” Frank said.

She lifted her shirt slightly, revealing her pale stomach. “I could lose a few.”

“Please, you’re a beautiful girl.”

She looked up at him and smiled, holding her shirt between two fingers. “Lose some weight, I bet you’ll be pretty cute too. Real cute, maybe.” She dropped her shirt and then sat up and looked around. “You’re missing my stop. Hey, my stop.”

Frank stomped the brakes and Ashley lurched against the front of her seat. She stood to leave, and Frank had to resist reaching out and touching her. “You want me to just take you home?”

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other and the corners of her mouth turned up in the beginning of a smirk. “Your call.”

“You are my last stop.”

She settled back into her seat and drummed the vinyl. “Onward.”

At her house Frank opened the double doors and motioned toward the exit. Ashley stepped off the bus and walked up the path to her front porch. As Frank drove away, she turned around and waved.

Cheryl was at the kitchen table when Frank walked in from work. “Frank, we need to talk.”

Frank unbuttoned his work shirt, trying to remember if he had seen anyone he knew while driving Ashley to her house. Cheryl stood.

“I cheated on our diet. I ate two Oatmeal Cream Pies at work.”

Frank’s shoulders relaxed. “Look, Cheryl, if we’re going to make changes we have to go all the way, right?”

“The hospital doesn’t have great food.”

“We can’t allow for backsliding.” Frank shook his head and placed his hands on Cheryl’s shoulders. She reached one hand behind her head and pulled at her hair. It was a

nervous habit from back in high school. It was cute then, when she would smile and pull at loose strands of hair. But now the fat under her arm jiggled. Frank sighed and shoved his hands in his pockets. “Oatmeal Cream Pies.” He laughed and walked down the hall into the bedroom and he removed his shirt and his pants. He stood in front of the bathroom mirror and pinched the fat around his stomach. Then he got down on the floor and put his feet under the bed. He did seven crunches; his stomach and neck began to feel sore and his throat burned. Cheryl walked into the room and stood over him.

“Sit-ups?”

“Takes more than a fancy diet to lose serious weight.” He rolled onto his knees and attempted a few push-ups. After six his arms shook and he fell onto his chest. Cheryl tried some sit-ups of her own. Soon they were breathless; beads of sweat rolled down Frank’s hot face. Cheryl climbed to her feet.

“You’re really serious about this.”

“Somebody has to keep us honest.” He attempted a few more push-ups and then stood and flexed in front of the mirror. His face and body were red and he could hardly breathe, but he grinned anyway. “I feel great!”

He walked every day before work and by the end of the week he could do twelve sit-ups and ten push-ups without a break. He felt better when he woke up in the morning, more energized. At Ashley’s stop he killed the engine and turned around in his seat. Ashley leaned back on her elbows. Her thin legs stretched out from under a blue skirt onto the seat across the aisle. The top two buttons of her blouse were undone, revealing her soft white neck underneath the fabric.

“You’ve lost some weight,” she said. She narrowed her eyes and looked at him closely. “Mostly in the face. It’s thinner.”

Frank smiled. “Like what you see, huh?” He paused for a moment. “No thanks to my trainer. She can’t keep up.”

“Some trainer.” She lay down and stared at the ceiling. “You should tell her to stop being a bitch about it.” Frank waited for her to cover her mouth and apologize, but she didn’t. She kept talking, and Frank decided that he liked that. “I’d just walk up to her and say, trainer, what’s her name?”

“Cheryl.”

“Terrible name. I’d say, I’ve been overweight long enough.”

“Just like that, huh?”

“And if you can’t keep up, tough. And then she’ll say something like I’m your trainer, damn it! Don’t be silly.”

“She would be that lame,” Frank said. “And I’ll just be like, I’m forty now, the only thing that’s silly is putting this off any longer.”

“No way you’re forty,” Ashley said.

“Yesterday.”

“I don’t believe it. You don’t look a day over—well…” She sat up. “Shoot, what time is it? Can you drive me home?”

Frank eased the bus into her neighborhood. When they reached her house, she remained seated. “Actually, can you take me to my friend Lisa’s? It’s just across town.”

“I’m not supposed to—” Frank said.

“Please?” She leaned forward. “I’ll owe you one.”

Taking her across town made him a half hour late getting back to the station, but the only thing he remembered was the way she squeezed his shoulder before stepping off the bus at Lisa’s house.

When he walked through his front door he heard a low whirring noise like the sound of a fan blade slicing through air. In the living room he found Cheryl on an exercise bike. She pedaled slowly, hunched over the handlebars, and when he walked in she turned and grimaced. “Found it at a yard sale.” She stopped pedaling and climbed off the bike, wobbled and collapsed on the couch. She laughed and lifted the bottom of her shirt to wipe sweat from her forehead, her fleshy stomach sagging underneath the fabric. Frank decided not to wait. He was just going to come right out with it.

“I’m getting back into shape and if you don’t believe in me fine because somebody does.”

Cheryl stood from the couch and approached Frank slowly. “Of course I believe in you. I’ve lost four pounds myself.”

“If you can’t keep up, tough,” Frank said. “It’s my dream.”

“Is this last week?” Cheryl said. “About the cheating?” She entered the kitchen and reached into the freezer. “Because I just read an article that said losing weight is at its core a psychological undertaking. Therefore admitting things like cheating and vowing to get back into shape are really creating obstacles from the true transformation that is the mind-body dynamic.”

Frank climbed onto the bike and began pedaling. “I have no idea what that means.”

Cheryl returned with a package of Roll-Os. “Psychologically speaking, this might do more good than cabbage.”

“You see!” Frank pedaled faster. “I can’t have that chocolate! Now stop being a bitch about it and support me!”

Cheryl pulled back the Roll-Os. She grabbed Frank by the arm. “What did you call me?”

Frank increased his pace. “I knew this would happen. This is exactly what I expected.” The fan whirred and he stood up, pumping his legs. Cheryl stood in front of the bike.

“Frank. Frank!”

Frank pedaled faster. “I’m exercising!” His breathing was labored and his ears roared. The fan’s whirring filled the room, making discussion impossible.

He needed to talk to Ashley, but the next day she was preoccupied in the back row with some boy. He was huddled up next to her, whispering in her ear, and she giggled and leaned away from him. He clasped his hands behind his head and smiled, and then reached one arm around her and pulled her close. Frank tried reading lips but couldn’t make out any words and he almost hit a car stopped at a red light. The boy had the beginning of a light mustache; he was probably whispering vulgar things in her ear, childish, dull, boy things. He gave Ashley a piece of candy. At the next stop the kid sauntered up the aisle, grinning, and said thank you for the ride. Frank wanted to shove him down the stairs but instead quickly shut the double doors and drove off before he had a chance to look back and yell goodbye to Ashley. She moved up the aisle and fell into the front seat. It was sunny outside and she wore jeans with small holes in the knees and a thin purple shirt with a heart on the chest.

“You know, you can do a lot better,” Frank said.

Ashley laughed and leaned back against the window. “I know.”

“What do you want with a boy like that anyway?”

She stood and held onto the support rail. “Where are we going today?”

“I’m taking you home so you can call your boyfriend.”

“Oh honey,” Ashley said. “He’s just a boy.”

“Don’t call me honey.”

She rubbed the back of his neck. “Long day?”

“You should really sit down.” His voice lost its harsh edge. She sat down and stretched her legs across the seat.

“So when am I paying you back?”

Frank looked in his mirror; she was grinning. “I don’t have to be home yet.”

He swallowed hard and turned off the busier city street and into a quiet neighborhood; houses lined the block but they eventually gave way to a wide grassy field. Frank drove to the end of the block and pulled off on the side of the road. He killed the engine and turned around in his seat. Ashley sat up and looked around.

“So.” She reached for his hands and pulled him toward her. Despite the exercise he still found himself out of breath. He began to speak but instead he leaned over her and placed his lips on hers. He expected her to taste sweet, but there was really no discernible flavor. She kissed back hard; he felt her small tongue slip just inside his mouth and then she kissed his neck. He could feel her sucking his skin and he pulled back.

“What are you doing?” he said.

“Trust me, you’ll like it.”

“You’re going to leave a mark.”

She held his face. “That’s the idea.”

“But that’s, like a hickey. I don’t want a hickey.”

She rolled her eyes. “Come here.” She kissed him furiously and sucked on his lower lip until it felt swollen and sore. He stopped her.

“This isn’t sweet at all,” he said.

She stared at him and then pushed him away and crossed her arms. “I know what I’m doing.” She turned toward the window and sulked. Frank touched her shoulder but she brushed him off. “You know,” she said. “You can be so immature.”

Frank started the bus and headed toward her stop. When they had almost arrived she moved toward the edge of her seat. “Can you take me to Radio City? My mom’s being terrible and won’t let me go and I want to pick up some CDs.”

“I have to get back to the station,” Frank said.

“Oh come on, break the rules.”

“I really can’t.” He started pulling off to the side of the road. She stood and reached a hand between his legs and squeezed.

“Take me to Radio City.”

Frank pulled back into traffic and took her across town. In the Radio City parking lot he let the engine idle. Ashley used his rearview mirror to fix her hair.

“Oh, shoot. I left my money on my dresser.” She looked at him. “It’s only, like twenty bucks.”

Frank handed her a twenty-dollar bill. She kissed him on the cheek and stepped off the bus. He called after her. “This isn’t how it’s supposed to go!”

She called back over her shoulder. “It’s fine, I forgive you!”

When he arrived home that night Cheryl was cooking in the kitchen. The smell of wet vegetables drifted across the room.

“What are you making?” Frank said.

“Three artichoke hearts, sautéed in a light sauce of pomegranate juice and vinegar, topped with fresh pine nuts and parsley.” She turned down the heat and shook the pan. Then she turned around. “Jesus, what happened to your lip? It’s purple.”

Frank sat at the kitchen table and rested his head on the wood. “I can’t do this diet anymore. I just don’t see the point.”

Cheryl carefully set down her spatula. “What is wrong with you?”

“I can’t diet right now. I’ve had a rough day.”

“Ah, see, that’s emotional eating,” Cheryl said. “I read an article that says before dinner you should communicate your fears and frustrations with a spouse or close friend so that by meal time your mind is clear of emotional baggage and therefore can focus on the task of refueling.”

“Really?”

“It’s probably why you reacted so badly to the Roll-Os.”

Frank closed his eyes. “Those kids never stop talking, and then there’s this ugly looking boy who’s always grinning at me.”

“This is good,” Cheryl said. “Vent.”

“And the worst is this girl, Ashley, always flirting with guys to get them to do things for her. I kissed her but so what? Does that mean I have to take her to Radio City?”

There was an extended silence. Frank opened his eyes and looked up to find Cheryl with her mouth hanging open. “Exactly, it’s a mess. And now she thinks she can order me around, take my money, get rides.”

“You pay her?” Cheryl said. “Like a prostitute?”

Frank held up his hands. “Let’s not get carried away. You have sex with prostitutes. We just kissed.” He paused. “Which she sucks at, by the way.”

He had to duck when Cheryl threw the spatula at him.

“Hey, this was your idea!” he said. “No emotional eating!”

She came at him.

“I was venting!” he said. “I was clearing my mind for the task of refueling!” He backed out of the kitchen toward the front door. “I made a mistake, okay? It’s not like you’re perfect, Miss Oatmeal Cream Pie.”

This time he couldn’t duck before Cheryl hit him in the mouth.

Frank began taking Ashley across town nearly every day. He had nowhere else to be; Cheryl kicked him out, saying she couldn’t possibly lose positive pounds in such a negative relationship.

And Ashley wanted to go out. She climbed on his lap after the last student left. She kissed him and slowly unbuttoned his work shirt, then the top buttons of her blouse. She said, “Something for you, something for me.”

He took her to Game World, to Chocolate Heaven, to Pizza and Pipes. He spent nearly half his income to buy her candy, so she could play arcade games while he slurped a diet soda. She began gaining weight, and so did he. He bought her large pizzas and picked at them while she was in the bathroom; when he bought her milkshakes he ordered two for himself.

Some days Ashley announced the place, “Banana split time!” She grinned and checked herself in the mirror, her shirt growing tighter around her thickening waist.

“Maybe we should try Veggie Palace,” Frank said.

“Jesus, Frank! I’m eating a banana!”

She never walked home. “I’m too tired, just drive.” She slept a lot. In a month the kissing, the partial nudity, all their indiscretions became tired and predictable, Frank

saying “Oh, baby, oh baby, let me put my hands on that sweet rump roast,” Ashley saying, “After this, maybe we can get some Chinese?”

And then a new girl boarded his afternoon route. She was thin, her face was smooth and clear; even from far away Frank thought her blue eyes glistened. He watched her move down the aisle, blonde hair hanging heavily down her back. Ashley called out to her.

“Lisa!”

Frank tried to come up with something to say, something to make the time go by and make it okay for him to admire her in the mirror. He cleared his throat and started to comment about the weather or about the school or the success of its football team. Everything sounded forced in his head, and he closed his mouth and stared ahead at the empty road. She exited and soon he was alone with Ashley who leaned against the window.

“I’m in the mood for apple fritters. To the Donut House!”

Frank finished his route, pulling off at Ashley’s stop. She looked around, confused. “Is this the Donut House?”

“So that’s your friend,” Frank said, “Lisa, was it?”

“So?”

“No—nothing...just—does she like jogging?”

Ashley laughed. “Fat chance, Frank. Real fat.”

“What? No, hey, I was just thinking we could, maybe she—I don’t know, has some tips or something? You know what, forget it.”

“Forget it?”

“Maybe you should walk today,” Frank said. “I’m thinking of getting out myself, doing a power mile or something. Hey but tomorrow! Maybe we’ll get something light, a frozen yogurt or one of those fruit parfaits.”

Ashley gathered her bag and stumbled off the bus. She plodded down the sidewalk, her shoes slapping against the pavement. Frank watched her bloated backside shake with each step. He shook his head. “Terrible, just terrible.”

He returned the bus to the station and sat in his car. Lisa, that’s a beautiful name. He imagined introducing himself tomorrow; he would have to revise his route and switch Ashley and Lisa’s stops. It was a simple thing. Then they would have time to talk, to be sweet with each other. He stepped out of his car and took a deep breath. The air was clear and cool and he locked his car and jogged slowly from the station. The fat around his midsection heaved and his breathing came in shallow gasps. He imagined being thinner, running faster, running toward Lisa. Here I come, Lisa. He broke into a hard run.

Thieves

When I walk into the living room Olivia is dusting the portrait of her dead husband. She's humming to herself, running a soft cloth along the edges of the mahogany frame. Her husband smiles from above the fireplace, his lean arms crossed over his chest. He wears a charcoal gray suit and his blonde hair is perfectly combed to one side. I clear my throat and Olivia turns around.

"I was just cleaning up," she says. She quickly moves on to the television. I sit on the couch and open the newspaper. "I'm thinking we should take a trip." I prop my feet on the coffee table. "What do you think about Disneyland?"

Olivia sets down the dust rag. "Ken was supposed to take us." She looks up at the mural. "Before his death."

I sigh and skim the local section of the paper. "Isn't it time that thing come down?" My voice lacks conviction.

"It's just so dusty in here."

I look around. The room is spotless. I stand and stretch and walk just outside the living room and stand in the kitchen. Olivia picks up the dust rag. "Where are you going?" I watch her go back to work on the portrait. She doesn't turn around, so I don't answer.

This summer, Fresno has exploded in hot violence, brawlers spilling out into the white sunlight, gunfire shattering the thick dripping nights. There is a stretch of seventeen days when the high temperature doesn't dip under 105; ninety-five in the middle of the night. Nobody sleeps. Shadows prowl the neighborhoods; there are nine murders in seventeen days. The air conditioner in my car is broken and I roll the windows down and slowly drive the city streets. Hot dry air blows through the window and burns my face.

It's only eleven in the morning and already the day is filled with sweat. I park in front of my apartment building and walk inside. I sit on the couch but it's already warm and sitting will just make me hotter. I pace the apartment. Stand in front of the open refrigerator. Pour myself a glass of water and hold the cool glass against my forehead. Then I lock up my apartment and drive back through town and into Clovis. There are one-fifth the people and the community moves at a slower pace. Down Main Street people peer into shop windows; Scoops and Soups is piled with people trying to get a cup of Black Cherry Ice Cream. Despite the heat, people stand on street corners, loiter against the shaded storefront walls. They nod as I drive slowly by. I stand outside Olivia's house for a moment, and I wipe my feet on the Welcome mat. The mat is brown with a red and green flower border. When I walk into Olivia's house she's sitting on the couch with Ben. They're talking in low voices and when I enter the kitchen they stop and turn around.

"He returns," she says. Ben climbs off the couch and runs over to me.

"Can we go swimming?" he says. He hops from one foot to the other and tugs at my arm. "I want to swim."

"The water's cold," I say.

"I don't care."

"You will once you get in the pool."

"It's hot inside. I want to be cold. A nice change of pace."

"Change of pace? Where'd you learn that?"

He runs down the hall and minutes later he reappears wearing his swimsuit. He is thin but has a round belly that sticks out away from his bony frame. He takes my arm and

leads me to the back door. I open it and he runs outside and jumps in the pool. He bounces around in the shallow end, hugging himself.

“Feels great!” he says.

Olivia stands beside me, watching. “Where’d you go?”

“Needed some air.”

“Tell me where you’re going next time.” She steps out onto the back patio and crosses her arms and watches Ben swim in the shallow end. She peels off her shirt and her shorts; she’s been wearing a swimsuit underneath her clothes and she steps into the pool.

Olivia used to live with her husband and Ben in Fresno. One evening her husband went out for a walk and didn’t return. They found his body three days later in a canal. His clothes had been stripped and his belongings taken by thieves.

I take off my shirt and my shoes and walk toward the pool, but Ben is already bored with swimming and is climbing out of the water. I jump in and call to him. Olivia steps out of the pool and wraps him in a towel and rubs his shoulders. She whispers in his ear and he laughs and Olivia runs a hand through his hair. I bob in the water, my shorts heavy and billowing. I don’t have any extra clothes. Olivia and Ben watch me for a while and then they return to the house. I swim a couple laps and then I sit on the steps and listen to the air conditioning unit hum on the roof. It is large and loud and sunlight glints off the rusted metal. I shield my eyes and walk across the hot cement to the shaded patio. Olivia’s neighbor Mrs. Johnson is standing at her fence, watching me as I try to wring water from my shorts. I nod toward her and she ducks.

I knock on the back door and Olivia comes out and I ask her for a towel. I dry my shorts the best I can and enter the house, but I can’t sit on the furniture for another hour

because my clothes are damp. I stand in the middle of the living room like a guest and then I pace through the house. I order a pizza and when it arrives my clothes are dry enough to sit at the kitchen table with Ben and Olivia and eat pizza.

We spend the rest of the day watching movies and lying around the living room. It's another sweltering day and we don't have the strength for much else. In the evening I help Olivia put Ben to bed. I read him a story, the one he likes. A young knight named Ben saves his kingdom from an invading army.

“And he beat the army by himself,” he says.

“All by himself.”

“Because he was strong, and because he was a knight.”

“Time for bed, pal.”

“Do you think it's possible? To beat an army by yourself?”

“I don't know.”

“You don't think so.”

“It's possible, sure.”

Ben stares at the ceiling and I tuck the sheets around him and pull the blankets back. It's still warm and one sheet is enough. I check under his bed and then I look in the closet and then I kiss him on the forehead. “Get some rest, sir knight.”

“Could you beat an army?”

“I don't know.”

“If they were attacking us?”

“I'd try.”

I kiss him again on his forehead and then I turn out his light and leave his door open a crack. Olivia walks in after me and tells him goodnight and then she joins me in

the kitchen. I don't tell her what Ben and I talked about. She pours two glasses of water and we sit at the kitchen table without speaking. Finally she says something.

“This isn't working out.”

“Which part?”

“All of it. It's too soon and we're getting too serious and I just can't.”

“You can't.”

She drinks her water and then she sets the glass carefully down and folds her hands. “I don't want Ben to get too attached. I don't want to get too attached.”

“Isn't that the idea?”

She takes her glass to the sink and looks out into the yard. She rubs her face with her hands. I drink my water and then I cross the kitchen and stand behind her. I put my hands on her shoulders and squeeze. She shrugs away.

“I think maybe you should go.” She's shaking and I turn her around and tears slide down her cheeks.

“We'll go slower.”

“Go home, Danny.”

I release her and then I walk out the front door. The night is hot and the air buzzes. Gnats tick around the porch light. I step off the porch and cross the lawn. The dry grass crunches under my feet. I start my car and watch the house. Soon I begin to sweat and my back sticks to the seat. I back out of Olivia's driveway and roll through the darkness toward Fresno.

That night I sit at the edge of my bed with the windows open and listen to the low murmur of traffic outside. At some point I nod off and I wake still sitting at the edge of

my bed to the sound of gunfire. Four shots rip through the night air and then there is silence. I strain to hear but there is nothing. Eventually sirens rise in the distance.

The next morning before work I drive to Olivia's house. The Welcome mat is missing from her porch. The cement is brighter where it used to sit. Olivia answers the door in her robe. "Please, go to work."

"Where's your mat?"

She looks down, and then she pulls her robe closed and steps onto the porch and looks around. "Did somebody take it?"

"I came to speak with Ben."

"He's eating breakfast."

"I want to tell him why I won't be coming over."

"I'll tell him."

I stare at the bright rectangle of cement and then I turn to leave. Olivia calls out to me. "Do you think somebody would take it?"

"I wouldn't worry over it."

She looks around the porch and then backs into her house. She stands in the doorway. "This really is for the best."

I drive to Prescott Custom Framing, trying to put Olivia and Ben out of my head. I spend the morning hand-carving an oak frame for a woman as an anniversary gift to her husband. She wants to fit their wedding photo inside the frame which will have their names engraved on the top surrounded by roses. While carving out the flowers I find myself considering that Welcome mat. Olivia was truly frightened that somebody took it, that somebody was on her porch during the night. When I'm invited out to eat by my co-workers, I decline.

On my lunch break I return to Olivia's. She's left the back door unlocked so I open it and walk inside. There is the looming silence of an empty home. Ken stares down at me from above the fireplace. I unplug the television and pull it off its stand then I open the back door and step out into the sunlight. It is warm and my palms are moist. I carry the television to my car and set it carefully down into the trunk. Then I drive into Fresno and put the television in the living room of my apartment. I plug it in and turn it on. The sound is loud and I turn it down. I should have taken the remote, too. I turn off the television and leave the apartment and go back to work.

That night Olivia calls. "Somebody broke into the house."

"Are you all right?"

"They stole the television."

There is a pause on the other end. I look out my window into the street. For now the city is silent.

"Will you come over?"

When I arrive Olivia opens the door a crack and then allows me inside. She is shaking and she walks into the living room and sits on the couch with Ben. She stares at Ken's portrait.

"Everyone all right?"

Ben jumps off the couch and hugs me. "Don't leave."

Olivia doesn't turn from the portrait. "Who would do this?"

"Somebody looking for a quick score." I'm not sure where that response comes from. I tousle Ben's hair. "How are you, pal?"

He looks up at me. "Are they coming back?"

"No, they won't be back."

“How do you know? We have a lot more stuff.”

I consider this. “It’s time for bed.” I lead him down the hall and Olivia trails us. We tuck him into his bed and then Olivia leans down and kisses him and brushes his hair with her palm. I check under his bed and in his closet and then I stand by the door and wait for Olivia. Ben peeks out from under his blanket.

“Promise they won’t be back?”

“They won’t come back.”

“But what if they do?”

“I’m here.”

That satisfies him. “The knight.”

I smile and nod at him. Olivia closes his door and we walk into the kitchen and sit at the table. She rests her head in her palms and sighs. “I’m sorry for getting you out of bed.”

“I’m glad you did. I was thinking that maybe I can move over here for a while—”

She cuts me off. “I meant what I said last night.”

“I see.” I stand from the table and walk into the living room.

“I appreciate you coming over. But this one thing doesn’t have anything to do with last night.”

I look at the portrait and then sit on the couch. “I’ll sleep here tonight.”

She stands beside the couch and crosses her arms. “Just tonight.” I pull off my shoes and she leaves the room and returns with a blanket. She drapes the blanket over me.

“You really are a good man. I’m just not—”

I hold up my hands. “Maybe someday.”

She nods and lets the blanket go and leaves the room. The couch is too short and my legs hang over the edge and after a while it feels like they're full of sand. I pace around the room and then I go outside and sit by the pool. The air conditioner is still humming on the roof. The water is glassy and black and moonlight reflects silver off the top. I lie back on the warm cement and look at the sky but can't find any stars. I don't remember falling asleep but when I wake up I'm still outside in gray morning light and my back and arms are sore from being on the cement. When I stand there is Mrs. Johnson again, looking over the fence at me. I shake my head and walk inside. I write a note and stick it to the refrigerator, reminding Olivia to lock all the doors and windows before leaving for work. Then I leave the house and drive back to my apartment.

I find it difficult to concentrate at work. My thoughts drift to Olivia and Ben alone in their house without protection. I imagine people breaking down the doors, stealing Ben away as he sleeps. I ruin a metal frame job that is supposed to go out in the morning. Trying to weld it together I don't pay attention and melt it down until it's worthless and a co-worker has to yell to get my attention. I go out to eat with co-workers but I just pick at my food and then I say that I'm feeling ill and I leave. I don't return to work in the afternoon. I drive over to Olivia's house and walk around the perimeter, testing the doors and the windows. They are all locked. I return to my car and from the trunk take a tire iron. I look up the street and then walk around the house to the back. I remove my shirt and hold it against the window and then I tap the window with the tire iron until it splits and tinkles into the house. I reach in and unlock the window and climb through, avoiding the glass. I walk through the house, checking the rooms. I pour myself a glass of water and then I wash the glass out and replace it in the cabinet. Then I walk down the hall and

stand outside Ben's room. I look around, picking up toys and putting them down. Then I strip the bed.

That night I'm watching the news on Olivia's television when the telephone rings. The moment I pick it up she speaks frantically. "They came back."

"Who did?"

"They stole Ben's bed."

I cross the room and mute the television. It's the nightly news. There's been another murder in Fresno and the temperature won't go below one-hundred for another week. The anchors look grim.

"Are you still there?"

"Do you need me to come over?"

When I arrive Ben is crying on the couch and Olivia paces the living room. I try to get Ben to talk but he buries his head into the couch cushions.

"I'm here now. It's going to be okay."

He raises his head. "You said that last time."

"I'm sorry."

I look at Olivia. She has stopped pacing. I stand and put an arm around her. She sinks into me. "What should we do?"

"I'll call the police."

I walk into the kitchen and pick up the phone. I listen to the dial tone and then the automated voice comes on. Olivia walks into the kitchen and watches me.

"Yes. Okay. The address is 417 Pollasky. I don't know. Okay. Yes, I will. Yes. Thank you." I hang up and purse my lips. "There's not a lot they can do right now."

"What did they say?"

“They weren’t very helpful.”

“What did they say?”

“We should get Ben to bed.”

“Danny.”

I pause for a moment and then sigh and shrug. “I should probably stay with you guys for a little while.”

“That’s what they said?”

“Only until they can stop this.”

Olivia looks back at Ben and then turns to me. I hold out my arms and she allows me to embrace her. I stroke the back of her head. “I’m here for you. Whatever you need.”

“Thank you.”

We stand in the middle of the kitchen for a while. Ben has fallen asleep on the couch. I carry him down the hall to Olivia’s bedroom. She crawls into bed and pulls back the blankets and I set Ben down beside her. I lift a sheet over him and tuck it into the side of the bed. I kiss him on the forehead and then I walk around the bed and lean over Olivia.

“I’m sorry for all this.” I kiss her on the forehead and she reaches up and holds me by the back of my neck.

“Why are you so good to me?”

I shrug. “Love is a tricky thing.”

She pulls me close and kisses me on the mouth. Her lips are soft and her skin is warm and slick with sweat. I push away from the bed. “I’m on the couch if you need me.”

She nods and closes her eyes. I pat her softly on the leg and leave the room and close the door and take my place on the couch. I pick up the television remote off the coffee table and turn it around in my hands. Then I put it down. Ken looms above the mantle. His demeanor seems to have changed. His smile now seems to ridicule. His eyes gleam as if he knows something but isn't yet saying. I pace the room and he watches me. I put pillows on the floor and stretch out and stare at the portrait. The mahogany frame is high-quality but lacks any sort of creativity. I would have done more with it. The back window is still open and a breeze floats through the gaping hole. I look through Olivia's cabinets and come up with tin foil, and I stretch that across the window frame. It keeps some of the hot air outside, the breeze snaps the foil and outside pool water laps against the cement tiles. At some point I fall asleep and when I wake up Olivia and Ben are in the kitchen eating cereal. I stretch and join them. Ben is happier. He reads the back of the cereal box and does the word search. Olivia hands me a cup of coffee. "Good morning."

"That it is."

I drink coffee and eat toast with Olivia and then I have to return to my apartment to get ready for work. At the door Olivia kisses me on the cheek. Ben hugs my waist.

"Good day, sir knight."

"See you soon, pal."

I kiss Olivia and kiss Ben on the top of his head and then I get into my car and back out of the driveway, watching Olivia and Ben wave to me. If I didn't have to go to work I would stay with them all day. As I drive off I look in the rearview mirror. Mrs. Johnson strides across the lawn and onto the porch. I turn the corner and lose sight of the house. I return to my apartment and change clothes at work, where I start a new project. I find white birch in a back room of the warehouse and begin fashioning a frame. I carve

long looping designs into the wood and at the top of the frame inscribe Olivia's and Ben's and my names. When I return to Olivia's that evening I ask about Mrs. Johnson.

"That woman is crazy. She comes right up to me and says she knows something's going on in this house. She told me to be careful."

"What an odd thing to say."

"Did you sleep outside the other night?"

"It was cooler out there and I dozed off."

"She told me to watch out for you. You! I laughed. She can be so nosy."

"Next time I see her I'll clear the air."

"Don't bother."

Olivia and Ben are happy for the next two weeks. The thieves do not return. I find a new bed for Ben and help him set it up. For the most part I sleep on Olivia's couch. One night she asks me if I want to stay in bed with her, but I say we shouldn't rush things. She agrees. In the morning I eat breakfast with them and then they see me off to work and in the evening I return for dinner and we watch a movie or play games. One day we walk through the mall and I talk them into sitting in one of those photo booths that takes a strip of four snapshots for a dollar. It's so much fun that we sit through it twice. The police have no suspects but we are hopeful for a break in the case.

Soon though, we return to our old ways. It doesn't take long for comfort to set back in, and then Olivia and I are having the same discussions. I want to leave clothes in her closet so that I don't have to rush back to my apartment every morning before work. She thinks that's a big step, and one that needs time for careful examination.

"I don't mean to seem ungrateful."

"But?"

“I still love my husband.”

I nod. “Is it possible to love both of us?” She doesn’t respond so I continue. “Only one of us can love you back.”

This was apparently not the right thing to say. She tells me to leave.

“I’m trying to be honest.”

“Now.”

I walk out the door and she closes it without seeing me to my car. As I back from the house I consider what would happen if I didn’t return, if they were left alone to fend for themselves. The heat wave refuses to break and I drive home in a sweat. I sit in my dark apartment letting the hot city air drift through my windows and fill the apartment. It has never been so hot. It might never cool down again.

The next morning I go through work on auto-pilot. I neglect pressing orders to work on my own frame, which is nearing completion. I add starbursts in the corners and along the bottom I carve out a scene in which a knight rears back on his horse, fighting a legion of attackers. His sword is as large as his enemies and he is in mid-swing, about to cut down a man holding a battle-axe. Behind him, a woman and boy look on with their arms outstretched. The air conditioner has broken at the warehouse and just moving around works up a sweat. I flap my shirt to create a breeze but the breeze is hot and after a while I stop and stare straight ahead. On my lunch break I return to Olivia’s house. She hasn’t replaced the back window and the tin foil reflects harsh sunlight. I dip my hand into the pool and then I drip water over my head. Droplets hit the cement and sizzle. Nobody is home but the air conditioner is humming. I cup water onto my face and then I walk into the garage and get Olivia’s ladder and open it against the house. I climb onto the roof and stand over the air conditioning unit. Four bolts hold the top panel in place so

I climb off the roof and return with a wrench. I sit on the roof and wrench the bolts until they come loose. My shirt is heavy with sweat and the bolts burn my hands. I drop them and listen as they clatter off the roof. Then I open the unit and find the wiring. Three wires come together and connect to the power source. I pull the wires out and the unit slows and shuts down. The roof smells of dried tar and heat rises off the panels and into my face. I look across to the neighbor's yard. Mrs. Johnson is sitting by her pool, watching me. She takes off her sunglasses and stares before putting them back on. Then she goes back to watching the pool.

I climb off the roof and find the fallen bolts. I drop them loudly into the rain gutter and then I enter the house. I look at the portrait. Ken doesn't seem so happy now. His smile is flat and his eyes gleam not with amusement but with anger. I smile to myself and lift the portrait off its pegs. I take it outside and stand it against the house, and I close the ladder and put it back in the garage. I return with the wrench and Mrs. Johnson is peering over her fence.

“What's going on?”

“Repairs.”

She continues watching until I cross the lawn toward her. Then she slips behind her fence. I wait patiently, tapping the wrench against my leg. She comes back up and she doesn't move this time when I near her.

“May I use your telephone?”

“For what?”

I climb over the fence and drop down on her side of the yard. The woman stares at me. She removes her glasses and peers into my face.

“What are you doing?”

“Remembering your features. The police are going to be very interested in this, especially with that house being broken into already.”

“I am the police.”

The woman pauses. “You are not. I saw you over there just last week.”

“Investigating.”

She studies my face again. “I’m calling the police.”

She turns and strides across the cement toward her back door. I follow her from a distance until she is under the shaded porch. Then I close the distance and raise the wrench. The way she collapses is not unlike sinking to the bottom of a pool.

I get the call later that night.

“I can’t even explain this one.”

“Not again.”

“They broke the air conditioner and took Ken’s portrait. And Mrs. Johnson is dead.”

“Mrs. Johnson?” The portrait leans against my couch. I pull out a pen and start drawing a moustache on Ken’s face, but I stop myself. Vandalism is beneath me. I pick up the portrait and hold it against the wall, putting it in different places.

“I don’t understand any of this. This doesn’t happen here. This happens in Fresno.”

“There are no safe places left in this world. Should I come over?”

She pauses. I can hear her yelling at Ben to get away from the window. Then she’s back, her voice shaking. “What’s next?”

“This time I’m staying.” I hang up before she can respond. Before I leave, I find a nail and hang Ken up on the wall behind the couch. I promise to take care of Olivia and Ben. With his new half-moustache, Ken doesn’t look happy at all.

The house is silent when I pull up. The hum of the air conditioner is conspicuous in its absence. There is police tape around Mrs. Johnson’s house. A police cruiser sits outside. I enter the house and Olivia is sitting at the kitchen table drinking a glass of water. The house is stifling. I sit at the table with her and reach across to hold her hands. She pulls them away.

“The police came by earlier.”

“Any leads?”

“What did they tell you when you called?”

“They were working on it. I don’t know, they gave me the brush off.”

“They said nobody ever called.”

I think about this for a moment. I rise and walk into the living room. There is a large blank space in the wall where the portrait should be. “What made him so much better than me?”

Olivia shakes her head. “Did you call the police or not?”

“It is impossible to fight with a ghost.”

“Answer me.”

I raise my voice slightly. “Of course I called. You were standing right there.”

She pauses and looks at wall. Then she looks back at me. “It’s not impossible.”
It’s the first opening I’ve had. “If he was here, he’d know what to do.”

“He’s not. I am.” I rest my hands on her shoulders. “I’m sorry. I’m really trying.”

“Ben really loves you.”

“I love him. I love you.”

“Can we just go to bed?”

I pull Olivia toward me and hold her. Our bodies are damp and warm. I take her hand and we walk down the hall together. Ben is asleep in his room. We watch him and then close his door and go to her bedroom. I climb into bed next to her and we lie on top of the sheets and hold hands. I begin to think Olivia has fallen asleep but then she speaks.

“They were insistent that nobody called.”

“I was thinking of that myself. Strange.”

“I hope this isn’t terrible to say.”

“Say it.”

“I’m sort of glad Mrs. Johnson is gone. I mean it’s a shame she’s dead but I’m glad she’s gone. She’s always looking over her fence, watching us. It’s creepy.” She pauses, and then she reaches a hand out to me. “Do you think they’ll come after us?”

I squeeze her hand. “You’re safe.”

After Olivia falls asleep I climb out of bed and walk through the house. I find a dishcloth in one of the kitchen drawers and wet it and place the cool cloth on my forehead. I sit in the living room and look out into the backyard. In the morning I’ll have to repair the air conditioner. I go out to my car and bring in the new frame. Inside there are four of our mall photos, enlarged and cropped to fit one in each corner. I hang the collage on the wall and stand back, making sure it sits straight.

Ben appears in the kitchen. “I can’t sleep.” He sees the collage and comes closer. Then he turns and calls for his mother. She joins us in the living room. “What is it?”

“A knight! And there’s us! He’s fighting the bad guys!” He doesn’t turn away from the collage.

“Too much?” I say. Olivia crosses the room to me and looks at our pictures.

“You did this all yourself?”

Ben tugs at my shirt. “They can’t get us with you here, right?”

I lift Ben from the ground and hold him close. I look Olivia in the eyes. “As long as I’m here, nothing bad can happen.”

Sink

After four days of heavy rain the clouds broke and drifted east, but now the house appeared to be tilting. Gerald stood in the driveway; he leaned to one side. A long fissure ran up the driveway and he bent to the ground and touched the cement. Water trickled into the opening. He walked along the edge of the flat and muddy lawn and eased up his front steps, which were buckled with water. The front door had swung open. Gerald stepped inside the house and tried to close the door but it no longer fit in its frame. There was a crack along the side. Gerald pulled tight and held the door closed. When he released the knob, the door opened and clattered against the house.

He called to his wife Karen. She was standing near the sink, pulling her hair into a ponytail. Sliced cucumbers sat in stacks on the counter. She reached up and moved hair across her forehead with the back of her wrist. In the fading gray evening light her skin looked pale.

“The door won’t close.”

“Chicken okay tonight?”

Gerald leaned against the refrigerator. He opened it and looked around but decided there was nothing he wanted. Outside the sun was disappearing behind a few lingering storm clouds. He thought of water pooling on the lawn. Karen was dicing tomatoes on a cutting board. The knife clicked hollowly against the wood.

“Karen?”

She turned around. “So chicken then?”

Gerald shrugged. “It’s up to you.”

“Honestly.” Karen through the knife into the sink and walked past him toward the front door. She pulled the door closed and watched it fall open. She walked out onto the porch and stopped at the steps. “Well. That’s a problem.”

That night Gerald couldn’t sleep. The house creaked and when he walked into the bathroom he found a crack that started at the ceiling and moved down the wall to the tub. The linoleum seemed to bend under his feet, and he couldn’t remember if it had always been that way. Karen was asleep. He walked through the house peering into each dark room. The living room was empty except for the couch that was now pushed against the wall. The front door still hung open and each time a car drove by Gerald heard wet tires against the road. He sensed the roof sagging toward him, and he heard water dripping somewhere. He tried to get the front door to close but it kept banging against the house. On his fourth attempt, Karen yelled from the bedroom. When he returned she was sitting against the headboard.

“Leave it alone.”

“I need to tie it shut or something.” Gerald reached out and touched Karen’s shoulder and then took his hand away. “A shoelace?” He reached out for her again but she curled under the blankets and rolled away from him.

“How long is this going to continue?”

Gerald left the bedroom. He spent the rest of the night listening to the house.

The county inspector arrived the next morning. Gerald stood on the porch and watched him write on a notepad, and then watched as he lifted his pants slightly and pressed the grass with his toe. Mud clung to his black shoes. The inspector noted the sagging porch and the door and followed closely as Gerald led him through the house.

The kitchen floor was slanted so that they had to walk downhill into the room. There were more places in the walls where cracks had formed. Gerald looked out the kitchen window and saw a new section of lawn. Some time in the night the window had moved.

When they reached the bedroom Karen was standing near the closet, changing. Her bathrobe lay in a heap at her feet. She was pulling on a pair of jeans, the pants just coming up over the curve of her backside. Gerald froze in the doorway. He looked at the inspector, who had a small half-smile on his face.

“Oops,” the inspector said.

Karen turned around. “Writing this down?”

“None of the doors work,” Gerald said as Karen struggled into a shirt.

“Got it,” the inspector said, still looking at Karen. She brushed past them. Gerald walked across the bedroom and tried to open the window but it was stuck. The inspector noted that. He wouldn’t stop smirking. Gerald showed him the shower, the fractured wall. Flecks of paint and plaster had fallen into the tub. He brushed debris from his hands and led the inspector outside. He had seen enough to make a judgment on the house. They stood on the porch. The water hadn’t moved from the lawn. Mud and water slid underneath the porch and disappeared in a large gaping hole. The lawn slowly oozed toward the house. A man and woman walked by. They stopped and talked quietly from the street, occasionally pointing toward the house. The man had a camera hanging from his neck and snapped photographs. The inspector said he would call the next day to let Gerald know what to do.

“What do I need, sand? Can I fill it with sand?”

The inspector stepped lightly off the porch and shook his head. He would call in the morning. Gerald watched him drive off. The couple stood by the curb and watched

the house, and the man waved and snapped another photograph. Gerald stepped onto the first porch step and waved but the step broke underneath him and he fell. The woman called from the street, asking if he was all right. He pulled his leg up from the hole. Mud covered him up to his calf. He yelled that he was fine and stumbled back into the house.

“What happened to you?” Karen said, looking at his feet. She sipped a cup of coffee. Gerald sat at the kitchen table. The slanted floor forced him to lean to one side, so that he felt like he might spill out of his chair. With a finger he scraped mud onto the floor.

“I hope I can fix this.”

Karen set her cup on the counter. “Is that really one of your strengths?”

Gerald felt a chill on the back of his neck. The house was cold and a damp breeze blew in every few minutes. The door clicked against the house. Gerald sighed and rested his chin in his hands. He noticed wallpaper falling away from one corner of the wall, and he stood on a chair and pushed the wallpaper into place.

“Tape,” he said.

“What?”

He climbed off the chair and put his hands on Karen’s shoulders. She tried to pull away but he gripped her arms. “Tape! We need tape!”

Karen shrugged and pushed Gerald in the chest. “Just tell me what the first step is. What’s the first step?”

Gerald opened his mouth to speak, but couldn’t think of what to say. There was movement coming from the front door. Shoes shuffled across the porch and into the living room, and there were low voices. Gerald and Karen walked out to find the couple from the street looking at the walls. The woman turned around.

“Sorry, is this a bad time?”

“Bad time for what?” Gerald said.

“Well you know, to take a look around. Your house has piqued the interest of this whole neighborhood.” She smiled broadly and stuck out her hand. “We’re the Tompsons.”

When Gerald didn’t respond she added, “We live two houses down?”

Her husband, who had been running a hand along the wall, turned around. A chunk of wall had come off and he dropped it on the floor. He lifted his camera and snapped a picture of Gerald and Karen. His smile was larger than his wife’s. “Jack Tompson! Good to know you. Got a beautiful home here.”

“What do you think this is? A museum?” Karen said.

The Tompsons’ smiles faded. Jack retreated toward the door. “We just thought. You know, the door was open.”

Gerald ushered the Tompsons to the door. “It’s not a good time, so maybe you—”

“You can get the fuck out,” Karen said.

Mrs. Tompson’s mouth opened wide. “Such language, and from a lady.” The Tompsons carefully made their way down the steps and out to the street. They stood in the street and Jack snapped photographs of the outside of the house.

“Can’t keep this to yourself you know!” Mrs. Tompson said.

Gerald removed his shoes and pulled the laces from them. He dropped the shoes on the porch and walked inside. He brought a chair from the kitchen and stood it next to the door and then he tied the shoelace on the doorknob and connected it to the chair. The door hung open slightly but he left it there.

“The nerve of some people,” Karen said. She crossed her arms over her chest and shivered as if she were cold. “We’re losing our house and they want to take pictures.”

“We’re not losing our house.”

“This is first time I’ve ever seen them. Do they really live on our block?”

“I’m going to fill the hole.”

“I hate this house.”

“You don’t hate it. You love this house. And we can fix it.”

“You always say that. I hate when you say that.”

“Let’s just worry about one thing at a time, okay?”

“God you’re a jukebox of clichés. What’s next? If we work together we can accomplish anything?”

“Well, we can.”

“Oh boy.” Karen walked into the kitchen and put her coffee cup on the counter. She leaned over the sink and looked out the window. “Hey, you can see the driveway from here!”

She left the kitchen and walked down the hall to their bedroom. Gerald sat in the living room, imagining the house slowly sinking into a growing chasm. A few hours passed and he peered out the front door. The Tompsons had gone home. Gerald walked into the bedroom and sat at the edge of the bed. It was damp and smelled like wet laundry. It wasn’t quite evening. Gray light filtered in through the window. He went to the kitchen and called around until he found a company to deliver sand and then he returned to the bedroom. Karen got up and they stripped the bed and heaped the bedding in the corner. Water dripped from the ceiling and hit the bedding in small thick splashes. Finally Gerald moved to the living room, and soon after Karen joined him.

The inspector called early the next morning. They had to move out. Gerald stood in the bedroom holding the phone, watching water seep through a crack in the ceiling. There was a dark splotch on the bed. Water slid down the walls. The wallpaper was warped and discolored. One corner of the bedroom was collapsing. The ceiling had begun to shift and large pieces had fallen on the floor. Insulation fluttered around the room and a draft slipped through the top of the ceiling.

“So that’s it then,” Karen said. She began pulling clothes out of the drawers.

“There’s still a chance. Sand guy’s coming today.”

Karen stood holding a pair of shorts. “How sturdy is sand?”

Gerald took the shorts and replaced them in the drawer. There was the sound of a truck pulling up outside. “That’s probably him.”

Gerald turned to walk away but Karen stopped him. “Let me help. We have to try, right?”

“I have to see about the sand.” Gerald walked through the house. He untied the shoelace and the door fell open. He stepped off the porch and approached the driver. A crowd had assembled on the street. Jack Tompson stood with his camera poised. Karen remained on the porch. Gerald looked back at Karen and raised his eyebrows.

“What should I do?” Karen said.

Gerald spoke quickly to the sand man. When the driver asked if Gerald knew what he was doing, Gerald said, of course. The driver lifted the back of the truck and sand spilled on the driveway in a great pile. After the driver left, Gerald carried a shovelful to the porch. Karen watched as he worked.

“Should I tape up the wallpaper?”

Gerald leaned against the shovel handle. “Brilliant, yes. A team effort.” He returned to the pile and lifted another shovelful. The onlookers stared as Gerald worked. Karen watched for another few minutes, and yelled out to the crowd.

“If you want to keep watching you have to buy a ticket!”

She slammed the front door shut. She hadn’t reached the other side of the house before the door swung open again, and Gerald watched her disappear into their bedroom.

He began to get into a rhythm. The clouds had dissipated and the sun peered out. It was finally a warm day and the heat rising off the mud and stagnant water made him sweat. His shirt stuck to his body and he removed it. He worked steadily for over an hour but couldn’t tell if he had made any progress. He couldn’t see into the hole and didn’t know if the sand was filling it or disappearing without effect. There was a steady murmur of voices as he shoveled sand. Jack Tompson seemed to be the expert on the subject, and answered questions.

“He should give up,” somebody said, making no attempt to lower his voice.

“Wouldn’t it have been easier to have the truck just dump the sand into the hole?”

“Nonsense,” Jack said. “It would be impossible to get a truck onto the lawn under these circumstances.” He snapped a few more photographs.

After the second hour, Gerald’s skin was sunburned and he his hands had developed blisters. It was becoming more difficult to carry the shovel. He wrapped his hands with his shirt and continued working but soon tired and rested against his shovel near the sand pile. Two teenagers left the crowd and ran to him. They stood beside him as Jack took their picture.

“Hey Gerald, could you look a little more bedraggled?” Jack asked. “I really want to play up the contrast between you and the two boys. You know, really capture the desperation.”

Gerald set the shovel down and went inside. It was the middle of the afternoon and he was exhausted. He leaned over the kitchen sink and splashed water on his face. The house was quiet and he walked down the hall, looking for Karen. She was in the bedroom using glue to stop the ceiling from leaking. Globes of glue fell to the floor. Wallpaper hung in wet strips.

“Is it filled?”

“I think I’m making real headway.”

Karen dropped the glue and leaned her head against the wall. “Maybe towels. Can we pin towels up here?”

Gerald didn’t respond. Karen closed her eyes. “I wish you’d just admit that everything is ruined.” After a moment she opened her eyes and looked around. “We should pack.”

Gerald walked into the living room and sat on the floor. He heard kids playing a game, yelling to each other in the street. Karen came out of the bedroom with boxes. She put the kitchen utensils in a box and set it by the front door. Gerald closed his eyes and slipped in and out of sleep.

When he awoke it was dark outside. The breeze was cool now after the damp heat of the afternoon, and Gerald rested his head against the wall. Bits of paint stuck to his hair. Karen was somewhere on the other end of the house; he could hear her moving in the bedroom. The kids were still outside. He thought he could sense them right next to

him, their voices were so clear. Then he heard rough footsteps. He opened his eyes and saw two teenage boys standing in his living room, looking around.

“The hell is this?” Gerald said, standing. “Why do you people keep walking in?”

The boys were staring at the ceiling. One of them said, “We just wanted to see what the inside looked like.” The other one said, “This is so cool.”

“It’s not cool,” Gerald said. “It’s a fucking disaster.”

The kids looked at him, startled. “I don’t get it, man,” one of them said. “I’d let everyone in here if I was you.”

“Get the hell out of my house,” Gerald said. “And tell your friends this isn’t a side show.”

He followed the boys off the porch. The crowd had gone home for the night, but Gerald was sure they’d come back tomorrow. He tied the front door to the chair and sat down on the living room floor. Karen entered the room.

“Kids?”

“Just walked right in.”

She slumped on the couch and closed her eyes. “It really is more interesting from the inside.” After a while, her breathing slowed.

Gerald sat against the living room wall, watching Karen sleep. His skin was raw and gritty. Salt formed over his eyelids and on his neck, and each time he moved he could feel the sunburn. When Karen slept she frowned and her eyebrows turned downward so that she looked angry. She clenched her hands in two fists under her chin. Gerald searched through boxes until he found a blanket, and draped it over her as she slept. Then he moved through the house and packed the rest of their belongings. From the closet he pulled clothes that hadn’t been worn for years. He tried on a button-up orange shirt but it

didn't fit right and he left it in the closet. It was like going through relics of a different life; the people who'd worn those clothes no longer existed. When he finished packing the clothes he sat on the floor. The carpet was damp and squelched beneath him.

The next afternoon the county men showed up to condemn the house. The sky was overcast but there was no rain. Gerald had been working for a little over an hour and his arms and back ached. When the men arrived he picked up the pace, jogging between the pile and the hole.

The men worked quickly. They wrapped caution tape around the perimeter of the house. The neighbors had returned and stood on the street, watching. Mrs. Tompson wringed her hands but she was grinning. The house slanted toward the street. It looked as if somebody had dropped the roof crookedly on top. Karen went in and out of the house with two workers, removing boxes. One of the workers approached Gerald.

"You're going to have to stop this." He stood quietly for a moment, nodding his head. Gerald took two more scoops of sand to the house and dropped them under the porch. "You're not even close."

Gerald paced to the sand pile and dug another shovelful. Finally the worker stepped in. He placed his hands on Gerald's shoulders. "It's all over."

Gerald pulled away. He could feel things beginning to slip away from him. He looked up at the house. It was ugly and broken. He didn't like the house either. And yet, here he was. He brushed past the worker and dropped sand into the hole.

"Sir?" the worker said. He took the shovel away. Gerald stood quietly for a moment, then began scooping sand with his hands.

"The house is going to fall. You have to leave."

Karen stood on the street, calling to him. “Let it go!”

“What did you think?” the worker said. “You can just fill the hole up with sand? That still doesn’t address the other problems.”

He led Gerald away from the house, and Gerald stood next to Karen and watched the men finish their work.

“Karen,” he said, but he didn’t know how to finish his thought. His clothes were heavy with mud and sweat and the smell was thick and swampy. He peeled off his shirt and pulled off his shoes and socks, letting them drop heavily onto the pavement.

“This house wasn’t that great,” Karen said. “Was it?”

“If we just had more time. People kept coming in and—maybe concrete would’ve done it?”

“Please, can we not talk?” Karen sounded tired. “Can we just stand here?”

Her voice fell away. Gerald turned and watched the house. Jack Tompson walked around the perimeter, snapping pictures. He was frantic, trying to capture the final moments. Gerald considered reaching out to touch Karen’s hand. It was close enough. But he decided against it. There was nothing left to do but watch the house collapse on itself. The porch went first.

Desperado

Julie and I are in New Mexico. We've been driving all day from east Texas, trying to get to California, our first real road trip. Julie wants to go to Hollywood and meet famous people; she wants to be an actress, she tells me. She's just waiting for her chance to be discovered, and that's not happening in the community theater back home. She's good, I guess; I don't know anything about acting. She's a pretty girl, nineteen; the star of our town. Old women come up to her after shows and ask for her autograph; boys want their pictures taken with her. I don't want to crush her dreams or anything, but I don't think anyone in Hollywood wants a pretty girl who can only play helpless damsels.

"You know what Earl said to me?" Julie says. "He said, 'Give 'em hell, Julie!' I fully intend to."

"Is Earl the one always sitting in the front row, trying to touch your legs?"

"Ooh, I'm so excited! Aren't you?"

"Absolutely."

The car has overheated twice already. We turn on the AC and it starts screaming, smoke billowing over the hood. We leave the windows down and sweat, hot air swirling inside the car. I reach out and hold Julie's hand but it's clammy and I let go. I leave my hand on her thigh for a moment. Her skin is smooth and warm and I squeeze her leg lightly. I move my hand slowly, further up her leg, but she shifts and it falls off. The road keeps spilling out in front of us.

"Well," I say, shouting over the rushing air.

"What?"

We roll up the windows and I reach for the AC switch. Julie makes a motion to stop me.

“I don’t care,” I say. Then, I say, “Can’t wait to get out of this car and find a hotel. Lie down in a nice big bed.”

I look at Julie out of the corner of my eye.

“Don’t be sly,” she says. “Just ‘cause we’re out on the road doesn’t mean rules change.”

“Did I say that?” I say.

“You’re twenty-three. You don’t have to say a thing.”

After ten hours my back hurts and my eyes are raw from staring out the bug-spattered windshield. I fold my legs underneath me, relying on cruise control, sliding around vehicles in a daze, my body shaking from energy drinks and powdered donuts. Julie has fallen asleep beside me, her red hair in clumps, her face against the window, drool spilling out of the corner of her mouth.

Suddenly there is a loud hollow pop and the car starts shaking. There is the sound of metal grinding. Julie sits up. Her eyes are bloodshot and there are small chip crumbs stuck to the side of her face. I brush them away and pull a handful of chips from the bag.

“Where are we?” she says. The car is really bucking now. She looks around and rubs her face. “That doesn’t sound right.”

We pull off in some empty town, Outlaw, and look around for a service station. It’s like a town out of a western. There is one road running through the center, flanked on each side by a barber shop, a hotel and saloon, a general store. I don’t see a service station so we stop at the general store. My legs feel like concrete, and I walk stiff-legged around the car. Julie wraps her arms around me. The air is hot and warm dust blows over my shoes and whips around me.

“Thanks for driving,” she says and kisses me. Then she pulls away and frowns.

“You taste like Fritos,” she says. I walk into the store and ask the clerk about a service station while Julie pulls bottles of Coke from the refrigerator.

“No stations here,” the clerk says. He has a clear country accent that sounds like maybe he’s over-doing it. “Gotta go fifteen miles up the road for that.”

He rings us up for the sodas. “I can fix the car, no problem. Take at least a day though.”

I look at Julie and she shrugs.

“Wanna stay here tonight, motel right across the street,” he says as he points out the door toward the saloon.

We step outside and Julie’s already looking over at the saloon, walking in that direction.

“While we’re here, I’m not Julie,” she says. “I want to be someone else.”

“Why?”

“Practice. You have to call me Rita.”

“Rita...”

“And you can be...August.”

“Really, a month? You want to do all this acting garbage, that’s your own deal. Leave me out of it.”

“Please?”

She takes a long pull from the Coke bottle. My skin is gritty; salt has gathered over my eyelids and on the back of my neck. I just want to take a shower and lie down. Maybe lie down next to Julie for a while. Maybe do a little kissing. Maybe rub her neck, or her back or...

I put my hands behind my back and stretch, trying to loosen up. The clerk follows us out of the store.

“Should I start now?” he says, looking at the car.

“Yes, great,” I say.

“Let’s find a room, Rita,” I say.

There are two men sitting at the bar when we walk in. The bartender looks up once then goes back to talking. Soon they all turn around and size us up. Julie puts on a big smile and saunters across the saloon.

“Ma’am,” the bartender says.

The men, both grizzled and tired, tip their cowboy hats in her direction.

“Mighty hot day,” she says, fanning herself.

“Reckon it’s been that way a while now,” the bartender says. “What’d you need?”

I walk toward the bar, nodding at the two drinkers. “Room for the night,” I say, and the bartender reaches under the bar and pulls out a clipboard.

“Just sign here,” he says. Julie takes the pen and carefully writes *Rita and August*. The bartender trades me a key for thirty-five dollars. One of the men picks up the clipboard and says, “Rita’s a pretty name.”

“Why, thank you,” she says, extending her hand. “And you are?”

“Name’s Harold,” he says, removing his hat. He has thick black hair and crystal blue eyes that shine against his brown leather skin.

“This here’s Clarence.” His friend is pudgy; jowls hang below his chin like a bulldog. His dark eyes gleam.

“Pleasure,” Clarence says, removing his hat and rubbing a hand over his matted brown hair.

Julie says she'd like to stay and "visit for a spell." I have no idea what she's talking about, so I leave to get our things from the car. At the store, the clerk is studying the engine block.

"Just starting to work on her," he says.

"Appreciate it," I say and remove our clothes and toiletries from the trunk. In the saloon Rita is sitting on a stool, leaning against the bar. She is laughing and tilts her head back slightly.

"Oh, Harold," she says. "What do you mean?"

"I'm just saying, *McLintock* is a fine film. One of John Wayne's best. You've seen it, I'm sure?"

"I most certainly have."

I've seen very few—if any—John Wayne movies, but I laugh awkwardly, standing in the saloon holding Julie's curling iron. She glances over at me.

"Well don't just stand there, darling," she says. "Take it upstairs."

"Right," I say. As I head upstairs, I can hear them speaking in low voices, and then they erupt in laughter.

There is no shower in the room, only a thick metal basin and a water spigot coming from the wall. I squat naked in the basin and run lukewarm water over my face until it runs out, then I bathe in cold water. The sun is beginning to set and I open the window to let in the warm evening air. I put on pants and a t-shirt and sit at the edge of the bed. It's narrow and hard; the mattress sits on a system of two-by-fours, lifting it just off the hardwood floor.

I rest my head in my hands. A full day of driving left, and then we'll be in California. Just fifteen more hours and it'll be palm trees, beautiful people rollerblading

along the sidewalk eating ice cream cones under blue skies and lemon sunshine. I lie down and close my eyes, trying to imagine paradise. Walking along the beach with Julie, splashing in the ocean water, lying out on the sand and listening to seagulls call out to one another in the late afternoon. Julie looks so lovely, sunlight glinting off her red hair, her slim, tan body just fitting into her bikini. Everything is more beautiful in California I'm sure, where the world is bright and not blurred by all this hot, dusty air.

I hear what sounds like cap guns going off in the street. I look out the window and see Clarence and Howard, twenty feet apart, shooting at each other. I run down the stairs and out the saloon doors. Julie is standing in the street, watching.

"What is this?" I say. A small crowd stands across the road from us, cheering. The clerk steps from behind my car and watches. He waves to me and points at the car.

"Comin' along fine," he shouts.

"Fine!" I yell back.

"It's part of the act," Julie says. "They have shootouts at noon and just before the sun sets." She turns to me, beaming. "Isn't this great? It's just like being in the Wild West!"

"There's no hot water, no shower," I say. "We might call a cab, find a Motel 6 or something."

"Are you kidding?" she says. "We're staying. These are my roots. God, my Dad would be so happy to see us in this place."

"What would your Dad care?"

"He was a cowboy, you know that."

"He was an actor. He played cowboys in movies."

"Still..."

“And it’s not like he was Clint Eastwood or something. He was the guy that always got shot and fell into a horse trough. He was dead within the first ten minutes of every movie.”

The gun play ends, and Clarence has been killed. The crowd applauds and disperses, and the two men dust themselves off and trudge into the saloon. Julie glares at me and trails behind them. We all sit together at a table in the middle of the room and wait for the bartender to bring us the Wild West Special.

“That was a real frightful shootout,” Julie says. I still don’t know what she’s trying to do with that accent.

“Shoot, it was nothin’,” Clarence says.

“You guys live here,” I say.

“Sure do,” Clarence says, and I can’t help it. I laugh.

“What’s so funny?” Julie says.

“They’re using cap guns. I mean, doesn’t this act get old?”

“Hey, this ain’t no act,” Harold says. “This here’s the last of an untamed land. You don’t know what you’ve stumbled on.”

“Untamed land, that’s perfect,” I say. The bartender brings us four plates, all with hamburgers and fries, a few pickle slices on the side.

“I suppose this is authentic food?” I say, biting into the hamburger. Juices spill out and dribble down my chin. It tastes wonderful, but still.

“Well I think this is all very believable,” Julie says. “I’m an actress myself.”

“That so?” Clarence says.

“Well, let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” I say. “She wants to be an actress. What, you do, right? We’re headed to Hollywood so she can make it big, or something.”

“Too bad,” Harold says. “We like your style, love to have you stay.”

“Oh, we’re not staying,” I say.

“Why don’t you go upstairs,” Julie says. “You’re ruining everyone’s good time.”

I pause, looking at their faces. Clarence studies his fries. Then I pick up my plate and stomp up the stairs. I eat the rest of my meal on the bed as I stare out the window. The clerk is still tinkering under the hood of the car. Downstairs, there is the sound of feet shuffling across the wood floor, and Julie is talking in a loud dramatic voice, as if she’s delivering a monologue. I take my plate to the door and listen. Her voice lilts beautifully, the words filling up the empty saloon. I lean against the doorframe until she finishes her lines, and then there is a light applause and Harold says something to her. There is the sound of furniture moving around and as I descend the stairs I can hear slapping and Julie’s laughter. At the bottom of the stairs, I’m treated to this sight: Julie is lying across Harold’s lap and he’s spanking her. Clarence stands away from them with his arms folded, looking seriously.

“No, that’s not right,” he says, and Julie stands. I clear my throat.

“Spanking?” I say. I can’t think of anything else.

“We’re rehearsing a scene,” Julie says.

“*McLintock*,” Harold says quietly and I just about lose it.

Julie steps in between us. “It’s a scene from a movie. If I want to make it I have to stay sharp.”

“Letting strange men slap your ass isn’t improvement. You want that go back home and let Earl go to town on you.”

“I might get a difficult role. I have to be flexible.”

“It’s true,” Clarence says. “Hollywood’s a tough town. Like this one.”

I take a step back, remembering that Clarence is in the room. The two gunmen look ridiculous, standing with their arms crossed, their cheeks covered in stubble.

“What are you guys doing here?” I say. “Waiting for John Wayne to come around?”

“Watch it now,” Clarence says.

I hold up my hands. “All right, Pilgrim.”

“Typical August,” Julie says. “Can’t go along with anything.”

“Please,” I say. “If they were even half-believable, I’d go along with it. It’d be like watching you play a serious role.”

She wheels on me, her eyes wide.

“You saying I can’t act?”

Slow down, I think. Just slow down. Still time to get out of this. But once you get going, you know how hard it is to stop.

“I’m saying this place suits you. You can be the damsel in distress.”

“That’s not right to treat a lady like that,” Harold says. “Rita deserves better.” He smiles at her and reaches out to touch her hand. The clerk eases through the saloon doors.

“Just had a question about the car,” he says. “I’ll come back.” He backs out of the doors and disappears.

“Does that guy always do that?” I say. “That’s the third time I’ve seen him. Just fix the damn thing.”

“Now you’re turning on Al?” Julie says.

“How do you know his name?”

“She knows everyone,” Harold says. “Everyone knows—and loves—Rita. You can’t understand that, we’ll settle things like men.”

“Settle what?”

“A duel. Tomorrow, high noon.”

“A duel? Where the hell am I?”

I cross the room and pick up a cap gun off the table.

“Can we make the duel at nine? We have to hit the road,” I say. “In fact, why don’t we just settle things right now?” I point the gun at him and fire a few rounds.

“Looks like you’re dead, Harold.”

Harold stares at me for a second, clenching his jaw. He turns and walks up the stairs. Julie crosses her arms and pouts.

“Now you’ve done it,” she says.

Harold returns with two more guns. He slams them on the table.

“This real enough for you?”

I pick up a gun. It’s heavy. I open it to find rounds in the chambers.

“Hey, I was just kidding around,” I say, trying to keep the panic out of my voice. I didn’t sign up for this. If Al would ever finish on the car I would pack up and leave; the Motel 6 maids don’t pull shit like this. Clarence is laughing.

“You want the real thing, so tomorrow morning you can have it,” Harold says.

“Look, Dirty Harry, I’m not looking for trouble,” I say.

“Okay, can I stop you for second?” Julie says. “Is he John Wayne or is he Clint Eastwood? You’re all over the place with your references.”

“Ah, so now you’re on their side?”

“I’m just saying, if you want to make fun, consistency goes a long way.”

Al walks back through the doors and stands in the entrance, holding his hat.

“What type of oil does that car take?”

“Damn it Al, not now!” I say. I shake my head. “I can’t do this.”

“Backing out?” Clarence says.

“Of what?”

“Tomorrow,” Harold says. “Nine o’clock.”

There is no reasoning with this guy. I scratch my head with the barrel of the gun and sigh. I try to make my voice deeper, a low thick whisper.

“I’ll set my alarm,” I say. I try to walk up the stairs without shaking, trying to remember what the guys do in the movies when they get challenged to a duel. Upstairs, I set the gun on the bedside table. I lie on the bed and cross my arms over my face, thinking, this is not worth it. I should have made this trip myself. Of course, if it hadn’t been for Julie I’d still be home. I wouldn’t be anywhere.

After a while, Julie enters the room and sits at the edge of the bed. She touches my leg and then takes her hand away and fixes her hair.

“Look, Julie, those things I said.”

“I don’t know why you had to stir those guys up.”

“Me stir them up? Why do you always have to play a role? Why can’t you just be on a road trip with your boyfriend?”

“Isn’t that a role?”

I squeeze my eyes shut and sit up against the wall.

“Look, I understand, okay? I know you’re trying to act with those guys. But there is now a real gun in this room.”

I swing my legs off the bed and sit next to her.

“I just want you to be safe,” I say. “I want to make it to Hollywood in one piece so you can be a big star.”

She rests her head on my shoulder and I wrap an arm around her. I close my eyes and listen to her breathing. I kiss her cheek and squeeze her shoulder.

“I could do well in a place like this,” she says quietly.

I laugh. “Yeah, you would be the star.”

I move around in front of her and kiss her on the mouth. She pulls away slightly.

“You can be a real jerk,” she says.

“I know,” I say, and kiss her again. This time she kisses me back, and I take the cue; I let my hands slide down her arms and leave them on her waist. Then, slowly, I move to her thighs, and then her inner thighs. She pulls away.

“What are you doing?” she says.

“Come on,” I say. “Let’s pretend that we’re in love and on the run.” I lean in to kiss her again.

“You’re a terrible actor,” she says. She gets off the bed and walks toward the bathroom. Before she reaches the door I come up behind her and swat her backside. Mistake. She jumps.

“What was that?” Her mouth is open slightly and she looks angry.

“*McLintock?*” I say. She puts her hands on her hips and shakes her head.

“You’re hopeless,” she says. She walks into the bathroom and closes the door and then I hear running water. I lean my forehead against the door.

“Come on Julie. Rita. I’m trying to love you, but you’re not giving me a fair chance.”

“I’m busy,” she says. “Can we talk about this in the morning?”

“I might be dead in the morning.”

“Go to sleep,” she says.

I sigh and turn around, and there is Al standing in the doorway. I jump back, startled.

“What the hell?”

“Trouble with Miss Rita?” he says.

“What do you want?” I say, trying to recover.

“Just wanted you to know I should be done in the morning.”

I make an effort to slow my breathing.

“And?”

“And...that’s it, I suppose. Ya’ll have a nice night now.”

He stands and nods to me, and then moves quietly from the room. I follow him and close the door and sit against it.

“I’ve got to get out of here,” I say to the empty room. I fall on the bed, slightly knocking the wind out of me. We could slip out early, leave the key at the bar and drive away before anyone else wakes up. We could be miles away before anyone realizes we’ve left. Except, Al has the keys. I close my eyes and moan.

I’m drifting into a fitful sleep when Julie steps out of the bathroom, shivering in a pair of sweat pants and a sweatshirt. Her hair is wet and hangs past her shoulders, leaving wet splotches on her clothes, dripping water on the floor. She climbs into bed and curls underneath the covers, putting her arms around me.

“Water’s freezing,” she says. “Keep me warm.” I wrap my arms around her and squeeze, her cold wet hair swishing against my face. I run my hands up her back, and kiss her forehead and her nose and her mouth and her neck, I slide my hands down her sweat pants.

“August,” she says.

“Just trying to keep warm.”

“Oh for goodness sake,” she says, climbing out of bed. “I’m going downstairs. I think, under the circumstances, you should sleep on the floor.”

She leaves me in the room, aroused and pissed off, and soon I hear voices again downstairs. I lie on the floor and try to fall asleep, but there are knots in the wood that keep pressing into my spine. I roll around but can’t find a comfortable position. I think to myself, is this love? Is giving up sex and a bed enough to say I love you? I don’t know if I love her; she’s great, and she’s a tough girl and yeah the acting thing might be stupid, but who cares? If I love her I’d support that, wouldn’t I? So what do I have to do to show her? Do I have to die for her? Or kill for her? I start thinking maybe the fight will give me a chance to win her over; maybe if I do this for her we’ll get to California and everything will be wonderful. I fall asleep, halfway to the coast. In my mind, I’m already there.

I oversleep, and at nine there is shouting from the street.

“Come on down, varmint!”

I stand up, my back stiff and sore, and look out the window to see Clarence and Harold peering up toward me. There are a handful of spectators on the other side of the street. Julie is standing in the bathroom, applying makeup.

“Varmint?” I say.

“Aren’t you going down there?” Julie says. She picks up her toothbrush and goes to work. She spits toothpaste into the sink and ties her hair back into a ponytail.

“I’m going to win it for you,” I say, wanting to believe it, wanting it to be true.

“Just don’t get hurt.”

“A risk I’m willing to take, my darling.”

I pick up the gun and walk downstairs and into the street. Harold and Clarence have been talking to each other, but now they approach me.

“Didn’t think you’d show,” Clarence says.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I say. “You just saw me upstairs.”

Clarence looks from Harold to me, then steps back and addresses the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we have ourselves here an old-fashioned Wild West shootout!”

Julie walks out of the saloon and stands in the doorway, looking on.

“August has dishonored the fair Rita,” Clarence says. “Harold’s gonna right the wrong!” There is a smattering of applause and Clarence slaps me on the back and grins.

“Dishonored the fair Rita?” I say. Harold walks over to Julie and kisses her hand. She turns away and bats her eyelashes. The crowd loves it.

Clarence finishes his speech. “The rules: You each walk ten paces, then stop and face each other. Then it’s fastest draw.”

He winks at me. “And that ain’t you.”

Harold comes over and stands beside me; there is a family that has just arrived and they want to take a picture of the two gunmen. As we pose, he says, “Now just pull your gun out and fire, and then fall down.”

“What about the bullets?” I say. He laughs.

“You’re lucky you have a nice lady friend,” he says. “Otherwise I wouldn’t have given her the blanks.”

“What blanks?”

“Just shoot and fall, and then we’re done,” he says. Then he steps back from me and shouts, “To the death!”

“Wait, what blanks?” I say, but Harold is already taking his paces. I turn toward Julie.

“Blanks?” I shout. She freezes and her arms drop to her sides, and her eyes go wide. I see her mouth “Oh, no,” and then she turns and runs back into the saloon. I look in my gun and see the bullets, and then I walk toward Clarence holding out the gun.

“I forgot...”

“Where you goin’?” he says.

“My gun, there’s something wrong with...”

Clarence raises his voice so that the spectators can hear him. “What are you, yellow?”

The crowd gives a deep gasp.

“Cut that shit for a second,” I say. I try to speak quietly, urgently so that he might understand. “My gun is no good.”

“Looks like August’s gonna walk from a gunfight!” he shouts. He jabs a finger into my chest. “Like the yellow-bellied coward he is!” The crowd boos at me. I turn around to find the family booing, a little girl shaking her fist. I back toward the saloon, but Julie hasn’t come back.

Fine, I decide. I’ll stand and get shot. I walk back to my position and stand, ready to draw. Even though I know Harold has blanks, I’m nervous watching his fingers twitch near his holster. I don’t have a holster. My gun is stuck in the waistline of my pants. The crowd has grown silent. I take my eyes off Harold as Al saunters up to me from the side of the road.

“What is it?” I say.

“Wanna look at the car?” he says, smiling.

“Little busy here, Al.”

“Right,” he says. But he doesn’t move. “Shootout, huh? You know, he’s never lost. Quick Draw, they call him.”

“Look, can you give me a minute?” I say. There is gun blast. Instead of falling down, I pull my gun from my waistband and fire. It’s all reaction. Honestly, what would have been the right response? I hear gunfire. I have a gun. It all happens in two seconds. Smoke slips out of the barrel; twenty paces away Harold is writhing on the ground. Julie bursts out of the saloon doors holding blanks. She drops them and they clatter on the ground. I run to Harold and crowd around with the spectators and Clarence and Julie.

“You shot him!” Clarence says. “What’s wrong with you?”

“I tried to tell you.”

Clarence takes the gun from me and empties the bullets onto the ground. “Such villainy!” he cries. He sounds like a child, his face contorted, his jowls swaying like a Jell-O mold.

“Are you all right?” Julie says. She kneels beside Harold’s body. Blood spills from his right shoulder onto the dusty ground. His shirt is wet and dark.

“Just a flesh wound,” he says, sounding almost like John Wayne. Then his accent falls away. “Hurts like hell, though.”

Al runs up beside us and stands over the body.

“Guns kill,” he says, shaking his head.

“Not now, Al,” I say.

“Car’s ready to go,” he says, and hands me the keys. He takes another look at Harold and shakes his head.

“Damn shame.”

“Look, this wasn’t my idea. I didn’t even want to stay here.” I turn on Julie.
“You’re the one who wanted to stay, who wanted to change our names, who wants to play-act all the time.”

The crowd begins to disperse. Al trudges back to his store. The family walks toward the hotel, the father carrying his screaming daughter. Right now, I’d like to be carried off, too.

“Can we go now?” I say, reaching for Julie’s arm. She stands.

“We can’t leave Harold bleeding in the street!” she cries.

“My name is Anthony,” Harold says.

“I’m Julie.” They stare at one another, silent.

“We really need to hit the road,” I say.

“If you’re so anxious to go, then go,” Julie says. Clarence takes a step away from me and raises his eyebrows.

“You’re on your own, pal,” he says.

“So, what? You’re staying here?” I say. “Want to be Rita for the rest of your life? Just want to pretend?”

“Why not? Did a pretty good job with you, didn’t I? Oh, yeah. Didn’t know that, did you? You’re my ride out of Texas, pal. You think I’m in love with you? Please, just another part?”

“You don’t mean that.”

“And what about you? All you talk about is going to California. Everything will be better in California. Is the beach really gonna save you?”

“We can do this in the car,” I say, and then I play my last hand. “Julie, please. Come to Hollywood with me. I love you.”

“What a line,” she says. “But your delivery is terrible.”

“Can somebody please attend to my arm?” Harold says. Clarence removes his shirt and wraps it around Harold’s arm. He and Julie lift Harold to his feet, and he stands leaning against them. There is nothing left for me. They’re running me out of town.

“If I leave, you’re stuck here,” I say.

She slips an arm around Harold’s waist. I walk upstairs to the room and gather what little I have left. I leave the key at the bar and remove Julie’s things from the car.

I drive all night, a lone rider, racing through open desert toward California. I get there the next day and sleep in a rest area before entering Los Angeles. I come over a hill, descending into the city, and the blue sky is smoggy brown. I stay in Hollywood for half a day, wandering the streets. It’s not bright and glittery; the place is a dump and I don’t meet any famous people. The beaches are littered and I get a bad sunburn. After a day and a half, I drive back home, seeing Julie everywhere I go, remembering that moment I drove away, dust kicking up behind the car, the three of them disappearing in my rearview mirror. They looked like a posse.

Traps

This summer bears have been coming down from the woods and into the neighborhoods. They knock over trash cans, looking for scraps, and now we keep the cans in the garage. Every morning I fight through the stench to reach my car. Two months ago Bob down the street had a bear break into his car, smash up the windshield and paw around because Bob left an open box of crullers on the front seat. In mid-July Bob sets traps out in the woods, trying to deter the bears. It's illegal, but Bob's car is totaled and he doesn't care about legalities. He says if the county isn't going to come out and fix the problem, if the forestry department doesn't care, then why should he? I don't know who's supposed to take care of it, so I just nod.

"They were heavy," he says, talking about the traps. We stand in the middle of the street, looking out toward where the road disappears and becomes woodland. He found them at a swap meet and paid forty bucks for five. They were metal and rusted. The snaps have teeth that will sink into the bear's leg, keeping it in place.

"Won't move with those clamps on," Bob says. It is mid-morning but already damp and hot. I wipe my face with the bottom of my shirt.

"Boy." I can think of nothing else to say. Bob has a way of talking at you. He pats my shoulder and walks back into his house. And then Carla's calling to me from our porch. Inside the air is cooler and I lean against the kitchen counter. Carla is holding the telephone in one hand, a piece of paper in another.

"Groceries, Dean," Carla says. She extends a list to me.

"Why can't you do it? I have papers to correct."

"Then you wouldn't be playing outside."

"Playing? You think I'm playing?"

She starts to read off the list. “We need hamburger meat, and Swiss cheese, and I want new cereal. Golden Grahams. And if you want you can pick up some of those artichoke hearts you like. The ones that come in the jar? Want some of those?”

“Aren’t you bored?”

She stops listing items and folds the paper in half. “Take my credit card.”

“I can pay for groceries.”

“Don’t be silly. Take my card. And get something nice for yourself.” She punches numbers into the telephone and listens. I pause for a moment, then take the list and dig through her purse for her credit card.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t spend too much now.” She turns her attention to the person on the other end of the phone. “Hello there.”

The air in the garage is heavy and smells faintly of pickled meat. I open the garage door and harsh sunlight glints off the pavement. I hold my breath and jog around to the driver’s side. Flies hum around the trash cans, and a few follow me into the car. I drive with the windows down, swatting at bugs.

Once inside the grocery store I can’t remember what I came for, and I realize that I’ve forgotten the list in the car. I troll the aisles, leaning on a cart. I move through the cereal aisle transfixed by the colored boxes, the many different types of cereal. Then there’s a jolt and my cart stops moving.

I smell her before I look up, peppermint and vanilla, and then I see her standing there, maybe five years younger than me, short black hair and a thin body, pale skin. She stands upright with one hand against her cart, her pretty little mouth set in a frown.

“Whenever you’re ready.”

“Um—what?”

“Move?”

She pushes her cart into mine, but I just stand there vaguely pointing back over my shoulder. “Have there always been that many kinds of cereal?”

She studies the row of boxes then she backs her cart away from me and turns around. I follow her.

“I didn’t mean to bump you, you know.”

“I’m looking for coffee filters. Where are the coffee filters?”

“Because if you think I was trying to run into you just to, I don’t know, start a conversation or something, well you’re wrong. I was distracted, I had no idea you were there.”

She scans the aisles, peering at the labels hanging from the ceiling.

“So then, we’re okay?”

She stops. “If you want to follow me around at least help me find coffee filters.”

“I’m not following you.”

I continue following her, and we talk. I find the coffee filters and offer to buy them for her, in apology for the accident. She notices that my cart is empty, so I begin filling it with random items. I pretend to study the health facts on the back of a package of granola bars and throw them in, saying, “Might as well.”

Then she notices my wedding ring. “You’re married?”

“Actually.” I pause for a moment, considering. “No.” I hold out my hand to examine the ring as if I’ve only now remembered that I’m still wearing it.

“Divorced?” There are small freckles across the bridge of her nose; a small mole on the side of her neck. Her eyes are large and wide-set.

“She’s deceased.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It was a long time ago.” I remove the ring. “Old habits, right?”

We speak a while longer and she lets me buy the coffee filters. We walk to her car and I help her load her groceries. She closes the trunk and hesitates, one hand resting on the car, and then I ask if I can give her a call sometime. She writes her phone number on the back of my receipt. On the drive home the world looks different, cleaner somehow; I can’t stop smiling.

Carla’s at the kitchen table talking on the telephone when I carry in the groceries. She whispers something quickly and hangs up. I’m surprised to see her; it’s like seeing a ghost. I drop the groceries on the table. She smiles but that quickly fades as she looks through the bags.

“What’s all this? Where’s the meat?”

“All out.”

“For God’s sake, Dean.”

“It was the—well—the bears. Apparently they got into the loading trucks last night or something. Crazy, I know, but what can we do?”

She reaches into the bag and pulls out coconut flavored marshmallows, and then she just stares at me.

“I have no adequate explanation for those.”

She shakes her head, and then extends her hand.

“My card.”

I hand it to her and unload the groceries. For dinner we have canned soup and in the cupboards she finds a chocolate bar and some graham crackers and we make S’mores.

“See? This isn’t so bad.” I put a marshmallow on the end of my fork and rotate it over a candle. She blows on her S’more and bites into it.

“I guess not.”

“Are we fine? We’re doing fine, right?”

“Yeah, we’re fine.”

We’re both polite for the rest of the evening and we go to bed early. In bed she lies on her stomach and I massage her back. Tina’s back is probably thinner; instead of my fingers sinking into pockets of flesh I’ll feel down to the bone. I imagine rubbing her tight muscles, I close my eyes and she’s beneath me.

“Not so hard.”

I press down with my thumbs and Carla squirms beneath me. “Oh, just quit already.”

I roll off her and pull the covers over my chest. Carla lies on her side and soon she’s breathing deeply. She pulls the blankets from me. There is something sharp scratching my foot at the end of the bed; whenever I move it pokes into the bottom of my foot. I climb out of bed and walk to the back door. I stand on the porch and feel the cool evening breeze coming across the back lawn. I peer toward the darkness of the woods, waiting for bears to come, but they don’t. Then I walk into the kitchen and sit with the phone in my hands. It takes three attempts before I dial Tina’s number, and when she answers I smile into the phone.

I agreed to teach geometry to the summer school crowd this year, and it is unbearable. The classroom is stifling and the windows are welded shut so that air hangs in the room like a weight. I prop the door open with the trashcan but the whole building is hot and the air conditioning system is broken and won’t be fixed until September. There

isn't much time left in the summer term but even so I've tried to condense the lessons down so that I can let them go home early. I tell them to get home soon before the bears come out; there is one girl in the front row who is disappointed by the news but the rest pretend to be concerned even though they smile when I make the announcement. I smile too, and then I pack up my briefcase and drive out to see Tina.

She lives a half hour away in a run-down community that used to be a big mining town. There are still places to pan for gold, small creeks where for five dollars they give you a pan and let you slip it into the water, shake the dirt around and let gold flecks sift to the bottom. We go to the Gold Rush Diner and then to the one-screen movie house and make out in the back row like teenagers. There's no bear problem in her town and we walk arm in arm through the neighborhoods or down Main Street, peering in shop windows.

After dating a month we become friendly with a lot of the regulars at the diner. But every time I'm enjoying myself, leaning back into the cracked vinyl booth, chatting up our waitress, Carla will slip into the conversation. She seems always to be present in the room.

"I'm sorry to hear what happened," our waitress says one night. I nod and turn my palms up toward her. "Car accident was it?" Her eyes search mine for pain. I don't remember ever telling her that it was an accident. I don't remember telling anyone, actually, but people will believe what they want. I take a deep breath.

"Year and a half ago. Next week, actually."

Our waitress shakes her head and clutches her small pad of paper to her chest. "That's just awful." She looks at Tina and smiles weakly. Tina pats the top of my hand and then squeezes my wrist and lets her hand rest on my arm.

“Doing the best I can,” I say.

“Aren’t we all?” There’s a pause and then she seems to remember something and ambles toward the kitchen. Tina and I sit quietly. I pick up a napkin and fold it in half, then in half again. Carla once told me that it’s impossible to fold a piece of paper more than eight times. I remember that conversation as I would a conversation with my grandmother; deep in the recesses of my mind, from a different time and place. I miss Carla in the way one misses the dead.

I fold the napkin four times. Tina leans close to me, resting her chin on my shoulder. She whispers in my ear, her breath tickling my neck, raising goose bumps. “How do you do it, act so strong after all that’s happened to you?”

Her voice is soothing, and her fingernails graze the inside of my arm. There’s a sensation in my groin that I haven’t felt in months, and I close my eyes.

“It’s been hard. But I have you now.”

She turns her head slightly and kisses me on the mouth, and the world swims in front of me, colorful and vibrant. She pulls back and holds my face. “Do you really care about me?”

“Of course.”

She looks down. “I just wish—”

“Yes?”

“Well your wife was rich, wasn’t that what you said?”

Again I have to pause and consider this. I don’t remember giving out any of this information, but there it is. “She left me a substantial sum.”

She looks back up at me. “I want to open my own massage business. You know, get my own clients, set my own hours.”

“Sounds great.”

“But I don’t have the money.”

Her eyes are steady; they hold my gaze. And then it occurs to me: What if my wife really is dead? What if there was an accident? Or she was murdered? I swallow hard. “Give me some time, I’ll try to work something out.”

Her face brightens. “I know you will.”

When I return to my house it’s dark and I don’t see Carla at the table until I’m halfway into the kitchen. I jump back. “You scared me!”

She covers the phone. “Do you mind?”

I climb into bed and pull the blankets around me. The window is open and warm air moves sluggishly around the room, and I throw off the blankets. There is that scratching still at the foot of the bed but when I look down there I can’t see anything. “What is it?” I say to the room. I thrash about on the bed, trying to get comfortable. Then Carla comes in.

“What’s with the racket?”

“Who was on the phone?”

“Business.” She stands at the foot of the bed; crosses her arms in silhouette and keeps talking. “Is it possible to marry the wrong person because you don’t know there’s a better option out there?”

“I’m trying to get comfortable.”

She climbs into bed beside me and rolls away on her side. If I had a knife right now I could just roll over and drive it into her side. But then there would be all that blood to contend with; you have to be smart about it.

“All marriages have their ups and downs,” I say. “We’ll be fine.”

I cycle through all the crime shows and murder mysteries I've seen in my life. Usually people get caught because of simple oversights. They do everything right except they track blood into a rug; or they clean up the whole place, but then for some reason get a glass of water before taking off and leave fingerprints on the glass. There are a thousand ways to kill a person, and it's so easy to foul up an otherwise perfect plan.

"I'll try to be more dependable, okay?" I touch her arm. It's warm and sticky. I squeeze it and roll her toward me.

I smile and kiss her forehead and then I roll over on my side of the bed. Somewhere around two in the morning I climb out of bed and walk out to the backyard. The heat has subsided and I stand in the grass, feeling the blades beneath my toes. I listen for the sound of approaching bears but they must be hiding out, waiting for the right moment to attack.

The second week of summer school ends, which is just as well. By the end of summer the kids slump in their desks, staring blankly at the blackboard as I try to explain the Pythagorean Theorem. I draw figures and diagrams on the board, humming quietly to myself, trying to pass the time; the girl in the front row is still paying attention and she clears her throat.

"What is that?" She points toward the board. Without meaning to I've begun diagramming a murder scene. I erase the board with my hand and spin around.

"Probably too advanced."

"For what?"

"Ok!" I clap my hands and drop the pen on the ground. "Um...look out for the bears and have a good summer!"

The kids gather their belongings in a sleep daze, but the girl remains seated. I clap my hands again. “Come on, don’t want to get caught outside.”

“What about our grades?”

This stops the class. They stare at me, waiting. “I will post them next week.” I lean close to the girl. “Between you and me...you got an A.”

I pack up my briefcase and hurry from the classroom. When I sense the girl trailing me toward the staff parking lot, I break into a run.

Apparently while I was teaching there was another bear sighting. He came halfway down our block and started pawing Jack Baker’s garage door. There is a large dent and scratch marks up and down his garage door. If only I had been home; I could’ve called Carla into the front room and invited the bear inside and just stood there while he went to work on her. A tragic, tragic accident. I call Tina to check in and then I pace the empty house. Later in the evening Carla comes home from work.

“Good day?” She sets down her purse.

“Oh, you know. Boring.”

“You look bored.” She walks up and pauses as if she doesn’t know what to do, then she kisses me on the cheek. I turn and head for the door.

“I’m going for a drive.”

“I have a business trip this weekend. When you get home I’d like to talk.”

I drive out of town, going anywhere, but am not surprised to end up at Tina’s house. She answers the door in small white shorts and a yellow tank top. “Hello there, stranger.”

I hadn't realized until just now how much I've missed her. I take one of her hands and kiss it and hold it against my lips. Tears well in my eyes. My phone rings and it's Carla so I turn it off. Tina takes her hand away.

"You can't just show up whenever you want. You're making me doubt your commitment."

"Spend the weekend with me."

Tina nods. "That's a start." She leads me inside and we spend the night together. In the morning I remember Carla. I tell Tina I have to run errands but I'll call later and I race home. There is a note on the refrigerator: *I don't know why I even bother. It's not a business meeting. It's another man. -C.*

I hold the note and can only think she can't leave me yet. That's not how it works. I tear up the note and spend the morning trying to prepare for Tina's arrival. I change the bed sheets and pull Carla's clothes from the closet and stuff them in two suitcases and then I shove the suitcases into the corner of the closet. I take her toiletries from the bathroom and stick them in the bag and put that under the bed. I take down pictures of Carla and me, and then I leave one small photo of her on the refrigerator and one framed one just inside the door. I walk out into the neighborhood and survey the front of the house for any signs of Carla. Bob is watering his lawn so I go over and say hello.

"Any luck with the bears?"

"You saw what happened to Jack's house." He nods in that direction.

"I just hope no bears come today. I'm showing a house to someone this afternoon."

“Their day will come.” Bob stares at a dead spot of grass. He excuses himself and goes into his garage, returning with a spray nozzle. He attaches the nozzle and shoots a steady stream into the dead spot. “Have to get under the grass, down into the soil.”

“It’s some girl, she’s interested in seeing the house.”

Bob trains the hose on another dead spot.

“Carla and I are moving out of here. Too dangerous.”

Bob finishes watering his lawn and begins hosing down the sidewalk. Water kicks up off the pavement and onto my feet. I have to jump out of the way.

When I return to the house I call Tina and invite her over, then I call Carla. I get her voice mail and apologize and promise to make it up to her when she gets home.

Tina arrives early in the afternoon and I make a big show of greeting her at the door. “So glad you could come and see my house!”

I lead her through the front door and she stops at Carla’s photograph. “Was that her?”

“That was her.” I pause. “She was a great woman.”

Tina moves to the kitchen and I follow her. I show her the rest of the house and she looks around the rooms as if she were in a museum. “This is a beautiful home. I’d love to live in a place like this.” She catches herself, and turns around embarrassed. “I’m sorry, that came out wrong. I’m not trying—”

“It’s fine.” I take her in my arms and run my hands down her back.

“Did you figure out what we’re doing about my business?”

“There’s plenty of time to sort that out.”

She steps away from me. “Why don’t we sort it out now?” She pauses. “Before Carla comes home.”

I freeze. “You know?”

“I’m not asking for much, just a little seed money. Hush money.”

We eat sandwiches at the kitchen table and she smiles the whole time, planning her business.

“Feel like taking a walk?” I say, making my own plans. “There’s so much to do and see out there.”

We walk down the street, past Jack Baker’s torn up garage door, past Bob’s house. Bob is standing on his porch, watching us go by. I try to lighten my stride, affect an easy, carefree tone. “This is Tina, I’m showing her the neighborhood.”

Bob goes inside and shuts the door. We come to the end of the block, but now that we’re here at the edge of the woods I lose my nerve.

“We should probably head back home.”

“You don’t want to look around some?”

She turns in front of me. She leans forward and kisses me and slips her hands around my waist. Her fingertips brush over my groin and then one hand is sliding down the front of my pants. “Have you ever done it in the woods?”

There is a low hum in my ears and my face is flush. “I imagine it’s quite dirty.”

She kisses my neck. “It is.”

I find myself caught between two equally compelling forces: sex and death. I run through the possible scenarios: We could be mauled by a bear; somebody could stumble upon us naked in the woods; Carla could easily find out and then this whole thing would come to an end. On the other hand, it might be the greatest sex I’ve ever had.

I take her hand and lead her into the woods. Dirt and dry leaves crackle under our feet. Only a few steps in it’s considerably darker and I drop Tina’s hand because mine is

damp with sweat and I have to keep wiping it on my pant leg. I hear a branch snap somewhere deep in the woods and I jump. Tina laughs. She puts an arm around me and pulls me toward the ground.

“This looks good.” She lies in the dirt and I lie on top of her, propping my weight on my elbows. I kiss her but keep lifting my head to look around. We’re only a few feet inside the woods and anyone from my street can probably see shadows bumping against each other through the trees. I can imagine Bob finding us grinding in the dirt; I can almost hear his voice—*Well, well*—nodding his head.

Tina brushes herself off and walks further into the woods. I trail behind her, looking back to mark the point where the street is no longer visible. I call out to Tina.

“How did you know about Carla?”

“Please,” she says. “You’re not that creative.”

I could kill her right now and nobody would know. My foot catches on something heavy and I pitch forward into the brush. Tina stops and turns.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine.” I look down and find a large stone, the size of a coconut. “Keep going.” I scramble to my feet and jog after her and she turns and takes five more steps before falling. Exactly five steps, and then there is a high-pitched scream, almost a squeal. She convulses on the ground, reaching for her leg. The lower part of her shin disappears in the teeth of a bear trap, and blood and flesh ooze out over the rusted metal. I can see through torn flesh clear down to the bone.

Tina tries to lift her head. “What happened?”

I brush the hair from her face and keep her from looking down at her tattered leg. Blood flows heavily from the gaping wound. I kneel beside her and warm blood seeps into my pants.

“It’s okay.” I look around, trying to find a solution. “Okay look, I have to go find help.” I stand and brush the dirt from my clothes.

“No, no, no.” Tina’s voice is weak and her face is ashen like she’s ready to pass out. “I know she’s not dead.”

I start to leave but that stops me. “Say again?”

“You can’t leave me. Save me and help me start my business or I’ll tell.”

“I don’t follow.”

“If you help me I won’t tell.”

I considered this for a moment. “But if I don’t help you...”

Tina suddenly looks childish to me, an injured little girl. She pulls in ragged breaths, her eyes wide, tears sliding down her gray cheeks. I can’t remember what life I saw in her now that it’s slowly ebbing away.

“Don’t leave me.” Tina repeats it over and over, a mantra: Don’t leave me don’t leave me don’t leave me.

“You have to be quiet.” I look out toward where the woods give way to the neighborhood. I wonder if Bob can hear us. Tina can’t stop talking. Her voice fades and I start to walk away. She has plenty of air left and she screams. I shout back to her.

“I’m coming back!”

There in the brush is the stone. I heft it in one hand, feeling its weight. The woods spin wildly as I stand over her. She stares at the stone and she becomes calm. Murder is such a messy affair.

“Well, get on with it.” Her eyes are huge and shimmering. She knows before I do what’s happening and releases a final, terrible gasp.

I emerge from the woods trying to wipe the blood from my shirt but I just smear it around. I run down the street hoping Bob’s not watching and I take Tina’s keys and drive her car to the supermarket. I leave it in the parking lot and walk back home with the shirt in my hand. I realize I have no idea how to execute or cover up a crime. There are traces of me all over Tina. I hurled the stone as far as I could but they’ll find it. When I return home I remember I hadn’t used gloves when driving Tina’s car. Eventually they will come for me.

I spend the weekend wandering around the house, resting my head against the wall in the entryway, staring out into the neighborhood and listening to the hiss of the sprinklers. I look into the woods and they seem darker. I wash the blood-stained shirt seven times and then I throw it away. I take off one shirt and look in the mirror and then I put another one on. I complain to the house. “Why won’t anything fit?”

Carla comes home, brushes past me and wheels her suitcase into the bedroom. She emerges. “Where’s all my stuff?”

I find myself tired and unwilling to come up with suitable responses. “It left.”

I climb into bed and pull the blankets up under my chin. Despite the heat I am shivering. There is a muffled bang coming from outside, like a car backfiring or somebody firing a gun. I can’t get comfortable and I throw the blankets aside and crawl to the foot of the bed, sweeping my hand along the mattress. It connects with metal and I pick at it with my fingernails until it starts to come up. I twist and pull at the bed until I pry up an inch long strip of wire. I sit at the edge of the bed, turning the bent wire in my hand, flicking it to hear its twang. Carla sits beside me and puts a hand on my shoulder.

“My life is in ruins,” she says.

I throw the wire across the room. “Now I’m just going to have to pick that up.”

“It’s over.”

“So what, I move out?”

“Not with us. With him. He broke things off. He wants to go into the rodeo.”

I turn and study her. She seems genuinely saddened and I open my arms to her. She cries into my shoulder. “God, this is terrible. I shouldn’t be doing this.”

“You think you’ve got it bad?”

She rubs her face against my shirt and looks up at me. “He’s forty-eight! What business does he have in a rodeo?”

“You’re too young to be with a forty-eight year old, anyway.”

“You think so?”

“Look at you!” I lean back to take her in. “I mean, you’re not unattractive.”

Her face breaks again like she’s going to cry. “Thanks.”

I cross the room to the closet and pull out the suitcase. I pull out her clothes and hang them in the closet.

“I’ve had quite a day myself. I killed my girlfriend.”

Carla snorts. “Please.” She crosses the room and helps me hang up her clothes.

“I’m serious!”

“It’s okay, I feel better.”

I hold Carla by her shoulders. “There is a dead woman in the woods. I killed her. I crushed her head with a rock.”

“That’s your problem.” She pulls away from me. “You take things too far.” From outside comes the wail of sirens and I stop to listen, holding one of Carla’s sweaters. But the cars race past our house in the direction of the woods.

“I suppose they’re coming for you?”

“Probably.”

“Oh, Lord,” she says. “You cheating on me? I don’t think so.” She walks out the front door and stands on the porch and I join her. At the end of the street a handful of cars and trucks flash. Bright spotlights illuminate the woods and cast it into wild shadows. Four men in silhouette drag a large bulky mass along the ground. I run down the street but am stopped before going into the woods by a thick uniformed man.

“That’s far enough.”

“What is it?”

“Got a call about gunfire, when we get here this guy’s bludgeoning a bear to death. Just beating away at it.” He pauses. “But you didn’t hear that from me.”

“Of course.”

“Yep, just hammering that bear’s face with a rock.” He chuckles to himself. “Seen all kinds. Didn’t hear that either.”

Two other men emerge from the woods. They are leading Bob away.

“There’s a girl out there too. Caught in some sort of trap.” They hold Bob as the burly man looks him over. Bob clears his throat.

“The traps are mine. The woman is not.” He stares straight ahead. “If someone had come out here earlier it wouldn’t have come to this.” He looks at me. It’s the first time I can remember looking him directly in the face. “Right?”

I look at the ground, shake my head in dismay. “Those bears ruined everything.”

Drought

JENSON, a father in his forties
OLIVE, his wife
MADDY, their fifteen year-old daughter
MR. BROWN, the water distributor
KID DYNAMITE, a salesman

(The stage is divided half. On the left side is a living room containing a couch, a recliner and a table beside the couch upon which sits a telephone. A door on the left side of the living room leads outside. On the right side of the stage is the kitchen; inside are a sink and a table and chairs. There is a door connecting the kitchen and the living room. JENSON sits with OLIVE on the couch, while MADDY stretches sideways on the recliner, her legs hanging over the side.)

MADDY

When are they turning the water back on?

JENSON

It's not a matter of turning it back on.

OLIVE

Honey, we have to be patient.

JENSON

There's no water to turn on.

OLIVE

Let's sing that song: Have patience, have patience, don't be in such a hurry-

JENSON

We all know the song.

(Jenson walks into the kitchen. He turns the tap but nothing happens and he returns to the living room.)

MADDY

This is bullshit, Dad.

OLIVE

Watch your language!

(Beat.)

Let's play a game. Do you want to play a game, Maddy?

MADDY

I want some water!

OLIVE

Nobody likes a complainer.

MADDY

My throat hurts!

JENSON

Madison!

MADDY

I'm thirsty and she wants to play a stupid game.

JENSON

Enough! There are still rules in this house.
Understand?

MADDY

...Sorry.

OLIVE

Did you call?

JENSON

Five times. Won't do any good.

MADDY

Come on, call again!

(Jenson picks up the telephone and dials a number.)

JENSON

You need to lose the 'tude, Maddy....Hello? I'm
wondering what the delay is...the thing is, it's been
two days...No, I don't. I have a fifteen-year old
daughter and she's very thirsty...

MADDY

Tell him my throat hurts!

JENSON

....I understand...Please...Yes, who? Mr. Greene? Thank
you....Yes, you too...of course. Goodbye.

(He hangs up)

Somebody's coming.

MADDY

They're bringing water?

OLIVE

Yes, sweetheart.

(MADDY joins JENSON and OLIVE on the couch.)

OLIVE (cont)

I can't wait to take a shower.

JENSON

I just want a big glass of water. That's all I care about.

MADDY

I want ten glasses! And then I want to turn on the sprinklers and sit in the grass and let the sprinklers cover me. Let's do that when they fix the water.

JENSON

Wonderful.

MADDY

I bet I could drink ten glasses right now.

(There is a knock at the door and JENSON answers it. MR. BROWN stands outside holding a clipboard. He wears a dark-colored suit and looks hot, tired and grim.)

JENSON

Mr. Greene?

MR. BROWN

Mr. Brown.

(MR. BROWN shoulders past JENSON and looks around the house, occasionally jotting down notes on his clipboard.)

OLIVE

Will it be much longer?

(MR. BROWN ignores her and continues making notes.)

OLIVE (cont)

Mr. Brown?

MR. BROWN

How much water would you say you use for laundry?

OLIVE

I'm not sure, a few gallons?

MR. BROWN

Uh-huh.

OLIVE

Can my daughter have something to drink?

(MR. BROWN pulls a small pamphlet from his coat pocket and flips through it.)

MR. BROWN

Children can go at least five days without water.

(MR. BROWN walks into the kitchen. He turns the taps, touches the inside of the sink and jots down more notes. JENSON follows.)

JENSON

We just want our water back.

(He stares at the ceiling and continues writing but pauses when JENSON continues staring.)

MR. BROWN

What?

JENSON

What do we do?

MR. BROWN

Drink a lot of water?

JENSON

Well, yes.

MR. BROWN

Working toilets in the house?

JENSON

Of course.

MR. BROWN

Laundry, plumbing, drinking water...mop the floors with water?

(Writes on the clipboard)

Bathe?

JENSON

Who doesn't bathe?

(MR. BROWN makes another note and returns to the living room, walking toward the front door.)

JENSON

What about our water?

MR. BROWN

You're asking too much. Baths, laundry, cleaning, drinking. How much do you need?

JENSON

I don't know, some to drink.

OLIVE

And bathe.

JENSON

And bathe, but that's it. Five gallons?

MR. BROWN

For drinking and bathing.

JENSON

That's it, that's all we need.

MR. BROWN

And when that's gone?

JENSON

When that's...well...

MR. BROWN

It adds up. Just do the math.

JENSON

We only need drinking water. That's it.

OLIVE

What about baths? How will we clean ourselves?

JENSON

A gallon. A gallon a day.

(MR. BROWN pulls out his pamphlet.)

MR. BROWN

Know what this is? Water Safety and Conservation Index. Want to know what it says?

JENSON

Well, I-

MR. BROWN

Water Code 268: In the event of drought, water is to be distributed on the basis of need and only after a thorough assessment and evaluation.

JENSON

Which means?

MR. BROWN

Think about coming down from that number.

(MR. BROWN opens the front door and leaves. JENSON rejoins OLIVE and MADDY on the couch.)

MADDY

So, what? He's not turning the water on?

(MADDY returns to the recliner and stretches out.)

MADDY (cont)

This is bullshit.

OLIVE

That's twice, young lady!

JENSON

I can't create water from nothing!

MADDY

You could've made a deal.

JENSON

Got one in mind?

(There is a knock at the door. JENSON jumps off the couch and opens the door. Standing there is KID DYNAMITE, bouncing from one foot to the other. He's wearing a canteen around his neck. Another canteen is hanging from a belt loop on his pants. He looks around as if being watched.)

KID DYNAMITE

Afternoon sir! Have a moment?

JENSON

Regarding?

KID DYNAMITE

Mr. Brown come by earlier, talking about assessments? Preaching water conservation?

JENSON

Something like that.

KID DYNAMITE

(nodding slowly)

Mind if I step inside?

JENSON

For what?

KID DYNAMITE

Believe me, you want to have a conversation.

(KID DYNAMITE unscrews the canteen and takes a long drink. He wipes his mouth and smiles.)

JENSON

Come in.

OLIVE

Who are you?

KID DYNAMITE

Call me Kid Dynamite, mama. Great place you got here.

JENSON

Can we have some water?

KID DYNAMITE

Sorry Jack, can't give the stuff away.

MADDY

Please?

KID DYNAMITE

Love to, chickadee, but—how old are you?

MADDY

Almost sixteen.

(KID DYNAMITE smiles, then turns to Jenson.)

KID DYNAMITE

I'll level with you, Jack. Mr. Brown's not turning on the water anytime soon.

OLIVE

He's coming back later.

KID DYNAMITE

Oh mama, you're a sweet one. I really like you a lot, you and your sweet girl. What good would it do Brown to turn the water on?

OLIVE

We need it!

KID DYNAMITE

Exactly! Baby we're in the middle of a drought. There's no water for miles and the only guy that has water is Mr. Brown. And me. I've got what you need. How many times you pour yourself a glass of water and then dump half the glass out? I've been saving all that water.

(He takes another long drink.)

KID DYNAMITE (cont)

Smart, right? Only problem is Brown's not too happy with me going around selling the stuff. But I want to give you a little hand up. Right chickadee? Bet you'd love a drink of water right about now.

MADDY

Yeah!

KID DYNAMITE
(laughs)

You got it baby!

(JENSON pulls out his wallet.)

JENSON

How much?

KID DYNAMITE
Put that away, Jack.

(turns to Maddy)

What do you say, chickadee? Want to ride with Kid Dynamite?

JENSON

You want Maddy?

OLIVE

You can't have our daughter! Jenson, tell him!

KID DYNAMITE
I won't hurt her, mama. I just want to take a ride.

(holds out the canteen)

All yours.

OLIVE

Get out!

JENSON

Honey, let's think about this for a minute. Be practical.

(To Kid Dynamite)

Why do you want her?

KID DYNAMITE
Kid Dynamite loves sweet girls.

JENSON

You won't hurt her or anything.

KID DYNAMITE

That sweet girl? Never!

OLIVE

We're not selling her!

JENSON

It *is* one less person to worry about.

KID DYNAMITE

What do you say, baby?

MADDY

Can I have some water?

KID DYNAMITE

All the water you want!

JENSON

See? Water for everyone.

(There is a knock at the door.)

KID DYNAMITE

Mr. Brown. Bet he saw me walk in here.

JENSON

Wait in the kitchen.

(OLIVE and MADDY lead KID DYNAMITE into the kitchen
while JENSON answers the door.)

MR. BROWN

Where is he?

JENSON

Pardon?

MR. BROWN

That boy, where'd he go?

JENSON

I don't follow.

MR. BROWN

(looking behind the couch)

He's a scam-artist.

JENSON

Scam-artist?

MR. BROWN

Have you bought any water?

JENSON

No, sir.

MR. BROWN

Good. You don't want to get mixed up with that guy.

JENSON

Why?

MR. BROWN

He stole water from headquarters. I can't count the water codes he's violated.

JENSON

There's water at headquarters?

MR. BROWN

Code 543 prohibits the unauthorized consumption of water, Code 832 outlaws sale of canteens for the purpose of holding water, Code 324-

JENSON

We'll do anything to get that water.

MR. BROWN

If you see him, call.

JENSON

I mean *anything*. Catch my meaning?

MR. BROWN

That's a dangerous road you're walking.

JENSON

Is there a Mrs. Brown?

MR. BROWN

No.

JENSON

But you like women?

(MR. BROWN crosses the room toward the front door.)

MR. BROWN

Don't let that kid come in.

JENSON

What if I deliver the kid to you?

(MR. BROWN stops.)

MR. BROWN

Where is he?

JENSON

How much water will that get me?

MR. BROWN

In the kitchen?

(MR. BROWN crosses to the kitchen door. JENSON steps
in front of him.)

JENSON

Do we have a deal?

MR. BROWN

Water Code 474 prohibits harboring fugitives and
illegal water smugglers.

JENSON

I think we have an understanding. Excuse me a moment.

(JENSON enters the kitchen, grabs KID DYNAMITE by the
arm and forces him into the living room. OLIVE and
MADDY follow.)

JENSON

Here you go.

KID DYNAMITE

Hey Jack, what gives?

JENSON

Mr. Brown gives, generously. Am I right?

MR. BROWN

I never said-

JENSON

Yes you did! We have an agreement!

MR. BROWN

Water Code 239 prohibits bribery of a water control official with monetary or-

JENSON

Forget the rules!

MR. BROWN

The Water Safety and Conservation Council thanks you.

JENSON

What'll it take to get some water?

MR. BROWN

Like I said-

JENSON

Honey, take your top off.

OLIVE

What?

JENSON

That's worth a gallon at least, right? Wait till you see this, Mr. Brown.

OLIVE

I'm not going to-

JENSON

Oh, show him! He'll pay, right?

MR. BROWN

Should I repeat Water Code 2-

JENSON

Sit down! Now honey, sit on his lap. Go on. What's that worth, another two?

(MR. BROWN sits on the couch. KID DYNAMITE and MADDY stand together off to the side.)

JENSON

Go ahead! She's great, trust me.

(OLIVE slowly crosses the room and sits on MR. BROWN'S lap.)

JENSON (cont)

There you go! Remember, two gallons!

(MR. BROWN pushes OLIVE away and straightens his suit.)

MR. BROWN

This is a complete violation!

JENSON

You owe us now.

KID DYNAMITE

He's right Jack, not good business.

JENSON

You touched my wife, everyone saw it!

(MR. BROWN takes KID DYNAMITE by the arm and leads him quickly to the door.)

JENSON

I don't think so, not until you bring our water.

(JENSON takes KID DYNAMITE'S other arm and pulls him back. A brief struggle ensues.)

KID DYNAMITE

Hey, watch it!

(KID DYNAMITE wrenches loose and crosses the room to stand with the women.)

JENSON

We'll be waiting, Mr. Brown.

(MR. BROWN straightens his tie once more and leaves.)

JENSON

Nice work, honey.

(OLIVE sits on the couch, joined by MADDY and KID DYNAMITE.)

JENSON

Oh come on, what else could we do?

(KID DYNAMITE takes a drink.)

KID DYNAMITE

Hey, chickadee? Want your own canteen?

MADDY

Yeah!

KID DYNAMITE

Let's ride!

OLIVE

Maddy! You're staying here!

JENSON

Hold on a minute. We get both your canteens?

(KID DYNAMITE stretches out the canteens toward JENSON.)

OLIVE

We're not—

JENSON

Come on! We get the two gallons from Brown, plus the canteens. We'll be fine for a week at least!

OLIVE

She's staying!

(KID DYNAMITE takes MADDY'S hand and leads her toward the door.)

KID DYNAMITE

She's going. Right baby?

OLIVE

Let her go!

(OLIVE grabs MADDY'S other hand and she and KID DYNAMITE struggle over the girl. Meanwhile, JENSON steals the canteen from KID DYNAMITE'S pants.)

KID DYNAMITE

Hey!

JENSON

At last!

(JENSON unscrews the cap and lifts it to his lips. He notices OLIVE and MADDY staring at him.)

JENSON

What? You're welcome.

(He pauses, then thrusts the canteen toward MADDY. She greedily takes it, lifts it aloft and opens her mouth.

KID DYNAMITE moves to stop her, but is held by JENSON.)

KID DYNAMITE

I wouldn't!

(Dirt spills onto MADDY'S face. She gags. JENSON takes the canteen and empties it onto the ground. He throws the canteen.)

JENSON

Damn it!

OLIVE

You were going to sell Maddy for dirt.

JENSON

It was a gamble! Blame this guy!

KID DYNAMITE

I tried to warn you.

MADDY

My face is dirty.

KID DYNAMITE

You look fine, baby.

MADDY

God, I just want some water!

JENSON

I wish he *would* take you!

(Beat.)

Let's calm down.

(Reaching for Olive)

We're still in good shape.

OLIVE

Don't touch me.

JENSON

I'm the one making deals here!

MADDY

Pimping out your family?

JENSON

I wouldn't let anything bad happen to you. Either of you.

MADDY

I want water now...

JENSON

We'll get through this, we're still a family.

(There is a knock at the door.)

JENSON (cont)

You see?

(JENSON opens the front door for MR. BROWN, who is holding a canteen and a glass.)

JENSON (cont)

There's no dirt in that thing, is there? Just a little joke. Where's the rest?

MR. BROWN

At this time I can offer you one government-approved glass of water.

JENSON

(Looks at Olive, who is confused)

I'm sorry?

MR. BROWN

Is there a table where I can set your glass?

JENSON

...In the kitchen...

(Mr. Brown enters the kitchen and sets the glass on the table. He unscrews the canteen and fills the glass. The others follow behind.)

KID DYNAMITE

That's not much.

MR. BROWN

On behalf of the Water Safety and Conservation Council, I offer one glass of water and this—the Water Safety and Conservation Index. Should you have further questions—

KID DYNAMITE

(laughing)

I've still got a canteen left, Jack! Let's make a deal!

(MR. BROWN takes KID DYNAMITE by the arm and leads him toward the front door, followed by JENSON and OLIVE. MADDY stays behind and when the others have left she gulps down the water down. Then she comes out from the kitchen holding out the glass.)

MADDY

I was so thirsty, I meant to just sip but then...

(Beat. They stare at the empty glass.)

JENSON

We need another glass.

MR. BROWN

Page 7 of the pamphlet.

(MR. BROWN opens the front door but JENSON slams it shut. He pushes MR. BROWN further into the room.)

JENSON

You're giving us another glass.

MR. BROWN

(Reaching into his coat pocket)

The Index clearly states—

(JENSON grabs MR. BROWN by his coat and forces him onto the couch. He shoves the telephone into his chest.)

JENSON

Call your supervisor. Tell him to bring a truckload of water.

MR. BROWN

You know I can't do that.

JENSON

Call him!

MR. BROWN

(pulls out the Index)

Water Code 746—

JENSON

I swear to God, read that and I'll kill you.

MR. BROWN

Prohibits the physical coercion of a certified—

(JENSON slaps MR. BROWN.)

JENSON

Try again.

(MR. BROWN picks up the phone and dials a number.)

MR. BROWN

Mr. Brown #77027A.....Yes, disgruntled....Thank you. Good bye.

(hangs up)

They've diverted dam water this way. Should be running any minute.

JENSON

So that's it?

MR. BROWN

That's it.

JENSON

That wasn't so hard, was it?

(MR. BROWN crosses the room toward the front door.)

KID DYNAMITE

Hold on, he's already lied to you and he spends five seconds on the phone making up a phony story and now you're letting him walk?

JENSON

Are you lying?

MR. BROWN

It's a violation to lie about the distribution of emergency water.

KID DYNAMITE

You're good! We should work together.

MR. BROWN

Good day.

JENSON

Nobody's leaving!

(JENSON forces MR. BROWN onto the couch again and takes the canteen.)

JENSON

I'll hold onto this.

MADDY

Can I have another drink?

JENSON

You can go to hell.

MR. BROWN

Drink that, you're looking at a number of violations.

(JENSON lunges at MR. BROWN but KID DYNAMITE steps in.)

KID DYNAMITE

Easy, Jack! I know where the water is.

(KID DYNAMITE drinks from his canteen.)

KID DYNAMITE (cont)

You know that's the truth.

JENSON

How much can you get?

KID DYNAMITE

Not for free.

JENSON

Ten gallons for Maddy.

OLIVE

Jenson!

JENSON

What does she contribute?

MADDY

I'm standing right here.

JENSON

You haven't done shit since the day you were born!

MADDY

Mother?

OLIVE

It's a hard decision, sweetie.

KID DYNAMITE

It'll be fine, baby! You'll be Lady Firecracker.

MADDY

Seriously, this is bullshit.

OLIVE

You know the rules about language!

(OLIVE pushes MADDY toward KID DYNAMITE)

MADDY

Mom!

(MR. BROWN leaps off the couch and tries to escape.
JENSON catches him and with the canteen strap chokes
him.)

OLIVE

That's enough. Jenson that's enough!

(OLIVE pulls JENSON away and MR. BROWN falls to the
floor gagging. JENSON shoves OLIVE.)

KID DYNAMITE

Take it easy, Jack!

(JENSON lunges at KID DYNAMITE and presses him against
the door. MADDY tries to step in.)

MADDY

Quit it!

(JENSON shoves her away too and turns wildly on his
family.)

KID DYNAMITE

You helping me, baby?

OLIVE

Are you okay, Maddy?

MADDY

Fuck off!

KID DYNAMITE

Lady Firecracker!

(MADDY crosses the room and stands with KID DYNAMITE.)

OLIVE

Madison Leanne, come over here this instant!

MADDY

Or else what?

OLIVE

You're forgiven for the foul language. Come here.

MADDY

You're selling me, remember?

OLIVE

It's your father's idea!

JENSON

I knew you didn't have the guts!

(MR. BROWN coughs, still on the floor.)

MR. BROWN

You are in violation of at least seventeen separate water codes.

KID DYNAMITE

Come on, baby. Let's split.

JENSON

Don't forget our deal!

(KID DYNAMITE laughs and removes his canteen. He tosses it to JENSON.)

KID DYNAMITE

All I got, Jack.

(MADDY laughs with KID DYNAMITE.)

JENSON

You're dead, you and Maddy.

(OLIVE runs across the room and stops JENSON before he attacks MADDY.)

OLIVE

Touch her and I'll kill you.

KID DYNAMITE

There you go, mama! Come with us!

(OLIVE stands with KID DYNAMITE and MADDY.)

OLIVE

Maddy, I never meant to-

MADDY

I know it was Dad. I can't even look at him.

(OLIVE and MADDY embrace. KID DYNAMITE wraps his arms around both of them.)

KID DYNAMITE
Beautiful thing, right Jack?

JENSON
I'll kill all of you for that fucking water!

(JENSON grabs KID DYNAMITE, but suddenly pauses. There is the sound of running water.)

(Beat.)

(OLIVE goes into the kitchen and returns with a glass full of water. Slowly JENSON releases KID DYNAMITE and smooths the wrinkles in his shirt.)

JENSON
Well.

(JENSON helps MR. BROWN to his feet and leads him to the couch.)

JENSON
I can't tell you how sorry I am, and how grateful we are for all your hard work. I'll be sure to take a look at that Index.

(to KID DYNAMITE)

I think under the circumstances...we'll go ahead and keep Maddy. After all, she's family and we love her.

(He tries to put an arm around MADDY but she pulls away. He looks around the room. Everyone is staring at him.)

JENSON
We can all admit we got a little carried away.

KID DYNAMITE
Who wants to ride with Kid Dynamite?

(OLIVE and MADDY join KID DYNAMITE at the front door.)

JENSON
Come on, I've got water for everyone!

KID DYNAMITE
(laughing)
You're out of time, Jack.

(MADDY and OLIVE laugh with KID DYNAMITE.)

MADDY

Dynamite, you burn me up!

(OLIVE and MADDY and KID DYNAMITE leave. JENSON joins
MR. BROWN on the couch.)

(Beat.)

JENSON

Get you a glass of water?

(End.)