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GET YOUR WATER WHILE IT'S RAINING

by

Eric Myles McQuade

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

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Major: Creative Writing

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## WHOA BROKE

Jeremy Franklin had just whipped the mower around a stack of railroad ties when a Chevy pick-up missing a bumper met him in the driveway.

There was a dog in the passenger seat. Mangy coat and all, it was clearly an English setter, a young one, its hair matted and stained brown with mud. Before he got a good look he thought the dog might be one of his grandfather's. Pop owned twelve pointing dogs and a two-thousand acre game ranch around Sugar Tree. Jeremy was sixteen. He'd been in charge of the dogs for a year.

"Your grandpa around?" the driver asked. It was Fitz, a man Pop called an old con. Pop should know because he was seventy-five and had seen all kinds. Fitz owed Pop money, too.

"Yes, sir," Jeremy said.

"Can you fetch him for me?"

He'd make no argument with Fitz. Fitz was not the kind of man he should be talking to alone.

Inside the house, in the office, Pop wore the bifocals he used when looking over the receipts. The ledger was open. All he seemed to do these days was look at the same things over and over. Since Jeremy's mother had passed, Pop had to handle all the details. She was always better organized.

"Fitz?" Pop said. "Fitzzy is here?"

It was enough to make Pop forgive the interruption. He got up and went outside to talk.

"Good morning, Mr. Franklin," Fitz said.

"You looking for work?"

"On account of our debt, I wanted to make you a trade."

Pop squinted at the dog in the truck. "For a mutt?"

"She's a real hunting dog," Fitz said. "She's got papers and everything."

"Papers don't help a dog point."

"What do you pay for a nice pretty girl like this? I'm talking about a broke dog. A genuine pointer. Whoa broke."

"Why would you have a dog like this?" Pop asked.

"I won her fair in a card game."

"Well, that sounds about right."

"She can point. I've seen it myself. She's stylish."

Pop shook his head. He looked at the filthy dog. Then without looking at Jeremy he said, "We have room for one more in the pens, right?"

"We're full, sir," he said. It was two, even three to a cage. It was like Pop lost count walking out to the yard. He and his mother had come to the Sugar Tree farm ten years ago, when Jeremy was six, because Pop had begun losing everything. First Grandma to diabetes, and then, slowly, his memory.

"I don't think—" Pop began.

"It's worth your while," Fitz said. "Now—*for real*—what would a dog like this cost you?"

"It would settle us up if what you're saying is true, and then some. I do want a litter. She ain't fixed, is she?"

"No, sir." Fitz smiled. "She's perfect as she is. Her name is Winnie. Don't go changing her name. She'll heel, but only if you use her name proper."

\*\*\*

Winnie smelled like an old knee brace. She didn't heel worth a damn, didn't come. Didn't mind anything Jeremy asked her to do.

She licked his face when told to sit. Man, she was dirty. Where in God's name had she been? He bathed her over at the hose in the backyard. He started with the ears and worked back to her tail and down to her paws, and she shivered the whole time, scared as hell. If his mother were there, she'd already know what to do to keep Winnie out of trouble with Pop. She used to let Jeremy sneak the dogs in the house to take hot baths, and she spoiled them with snacks of bacon and grease. When Pop really started losing it, he called from the hardware store saying someone stole his truck. Mom drove up and walked him around downtown until they found his truck, and made him feel as if someone really had taken it. They weren't to embarrass him in his old age, was Mom's message. She kept the family in balance.

Careful not to cut the dog's skin, Jeremy sliced out burrs snarled in her fur. She was white except for a black and brown mask and some dark freckles on her back. She was brand new, and he wanted to keep her.

He leashed her. "Winnie," he commanded. "Sit."

She rolled over and tried to dry off in the grass.

"Get up and sit down now."

She kept on in the grass.

"Winnie?"

Might as well be asking her to make breakfast.

"That's your name," he said. "Isn't it, girl?" He wrapped a towel around her, lifted her to her feet, held her, and talked quietly to her.

After a while he led her by the leash to the chain link pens. The two females, Bessie and Sarah, barked when he brought her close, and she tried to hide behind his legs.

No use moving her in with that jealous lot.

He nudged her forward, and the other dogs gathered at the gates to sniff her. Second from the end was old Ripley, an orange and white setter, nine years old, and gentle. She nuzzled up to Ripley through a space between the wires. Ripley could work. Rearrange the dogs and pair her with Ripley, and it might just happen peaceful and quiet.

\*\*\*

At lunch he told Pop about Winnie and her new friend Ripley. He left out that Winnie didn't know her name and was feral as a turkey buzzard. She was

sweet, yes, but she did not have the formal training Fitz claimed she did. This Jeremy kept to himself.

"We got to take your girl for a hunt tomorrow morning," Pop all but shouted at him over the TV.

"Yes, sir."

"Why don't you bring the other one along if they're getting on so good? There aren't any bookings tomorrow, so we can rustle up some wild quail in the east coveys near the river."

"What if Winnie ain't much of a pointer?"

"She'll point."

"But what if she won't? Could we keep her as an inside dog?" He might as well be asking if he could grow his hair out and vote Democrat.

"Fitz says she works with style."

"The man's been known to stretch the truth, sir."

Pop didn't look away from the TV. "Sounds like I'm a fool and Fitz is a liar."

Jeremy shuddered at challenging Pop. "I didn't say that, Pop..."

Pop stared at the TV. "Tell you one thing about Fitz you may not know."

"Yes, sir."

"Fitz never run out on his wife and little boy." He pounded his fist on the table. "Man stuck." He looked hard at Jeremy, but then his look softened, as if he was surprised to find Jeremy sitting there and not someone else.

"You just have them dogs ready to go in the morning, son," Pop said.  
"We'll see if she can point or if she can't."

\*\*\*

*McClintock*. That had been Jeremy's last name, his father's last name, until Pop took him down to the courthouse and changed it after Mom died. Pop rode him pretty hard, as if he were trying to whup something out of him, some bad thing in his bloodline. Since that day at the courthouse, Pop had never again said the name *McClintock*. Like he'd wiped it clean from his mind.

When a dog wouldn't come around, or got too old, when a dog had used up its last chance with Pop, Pop drove off with that dog and came back alone. Before Mom died two summers back, she told Jeremy about a dog that bit him as a child. She said she'd never seen Pop so angry. Yes, Pop worked him hard, she insisted, but it was out of love. You had to earn your meals on a farm. It was years before Jeremy figured out that every time Mom snuck him out to the movies and a Mexican restaurant, it meant one of the dogs would be gone when they got back.

\*\*\*

At first light he went to the pens. One by one he slid a metal dish full of wet canned food under the fences. He took turns letting them out to stretch their legs. Pop didn't approve of comforting dogs—dogs served one purpose and that was to hunt. But his grandfather spent less time with the dogs these days; he got too agitated with them, and all the chores on the ranch consumed him more than ever.

It wrecked Jeremy to see the dogs stuck in cages, so he wore them out on runs when they were restless.

After corralling the last of the dogs into the fences, he collared up Winnie and Ripley and met Pop by the stone road that led east to the river.

Pop finished racking the twenty gauges for the hunt and came over to scratch Ripley's neck. "There you are." Pop mulled something—the same furrowed look he made when he tried his hand at the accounting. "What's this dog's name again?"

"That's Ripley, Pop."

"Hell, I knew that." He roughed up the dog's ears. "You know this old boy has been with me a long while. He used to cover a hundred yards like it was the space between a hungry man and the refrigerator."

"A good pointing dog, too," Jeremy said.

"You're telling Noah about rising water." Pop slapped Ripley hard on the side. "Ain't that right, you old rebel? Let's move out, anyhow," Pop said. "Ride in the back with the dogs."

Pop didn't want dirty fingers on the leather. The seats weren't shiny leather, but lived-in leather like a pair of cattleman's gloves. It came that way. Pop can't live without a new truck, Jeremy's mom used to say.

Approaching the quail coveys, he held the dogs near him and listened to the tires on the long, flat stones they'd laid one backbreaking offseason through the ranch. Pop drove faster than he should, and here and there the stones jostled them violently. Jeremy held onto the dogs. He told Winnie to

watch Ripley when they got to the coveys. He told her to hold her point and don't do anything stupid.

They stopped near a field of tall grass colored gold from a late-summer drought, waist high and full of prickles. Out here were wild quail, not the birds Pop released on the ranch to stock for the hunters. Pop climbed out of the cab. "Let's see what these dogs can do." He slapped the tailgate, whistled, and the dogs leapt out, full of purpose. "Get on it," Pop said, as he always did.

Winnie and Ripley sprinted into the fields and crisscrossed at full speed until they were almost out of sight. Jeremy liked this part of the property, where the sky was biggest and you could see forever in most any direction. It was a place Pop saved for the family to hunt.

"She can run, all right," Jeremy said.

"Running ain't hunting. There aren't any quail here anyhow," Pop said. That wasn't true. The wild ones were down near one of the creeks that fed into the river. For someone who spent his whole life here, Pop mistook a landmark way too often.

"She does run pretty," Pop admitted. In the distance, Winnie bounded out of the open field, disappeared, and then flashed back across the dried-up basin.

Good pointers didn't flush birds; they froze at the point. That left a hunter to come and bump them out for a shot.

Ripley ran a step behind Winnie, but veered towards the underbrush where the birds were. Jeremy and Pop plodded well behind, watching for a

point. The dogs kept fanning back and forth. Winnie darted like a kite in a crosswind, yet she kept an eye on Ripley and weaved back to follow him. Ripley guided her towards the saplings and brush where the quail fed. If you had a staunch pointer like Ripley, you could have a real day hunting and come home with enough quail to fill the freezer.

Ripley tracked a scent into a green patch and coiled tight, his right knee bent off the ground. His spine bowed. His tail went up rigid, and his nose and eyes formed a perfect line on something in front of him.

Winnie stepped in just behind Ripley and froze.

"Let's go see," Pop said.

They crept up on the point.

Jeremy moved ahead of Pop, his heart thumping, imagining the bird taking flight and turning into the sky, the quiet before the shot—a perfect hunt her first time out. He loaded a few rounds and clicked off the safety and readied for the flush.

But just then Winnie smelled something. She barked and plunged into the cover in front of Ripley, and a family of quail foraging in the thicket flushed before he could take aim.

\*\*\*

Ten minutes later the dogs were back in the truck, panting and lapping up water from one of Mom's old saucepans. He and Pop sat on the tailgate drinking ice water from a Thermos. Pop said, "You need to be up tomorrow and ready with eggs and bacon for the boys around seven. They need a hot

breakfast before the hunt. I'll clean out the pens and feed the dogs for you."

Pop fanned himself with the brim of his Stetson. In the distance a quail returned to the covey and landed without a sound. A hen, maybe. "Too crowded in the pens with all these dogs," Pop said. "Why didn't you tell me it was so bad out there?"

"We can add space." He'd told Pop several times they needed more room.

"I don't know about that. These dogs already run our lives. Somebody has to go."

Pop shut the tailgate on Winnie and Ripley. Jeremy looked at them and felt himself tremble.

"Let's get back," Pop said. "Why don't you ride up front?"

Pop knew he was worried about Winnie. That's why he wanted him up front. Jeremy wanted to say it wasn't fair—it wasn't fair to punish her for not being broke. With a little help from Ripley and some training, she could point just like Fitz had said she could. Better even.

"I want to talk about this girl," Pop said.

Jeremy waited.

"Maybe she just ain't cut out for hunting," Pop said.

"We can still have puppies with her, right?"

"I don't want puppies with a fool dog."

Jeremy was quiet. Then he said, "Why don't you let me break her, sir?"

For this Pop had no answer, and they drove the rest of the way in silence. Now that hunting season had arrived, it would be hard as hell with all the work. And cold soon enough. All the things Mom did seemed impossible to replace—mostly the kindness she found in Pop and brought out, the way Pop could once bring out the best in his dogs. Kindness was there, all right, but Jeremy didn't know how to bring it out.

When they made it back, Pop took both dogs and tied their leashes to the old post in the backyard. "Did Ripley seem slow to you?"

Jeremy felt wrecked all over again. "He looked stylish to me, Pop."

Pop nodded. He looked at the sky a minute. "All right, Jeremy, take the quail inside and help your mother dress them for supper."

Jeremy looked at the dogs circling the post on their leashes, wagging their long tails. Pop had lost his memory for good. There were no quail. They hadn't even gotten a shot off. His mom was dead. Otherwise she'd be there to meet them after the hunt with Cokes and sandwiches.

Pop left the shotguns racked in the truck. The dogs wound themselves around the post. Jeremy could name every movie he and his mother had seen together, and every dog that wasn't there when they got back. Names stuck.

"Okay, Pop," he said finally, and lifted the empty cooler and carried it into the house.

## THE KNOCKOUT IN SLOW MOTION

Walking to downtown Abilene from the bus station, Johnny spotted a place called Rex's Billiards between a BBQ joint and Goodman's Heating and Air Conditioning. It was summertime and he was here in this unknown place for his eleven year-old daughter Sandra's custody hearing.

Two concrete steps ran up to a door with blacked out windows. All he could see in the glass was a special for forty-nine cent pitchers of beer written in white acrylic, almost like a child would do. Everything else was cinderblock.

In his left hand, Johnny carried a duffel bag with three pool cues in it. Slung over his right shoulder, he held two suit bags. That was the gear he needed, no more and no less, to play any juke joint in the country. He needed the cues to play and the getup to hustle. One couldn't live without the other.

He took everything inside with him, determined to find a game. Inside, Rex's looked more than just fine: twelve stained glass lights hanging over twelve tables. Rex ran enough felt to feed a hustler or two, that was for sure. Going up and down the rows of tables, Johnny found one he liked near the bar, and then he hung his suits on a hat rack. He thought he might make a go of it.

He took a leather pouch with one of his cues out of his duffel bag.

"A kid in green shoes wants action," the bartender told him. The guy must have been sizing him up the minute he walked in.

"Thanks, but I'm looking for some real action." He screwed his breaking cue together and tested its strength. "I'm only in town for a short while, and I don't have time for nickel games."

"This is my place. I'm not a stranger to a real player."

"You Rex?"

"That's right." Rex came out from behind the bar. He was tall with white hair, and he had on a pair of shitkickers that made him look like a rancher.

"Well, if you knew all about real players, you'd know me already."

"The kid, Sonny, plays all hours, except when he has to go to school." Rex was no stranger to the hustle, Johnny knew, but he wanted to give this guy the bad cop routine.

"Tell me more about him."

"He's my son."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," Johnny said. He reached out and Rex shook his hand. Johnny wore a pressed suit jacket and trousers, unlike a lot of these younger players. It was 1975, but he still cared about presenting himself like a goddamn human being like they did in the old days. "You give a rate for the day?"

"You got cash?" said Rex.

"Some. I travel light." Johnny had over ten thousand on him. "About to have a lot more." He dug around his belongings looking for his watch. There were no clocks inside Rex's poolroom—there seldom were in the places Johnny played. A hustler like Johnny just wanted the action—dead money,

straight up, hustle, no-hustle, no matter. But Johnny needed one more thing. He needed the time, always.

"You know what time it is, Rex?"

"Two thirty."

He kept time because he worried about minutes and seconds. Time ruined his thoughts. In the old days he'd learned that. They ran him off the tables in Johnston City because the hustlers figured out how often he'd miss a big shot. Give him the pressure, and he collapsed. His stake horses dried up, and they told him to quit dogging it and call them only if they could get action against him. So he sped the game up to stop the thinking. That was ages ago—back in the very beginning. He was nothing more than an easy mark for the real hustlers then. In the places he was known now they called him Machine Gun Johnny because he popped off games of nine ball and he'd fire off another set if you'd be so kind as to hurry the fuck up and rack the next game.

"Can't find my damn watch."

"I'll give you a table for two dollars a day," Rex said.

"How about nine for the week?"

"You plan on settling in?"

"Just here for my day in court. My daughter just moved out here with her momma. I might as well play a few games."

He was not known here yet. Texas was live territory.

"Fine by me," Rex said.

"Grand place you've got here. Only thing nicer is up in Norfolk."

He laid his hands flat against the felt and ran his palms rail to rail. He must have given Rex the impression he was looking for ticks on dog. He picked up a piece of lint near the pocket and then flicked it on the floor.

Rex pulled a set off keys off his belt and started searching through them. "Sonny's the best thing to come out of Texas," Rex said.

"That good?"

"Nothing good about it." Rex found a small, silver key and then he unlocked the pool table. "He should be in school." The balls in the table came crashing down into a pocket near Rex's knees.

"Who's staking him?" Johnny asked.

"I'm backing him." Rex took a triangle and racked up the table.

"What kind of cheese you carrying?"

"Big enough."

"I want to get inside Daddy's pockets."

"You ought to make money, young man, not lose it."

"My name is Jonathan Albers." It was nice to give his real name for a change.

"I can stake you a ways, but not against Sonny. I'd rather be on the winning side," Rex said.

"You think your boy can beat me?"

"I've been around a long time in this business. Sonny can play jam up better than any I've seen."

Johnny went up to the head of the table and put the cue ball down right behind the head spot. Then he made his left hand into a cradle and rested the cue stick between his knuckles. After he pumped the stick a few times, he swung back and cracked the cue ball with one smooth motion. A few people in the bar looked over at the sound of the break.

"So where is he?" Johnny asked.

"You tell me."

\*\*\*

Johnny stayed until five exactly and the kid never showed. Johnny walked east towards a vacancy sign. It was still plenty hot. He paid the woman at the front desk \$12.83 for a queen.

"Won't be ready for an hour," she said.

"That's no good. I'll take whatever you have now."

"It's going to be two dollars—"

"That's fine, sweetheart. I need to make a phone call." He paid extra for two double beds and hurried up to his room.

At 5:59 pm he picked up the phone and held it up to his ear. Just as the alarm clock hit 6:00 pm, he dialed his ex-wife's number. His daughter, Sandra, would know to be by the phone.

He let it ring once, and then he hung up. That was his message to Sandra, *I love you*, something they'd done for years now while he was on the road. It had become habit now.

Before he settled down for the night, he went out to the package store and bought a case of Miller to put in the small fridge in his room. On the way back to his room, a cruiser tore past him with its sirens screaming. It sped east and ran a red light before disappearing.

Back in the hotel, more sirens crashed past the window. Then more.

He stayed up late to watch Carson and fell asleep with the TV on.

He never slept well after he drank and woke at sunup. He read the newspaper they left in front of his door until he thought someone might be up at the pool hall.

On the way to Rex's, a huge posse of cop cars and county sheriff vehicles came roaring past him. From what he'd observed, Abilene was full of pickups and burnouts. The streets carried no sense of vitality—just a hot sun and panhandlers. Many buildings were boarded, including the air conditioning place next to Rex's, where one of the regulars having a smoke let him in the side door.

Johnny racked up his table and smacked twenty consecutive nine ball games. He played fast. Always. At eleven o'clock he practiced jumps and then tooled around with trick shots.

He ordered a double burger from Rex when the old man showed up just before noon.

A few locals trickled in to drink and took an interest in his cue work. He double-banked in shots. He jumped over balls. He put ungodly English on the cue ball.

"You want a drink?" one of them asked.

"I've got a game tonight," he said. "Is there a payphone around here?"

"Out front," another man said. "Take a right, and it's next to the coke machine in front of the barbeque joint."

Johnny went outside. Another cop car whizzed by him up towards his hotel. He picked up the receiver, heard the dial tone, hung it up, and thought about his daughter, Sandra. For the better part of two years, he'd been calling her—every day at six o'clock—and hanging up after one ring. It started off as a way to save money on a long distance call, but now it'd turned into habit. He could put all this behind him if he'd just get partial custody. Just this once he'd like to see a judge cut him a break.

He finally let go of the receiver and went back inside. Rex came out with the double burger, and Johnny asked him for a coffee. Coffee gave him the jitters, but it kept his mind off drinking when he needed to shoot well.

He returned to his table. There were pieces of chalk littered along the rail.

The door opened and light came in like a beacon, and there was the kid. Jewelry hung off him like fishing lures. He stood in the doorway shimmering just enough to let everyone notice him. The kid was no son to Rex. Sonny was full Mexican, and half a foot shorter than Rex.

He wiped clean a few chalk smudges as the kid came over to him.

"You should come clean my house," Sonny said. He couldn't have been more than seventeen. Maybe he was a hundred thirty pounds soaking wet holding a barbell.

Johnny hand-bounced the cue ball against all four rails exactly a dozen times each. The kid just stood and watched.

"You won't do, kid. I'd feel bad taking your money." He placed five hundred dollars above the light.

"You want to give me three balls?" the kid asked. Being young or fat or too pretty gave a real player an advantage handicapping games. No pool player worth a carton of cigarettes would think this kid could beat him.

Johnny wasn't biting, though. "No weight. Don't try to hustle me."

"I guess I'll just have to just take two."

"Hustling is an insult to me," Johnny said. " You want to play, let's play. I can beat you fast. Two or three games in fifteen minutes, one hundred a game."

He needed to get big money before Rex and Sonny saw his speed. He'd try to take a little off and see if the kid was good for a thousand after he ran the set.

"What do you do, kid?" Johnny asked.

"Just shoot a little pool. I don't work for nobody. All I ever done is play."

"You in school?"

"This is school for me. Did you say a hundred a game?"

They played the rails for break. The kid won and chalked up slowly. After Sonny broke and pocketed two balls, he surveyed the table the way a pit boss does a game of craps.

"All right," Johnny said. "Hurry up. I'd be on the nine by now. You got your whole life ahead of you, but I don't."

The door opened again just then and a cop walked in with a badge on his belt. He was one of those black cowboys you only find in Texas. He saw Sonny and walked straight up to them.

"Don't let me interrupt," the cop said. He folded his arms.

The kid ran out the table lickety split with the cop watching. Boom boom, and Johnny was down a hundred with two games left.

"Were ya'll in here last night?" the cop asked.

"Yeah," the kid said.

"What about you?"

"Some of the night," Johnny said.

The cop held up a piece of paper with three faces on it—sketches of two girls and one boy. "These kids were murdered last night up at the lake."

The kid looked at the sketches and then chalked up. "Never seen them," he said.

"Me, neither. How'd they die?" Johnny asked.

The cop lowered the pieces of paper. "You two play here often?" The cop stared at the kid. "Aren't you a little young to be here?"

"We're just shooting pool," Sonny said.

"Let me see some ID. Both of you."

"I don't have nothing," the kid said.

Johnny shook his head. "I don't carry it anymore."

"Why not?"

"My license got revoked."

The cop shook his head. "All right, kid. Get out of here. Right now."

The kid unscrewed his cue and put it in his case. On the way out he patted Johnny on the shoulder, "You still owe me a bill."

Sonny opened the door and the place was once again lit up like a camera flash.

The cop shook his head at Johnny.

"Your job is a hustle too, officer. You're hustling me right now. I just came to town last night to go to court."

"For what?"

Johnny pulled out a picture of his baby girl from his wallet.

The cop looked but said nothing about it. "You didn't see anyone strange in here last night?"

"I was by far the strangest one here."

The cop laughed and pinned the picture of the three kids on a corkboard. "How long you in town for?"

"As long as I need to be."

"Here's my card. Call me if you want to talk."

After the cop left he shot exactly twenty games and practiced jumps for an hour. He didn't want to do tricks and no one else showed up for a game. At this rate, he'd be in town for much longer than he planned.

Later that day, he packed up his gear, went outside, and dropped twenty cents into the newspaper dispenser, and pulled out a paper. He read the entire front page. High school students murdered at Lewisville Lake. Now he knew what all the fuss was about.

He followed the sidewalk east under a pink neon boot towards a different motel. He never liked staying in the same place twice.

In his new room, he lay down in the bed and read the entire newspaper. One boy. Two girls. Stabbed to death. They went up to the lake to swim and now their parents were heartbroken. He thought of the mothers and fathers, and how they might not sleep for months. The more he thought about it, the more he needed a drink.

He slipped out of the motel and found a steakhouse a half block from the courthouse on the square. He ordered a sixteen-ounce rib eye.

"Rare," he told the waitress. She was sixteen, tops. "Make sure it's bloody."

When she served it she asked him if he wanted anything else.

"I'll take a Jack Daniels and a Budweiser."

She returned with his drinks, and he shouted before she got back to the kitchen, "I'll be ready for another round when you get back." He took the shot and gulped the beer.

Now he was feeling better.

He drank three more shots before he worked up the courage to ask her about it. "Did you know the kids that were killed?"

"What kids?" she asked. She looked scared.

"Never mind," he said. "What about Sonny. Do you know Sonny?"

"I'm sorry," she said.

A few minutes or hours later the manager came over and asked him to pay his bill and leave.

\*\*\*

The next day Sonny was at Rex's looking like a gigolo. A linked gold bracelet dangled from his wrist, and he wore tight nylon pants. Sonny ran through five or six games with some college kids, trying hard to barely beat them. When they caught on he was for real, they just decided to play each other.

Johnny stepped up to Sonny. "You done with that low-stakes crowd?"

"My dad doesn't want me playing you anymore. You still owe me a hundred, too."

"You catch a lucky break and you're calling it quits?" He peeled off a bill and handed it to Sonny. "At least let me get my money back."

"I don't know."

"I'll beat you quick."

They put their cash above the light.

Johnny won the break and he took out his cue and mashed in the one and four. The two he hit too hard, yet it went in after banging around the

pocket. That was lucky. He had to jump the eight to get to the three, but he ran it flush along the rail and it dropped corner pocket. The rest of the balls dropped in order. He looked at his watch. Two minutes and forty seconds. After the next break, he had to go thin on the one and missed it. The kid made one two three but scratched badly on the four. Johnny took ball in hand and ran the table. Third break he pocketed three balls and knocked the rest in easy. His gut started hurting him on the fourth break, but he won with a dual ball, splitting the eight and nine with the cue ball. He peeked at his watch—fourteen minutes.

"No more," the kid said.

"Tell your daddy to bring more money. I want the real cabbage. Make it green." He grabbed his three hundred off the fluorescent light.

"You want to spot me the eight-nine?"

"Kid, that's not pool. What kind of hustle is this? Eight-nine? You're so bad I should probably give you the seven too. Get your daddy. Get Rex down here with real timber. I want action. A five grand set."

"I don't think he's going to like it."

After the kid left, he hustled the townies for pocket change. If he could get a game for nickel and a Bud, he played. He lost to an electrician on purpose and threw a fit. Then he upped the stake to a hundred and ran out the set. Soon he had a little crowd. It wasn't about big money just yet. Action sent the buzz loose on the street. It brought the derelicts to the rail. Chumming the waters. The kid was the prize. Pool is more theater than

English and bank shots. Lining up the stake horses, seducing the railbirds—that was real work. Knocking down the balls clickity clack was like taking a piss before bed. It was just something he did.

At 5:45 pm he put down his cues and told the dead money he was done for the day. He packed up his kit and left Rex's and went out to the payphone. At one minute to six, he called the operator and put in a collect call to Sandra's house. The phone rang once, and then he hung up.

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He woke up early and grabbed the paper. He had one more full day to put in before the hearing on his daughter. According to an article, there were a few leads that the killer may have already left town. Eyewitnesses reported seeing a strange man in downtown Abilene in the ice cream shop talking to underage women.

Johnny packed up his duffel the way he always did and prepared for a late night. He planned on leaving town as soon as the hearing finished the next day.

He wrapped up ten hundreds with a rubber band, and he slid his stake into his back right pocket. Then he buried a bet of five thousand into the side pocket of his bag.

Before he left, he ironed a pair of grey cotton slacks and broke out a pair of new black socks. He hated playing in anything loose. He put on a t-shirt and jacket. His belly pushed out over the waist of his pants.

He was thirty-five now. His daughter was eleven. Soon she'd be making real decisions for herself. First, you got dolls and dance classes. Then it's makeup and boys. His ex had full custody of Sandra. He had no reportable income. No identification. No family without her. No home except the closest pool table. His friends hustled. They smoked, drank, and took trips to the dog park.

He paid his lawyers in cash, and his money was as good as anyone's. The game they played was one of court dates and briefcases. His lawyers petitioned the judge for split-custody. He'd take Sandra for the summer and promise to stay put. The number one thing a judge looks for is stability. That's why he'd bought an old pizza joint in Elizabeth City, North Carolina, not too far from the water. Had the paperwork, tax records, and everything. He needed to show the court that he'd spent two straight years of living the domesticated life, even though he barely spent three weeks in North Carolina the entire time he'd owned the restaurant.

He left his room littered with newspaper, went to the front desk and checked out.

When he made it back to the pool hall, it was a hornet's nest. There must have been fifty people inside. Hustlers crawled out like centipedes. There was word that Johnny was looking to score and the kid might play him. That drew a nice crowd.

They were waiting for him.

While he waited for the kid, he did trick shots for cash. Set them up and dared people to tell him it couldn't be done. He could put damn near anything into a pocket for money. Fifty bucks. Twenty. He'd take two if they'd just put the money down. No skin off his nose. They were all bangers and too stupid to know that everything in this hustle is preordained. A fool and his money, and this town was all fools.

Rex came up to him around ten o'clock.

"Kid's coming."

"You're backing him?"

"No. Not unless you're giving two balls."

"Two balls is like handing me your money. I could give him four and he'd still lose."

"Five grand. Five games out of nine. Two balls."

Rex didn't know his ass from his elbow when it came to reading him. The kid dogged it for the hustle. He was good. Johnny knew it. Rex just thought Johnny didn't know it. But they were short on time. "Let's do it." He'd won worse bets. It was almost more fun letting Rex and the kid think they'd bamboozled him. Before morning he'd be up almost six grand and do a victory lap at the courthouse before he took the bus back to North Carolina.

The kid came in an hour later wearing a pair of green shoes.

"Nice shoes, kid. They help you play?"

"Alligator skin. Money green."

Rex was up against the wall taking every bet against Johnny he could get his hands on.

The kid played a different game, now. He put English on it. Johnny didn't like what he saw. Sonny was better than good—he was a player. The kid took the first game easily while Johnny stood in the crowd like a chump. Rex wouldn't even look at Sonny, as if he didn't want to jinx the run the kid was on. Between shots the cheering was audible, and then it dropped to a murmur just before Sonny smacked another one in. The door kept flinging open so more people could cram into the pool hall.

The kid took the first four games easily. Johnny barely used his cue. It lay against the wall like a coat hanger. When it came to the hustle, the kid played all right.

On the fifth rack the kid dropped in two balls. Five more and he'd have five grand in his wallet. He ran two three but left an outrageous shot—his first mistake of the set—and then missed badly trying to bank it in.

A guy with money on Sonny hissed loudly and Rex nudged him away from the table. The people who were cheering for Johnny started clapping. Some guy whistled for Johnny.

What happened next was something they were still talking about in Texas. If they weren't, they were even bigger fools than Johnny thought. He chalked up. A spray of blue powder dusted into his hands and he wiped it on his shirt.

"Rex, what time is it?"

"Midnight."

"Time me."

He ran out the rack. Four games to one.

"Time."

Rex couldn't keep up with him.

"Uh, one minute, fifty seconds."

One game in that time was good, but he'd only had to bang in five balls on an easy spread. The next rack broke like a piñata, and he ran it out. The crowd went nuts.

"How long?"

"Shit," Rex said. He fumbled with his watch. "Four minutes, twenty seconds."

Sometimes in a hustler's life, when he's playing jam up, he sees the pockets as large as a paint bucket. He damn near ran out the next three games in ten minutes. He was deadeye. He might play a thousand times and never run five racks out, yet he still had one game and one ball. The nine.

A single ball separated Johnny from five thousand dollars. It wasn't a gimme, but a simple enough bank shot. He went quickly up to it and hesitated for a second. Rex wasn't even looking anymore. The kid sulked over in the corner. Bets hovered on the edge of other tables. All action on this one shot.

So. He cocked the cue back and popped the cue ball. He dogged it—left a hanger for the kid. The nine just sat on the lip of the pocket.

The kid couldn't believe his luck. It was too good to be true. Sonny strutted over to the table and rammed the last ball home. He went over to the light and took the wad of hundreds and stuffed it in his pocket. "The rat takes the cheese."

Rex looked at Johnny. "Did you just dump that game?"

"I don't know," Johnny said.

There is an old player's adage that gamblers spend their winnings on booze and women, and then they fritter the rest of it away. It was something Johnny had said and lived a hundred times. It wasn't until a year later when he came back in town to appeal the custody case, that he found out Sonny had gone out drinking all night after his big win. Someone found him dead, lying on his back in a parking lot up at Lewisville Lake. His face swollen so badly that it took the cops a few weeks to identify him.

## GET YOUR WATER WHILE IT'S RAINING

Jimmy Gallo—gesturing with his hand—slashed his throat, and Fran muscled the boat into neutral to slow it hard against the choppy water. They were on the Long Island Sound, the New York side. Fran thought it was busy territory to be raising another lobsterman's pots but didn't say anything.

"This is it," Jimmy told him and yanked up the buoy. Jimmy inspected the tag, nodding.

Fran grabbed the utility knife.

"What the fuck you doing?" Jimmy said.

"I'm cutting the traps."

"We're taking the lobster. We might as well make some money while we're here."

"There's a lot here."

Fran knew none of this was up for discussion.

"I'm not banding the claws," Jimmy said. "We'll be quick. Help me toss them in the chests."

It was more dangerous to argue than to clean out the traps. Second season on the job and there Fran was, tossing his cigarette into the sea and stealing another man's pots.

If they saw a lobsterman on the horizon, they'd have seconds to leave. Getting caught meant Fran would never work again. After learning the business and seeing the cash you could make, Fran wanted in, not out.

But Jimmy wasn't someone to fuck with, so he jerked the little monsters out of the cages—claws snapping at him—looking over his shoulder for other boats. He tossed the lobsters into crates in front of Jimmy to be sorted. Only the babies were thrown back. No measurements, nothing.

Nervous as he was, he had to laugh. "Yo, Jimmy, we work faster on other peoples' pots."

The traps came in swarming with lobsters. At three and a half dollars a pound at the dock, you could imagine the windfall.

On Jimmy's orders Fran cut the rope below the buoys connecting them to the traps. They tossed the pots overboard, watching them disappear into the murky sound.

"So this guy. What he do to you?" Fran said. He rushed to the wheel.

"He's new. He's like a seagull. He flies in and takes what he wants, shits all over everybody."

"Does Ronnie know?"

Nothing happened at the Bellport wharf without Ronnie Little knowing.

Jimmy lit a cigarette. He was raspy, with a pile of cinders for a voice box. The guy probably smoked in line for communion. "Ronnie's the one that told me. This prick's moved down from Connecticut. Rhode Island. Someplace."

"Ronnie can't vouch for us if we're caught stealing."

"No shit, kid. Maybe you should meet Ronnie and tell him that yourself." Jimmy plopped down in the captain's seat. "Now let's get the fuck out of here."

Maybe he would meet Ronnie, Fran thought, and then he'd get his own tags.

Jimmy mashed the throttle and the boat kicked a frothy wake out behind them.

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Just after they'd stolen the traps out in the sound, Fran attended a party Jimmy threw every year on Memorial Day. Usually, Jimmy just boiled lobster and melted butter to celebrate the season. This year it was huge. Tables and piles of hard salami and platters of vegetables and dipping sauces cluttered the yard, smoke floating over peoples' heads. There was lobster salad. Lobster rolls. There was a circus tent to cover the food. A smoker had been pulled in behind a truck to roast a glistening pig. All the lobstermen came down to celebrate. Of course, Jimmy didn't pay for any of it.

"I can't believe Jimmy got someone to cook a hog," Fran said.

"He didn't. He built those guys a stone wall and they owed him a favor," Harry Meyers said. "You know the one there at Oleander and Laurel Hill?" Harry had been a lobsterman his entire life and had helped Jimmy get started with Ronnie. No one lobstered without Ronnie's blessing, not even Jimmy.

"Yeah, that's a good one. That grey one there," Fran said. Jimmy built a nice wall. He could have been a stonemason if he wasn't on the water so much.

That's how it went with everything at the party once you asked around. The trailer full of toilets: borrowed from some guy upstate that Jimmy schmoozed on vacation. The tents came on loan from the yacht club that hosted his fortieth birthday party. Kegs and ice: a debt repaid from Samson's Deli for installing central air. Besides which, Jimmy had a way of making the guests bring more food and drink than they needed.

"Can you believe this guy?" Fran said to Harry. They were gnawing on chicken wings.

Mrs. Gallo, Jimmy's wife, crossed in front of Fran and then waved. He never saw her hold Jimmy's hand even once in his life, but she managed to stand by his side for a few minutes and smile. That was a pretty big deal because it was known around the neighborhood that Mrs. Gallo had tried to divorce Jimmy. Some people said he crashed on the couch every night for three years. When Jimmy added some square footage on the house a few years back, Fran heard one of the neighbors joking that Jimmy was building himself a place to sleep.

Fran had grown up idolizing Jimmy because the guy hated laziness like it was a parasite that rotted your brain. Jimmy loved equipment—trucks and tools and repairing things that needed mending. He would never let anyone do something if he could do it himself. The guy had more scrap than a

lumberyard, more tools than a cabinetmaker. Hundreds of them: compressors, hacksaws, pipe wrenches, chisels and miter saws. Always dealing too. He'd barter for any gadget. Faded, battered, it didn't matter—even better. Once, he traded fifty pounds of lobster tails for an old station wagon with wood paneling down the side that looked like it should have been junked in the seventies. In a few weeks Jimmy had it running and he'd cruise the neighborhood honking at people. Harry told Fran that he'd borrowed Jimmy's truck once but he'd never do it again. He said it hurt his neck having to turn and wave at everyone who thought he was Jimmy. The mayor of Bellport—that's what they called Jimmy.

"Jimmy's never left Bellport. Not once," Fran's mom said before she'd died a few years back. "Look what he's built for himself."

Fran was the first guy Jimmy ever hired full time. Jimmy had been a lobsterman a few years at that time. Jimmy was tall and bald—all belly, sunbaked with red skin, never in the shade long enough to cure, and shoulders like an oak mantelpiece. He began pulling in single pots without a hauler, but soon he couldn't do it himself the loads got so big, and the guy already worked from sunup to midnight. For Jimmy a crew was a necessity. He didn't understand luxury. They cleared twelve-hundred pounds some days as a two-man crew. The most Jimmy had ever done alone was eight hundred.

Fran drank beers with Harry to get a few words in about getting his tags. Fran told him how he wanted to captain his own boat some day, because he knew Harry was tight with Ronnie.

"How have things been with Jimmy?" Harry said.

"Jimmy's okay with you guys, right?"

"That's not what I asked."

"Things are good," Fran said.

"There's good money in lobstering," Harry said. "Some party, huh?"

"The best," Fran said. "But I'm interested in doing it straight, you know? I'd like to put out my pots without all the extra work."

"There is no such thing as crooked. You play by Ronnie's rules, you're playing it straight."

"Can I talk to Ronnie if it's okay with you and Jimmy?"

"I don't know about that."

"You know Jimmy—I have to get coffee for him every morning. I love the guy, but I was hoping to do things my way, you know what I mean?"

"You just worry about doing what Jimmy says," Harry said. "You'll have to find your own space out there. It's not easy. It's tight right now with all the money coming in. Nobody wants to give up their pots."

"I'll make do with what Ronnie gives me."

A short while later everyone was drunk. Jimmy cracked open two beers, put one in Fran's hand, and then they walked out to Jimmy's shed. It was once a small building, but Jimmy had added on so much it was now the size of a barn. They went out there and everything was packed in cardboard boxes, stacked like in a warehouse waiting for delivery. Black marker inked

on the sides. *Kitchen. Garage. Guest Bedroom.* They tore open a box with an inflatable pool and dragged it out to the yard so the children could swim in it.

"You moving somewhere, Jimmy?"

"My old lady. She wants out."

The next time Fran was at Jimmy's house, weeks later, Mrs. Gallo had taken her stuff and moved to New Hampshire.

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After discharging from the Marines when he was twenty-three, Fran washed out trying to get work. Two weeks at home he was a hero, a Gulf War veteran, shaking hands and looking at proud neighbors; a month later he was a bum. People talked about how he was living off his mom's social security. As if six hundred a month even paid the rent. *What's Fran Keefe doing now?* everyone asked. At twenty-five he still couldn't find a real job.

In combat school at Camp Lejeune he got trained to light up the enemy with fifty caliber shells. An instructor named Sergeant Bowman was up on the platform behind the weapon, a gun that looked like a grim metal insect and dispensed over four hundred rounds a minute. "When you're up on the fifty cal," Bowman said, "you need to be getting your kill on." He clasped the machine gun and pantomimed some carnage for them. A bunch of guys laughed.

The first time Fran fired on live targets, he was on the Humvee, tracking militiamen as they fled across a desert smoldering with bombed out husks of armored vehicles. Adrenaline made the slaughter manageable. They

were dropping their weapons—while he unloaded—and turning to run. Bodies corkscrewed as bullets ripped through shoulders and legs. Only a few things will get you that high—stealing, he found out, was one of them.

Fran learned to love the sea working beside Jimmy. Here was a place where a man could be alone in nature with nothing but the sea and his boat. Self-employment meant freedom—no bosses or bullshit union rules. It was the smell of fuel vapors hovering on the sound, the motor whirring behind you and the gurgling of the sea as you slowly cruised out past the empty vessels anchored in the harbor and out to open sea. When you do something for the entire day your body and the job learn to harmonize. You loaded up the haulers, letting muscle memory take over. You memorized the exact spot where the land will jut out to the ocean. It was eleven minutes from his door to the harbor. Twenty-seven from his truck to open water. The tank swallowed two hundred and forty dollars in gas. He woke up early to the snarling of the outboard in his bed and the carpet swelling beneath him, as if the job never ceased.

He and Jimmy attacked the work, coming in fast on the pots and emptying them, then immediately moving for the next haul. Back then it was all legit too. None of the stealing that he and Jimmy got caught up in later.

All day he cleaned out traps and baited them with mackerel.

He was exhausted by the time they made it down to the wharf to unload the catch.

One morning they took the boat out past the village, pushing west towards Huntington, and stopped in an alcove that looked like a swimming hole where they used to anchor when Fran was a kid. There was a marker. They tugged up the cages and sorted the lobster into the tank.

"Some of these guys have been expanding their territory and fishing in Bellport," Jimmy said. "The money is too good." Jimmy was a busy son of a bitch. There was too much to repair, to sell, to grow, and to expand. "These jerks are lazy. You have to be smart if you want to drop pots on our turf."

Another day Jimmy told him they had an emergency and they went clear over to Oyster Bay, plucked up a bunch of traps, emptied the catch into the boat, and transported the pots all the way back to the harbor and stacked them in the back of Fran's truck.

"Now you have your own, for when you get your boat."

"Where am I going to put all this?" Fran said.

"You can stick them up your ass for all I care. You'll come up with something."

Once you get caught up in such a thing the weight of it starts to fade. Fran rented a storage space and stuck the whole lot inside, counting the days until he could run his own operation.

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The next week, Jimmy and Fran started taking traps from guys in Bellport.

"What's this guy's problem?" Fran asked.

"He owes Ronnie money."

"So how's this going to solve anything?"

"It keeps Ronnie happy and me on the water."

They took it all. Left only a rotting fish head reeking on the bait needle.

"I don't care what Ronnie says," Fran said. "I won't steal from people in town."

"You can tell him that yourself," Jimmy said. "This is going to work out for you if you stay patient. I'm buying a new boat. What do you think about taking this one off my hands?"

"Are you kidding, Jimmy? I'd love to." He patted one of the motors in the back and thought about how much a rig like this would cost. "But you now I can't afford it right now."

"Thirty-five grand. We can set up a payment plan." The boat was a custom twenty-seven footer. Fran couldn't get a fiberglass hull for that much, let alone the whole setup. It was robbery. Nobody had ever made a dollar off Jimmy Gallo until Fran did. He guessed it was the price of loyalty, possibly his silence—the boat wasn't free. He knew that.

The good days of doing honest work pretty much ended after Jimmy offered to sell him the boat. That's when the late night runs started. One night they parked away from the pier and launched the skiff where no one would see them. They paddled toward his boat in the harbor tightlipped, and vaulted aboard silently. The motor sounded like a choked out lawnmower cranking to life, a storm siren screeching off the coast. They were amped up steering out of the harbor, until they reached the point where the village was a distant glow

in the background. They dangled cigarettes from their mouths and sipped gas station coffee. By then he'd quit asking questions—Fran didn't even want to look at the buoys in case he knew the poor lobsterman who owned them. The plunder went into the hauler and they went bang bang fast, hooking the buoy onto the pulley, loading up the holds and filling the bait bags with clean fish heads so the guys never knew they cleaned out their cages.

Just before dawn they turned legit.

Jimmy compensated him for the extra work. With the overtime, Fran was clearing five hundred dollars some days.

One moonless night they went out and ran the spotlight off the side. Jimmy took them past Gull Island into a stretch of water Fran didn't recognize in the dark. They went through their usual routine, unburdening some chump of his day's wages.

Jimmy put his hand on his shoulder, his rank cigarette breath in his ear.

"You hear that," he said.

Fran turned off the hauler. Voices carried over the water, muffled whispers and disembodied talking. Jimmy cut the lines they were pulling up. Fran swiveled his head a hundred and eighty degrees but saw nothing. Someone was there, though. Jimmy jumped in the captain's seat and goosed the engine and they went straight for the harbor nonstop, not turning around to look behind them until they'd been going a full ten minutes.

Back in the truck, Jimmy laughed so hard he started hacking, and then he'd start right back up once he'd cleared his throat.

Fran shook his head. "Jimmy, come on. These guys—"

"These guys what?"

"They must know what's going on."

"That could have been anyone." He kept laughing. "Might have been some dumb shit kid like you."

He wasn't strong enough to stand up to Jimmy and Jimmy new it.

"Let's take a day off," Jimmy said. That was a first. "Meet me here tomorrow at noon. I got a surprise for you."

\*\*\*

Down at the harbor the next day there was a buzz all over Jimmy. He'd bought a brand new forty-two foot boat, still propped on a borrowed trailer, straight from the manufacturer. Fran brushed his fingers along the hull. He would have his own now, weathered by diesel fumes and cracked with salt—still not paid off—but a boat, a way to make money without groveling to a boss. Locals came over to gawk at the gorgeous white cruiser—the one Jimmy'd use to patrol the sound for decades. It had a Cummins inboard, and he said it could coast at fifteen knots like it was idling in a fresh water pond. Below deck there were two fish holds and up top a fourteen-inch stainless hauler.

They dropped her in and she floated like a bobber, a gleaming new behemoth as gentle as a guppy in a choppy sea. After the launch they went right to work, clearing eight hundred pounds in less than half a day. He even caught Jimmy beaming like a schmuck when they anchored mid-afternoon to

take a dip off the side. Jimmy stood gazing out at a tract of ocean while Fran dove off the castle tower cabin. The sun pounded the water so it looked like shards of a broken bottle refracting the light below until it disappeared into the cold and black.

\*\*\*

Fran woke up with a wicked burn across his belly and shoulders. He met Jimmy at the harbor like usual.

"Where's the coffee, kid?"

"Listen, Jimmy. I need to talk to you."

"Coffee first. Your problems second."

Jimmy marched towards the deli.

The guy behind the counter had to brew another pot. They sat at a table.

"Christ, now I got to wait ten more minutes for something I should already have."

"I'm done stealing pots, Jimmy." He had his own boat now—they worked out two thousand down with monthly payments of six hundred dollars.

"So we're losing daylight so you can quit?"

"Jimmy—"

"Season's over for you, Fran. I got money to make. You're the only white person I know that doesn't have to work for a living." He pushed the table to get up, grabbed his coffee, and walked to the door.

"Jimmy—"

The surly bastard left. Fran took his cup and drove down to the harbor to catch him before he went out for the day. His boat was on the move, edging out toward the sound.

Fran took his out instead. Just travelled west toward the city and stopped in Great Neck. Kept her going with no wake, just floating past all the mansions and dreaming that no one in the world knew where he was.

\*\*\*

All of the sudden Ronnie said he wanted to meet with him. Fran walked down to the diner. Ronnie was at a booth by himself.

"I hear you're having problems with Jimmy," he said.

"No problems," Fran said.

"A lot of reports about traps coming up light."

"I'm off Jimmy's boat, Ronnie. Got my own, now."

"We got guys coming over to the village saying they saw you lifting pots that don't belong to you. People've seen you out in Huntington. Why would a captain and his deckhand be seen in Huntington?"

"That ain't me. That's just Jimmy. He's got deals everywhere."

"You should come work for me the rest of the season. So I can keep an eye on you."

When Ronnie suggested you do something, you had no choice. Although it sounded like an offer, it was actually an order.

His first day on the job with Ronnie they caught a late breakfast, and the sun was up thirty minutes before they got out on the water. A few guys

came in to the deli to talk business. Harry wanted to put down some more traps. Another guy wanted to take over a spot vacated by another lobsterman who retired to Florida.

Ronnie had a nice rig himself. They cleared the harbor after an hour of prep. Most of the prime spots belonged to him—he drank a beer while Fran ran the hauler. They cruised out to a rocky island and Fran drenched his shirt with sweat pulling out the lobster.

"Let's hurry up," Ronnie said. "I want to get back and show you something."

Before sundown they were back on land, sitting together on a bench at the end of the pier watching the sun fizzle out.

"This is a ritual of mine," Ronnie said. "I like to come back here and have a drink and watch the day end."

Fran watched a black plastic bag scoot with the breeze across the boards on the dock. It was so odd—he thought it was a remote control car at first, how quickly it tore through his vision.

Then a loud snap like the discharge of a mortar round popped nearby.

An explosion cracked and a cannonball discharge of fiberglass planks shot up into the sky. Fran's twenty-seven footer ignited in the harbor and then hovered on the surface of water like a dead fish. Shards of the vessel landed on boats anchored hundreds of feet away. The explosion launched projectiles, one of them thwacking into the gazebo at the park a quarter-mile away. The boat snapped into a pile of smoky matchsticks. Ronnie peeked at his watch.

Fran saw the time. It was eight thirty. A pall rose over the water, blowing sideways and up with the breeze.

"I couldn't reason with the guys in Huntington," Ronnie said. "Someone needed to pay for those missing traps."

"I was just doing as I was told," Fran said. His head slumped forward. "It'll take me years to save up that kind of money again."

"Most people would gladly pay for that kind of lesson."

Fran lay down flat on the dock, breathless.

"See you, kid," Ronnie said and left.

In less than ten minutes sirens engulfed the harbor. Police cars filled the parking lot.

When the cops brought him down to the station, he just said, "Why would I blow up my own boat? I don't even have insurance."

\*\*\*

During the offseason, Fran did it all. Raked leaves. Built a doghouse. A couple of guys teamed up with him to paint houses.

Jimmy hired him for part time work with his new crew come the next spring. Harry Meyer's kid took work with them as a deckhand but didn't know shit. He was a mouth-breather, all the way, a high-school dropout looking to make big money with little effort.

"Do we get a cut of the lobster?" the kid asked.

"Shut up and get on the hauler," Fran said.

They'd baited a few pots, but they were only now going around to collect them. The first one came up full.

"These things stink," the kid said.

## DOWN SOUTH YOU'D BE UGLY

Tara Matheson swatted mosquitos on the tarmac of the King Salmon airport. She was waiting for her mentor, Jasper McIntosh, and as soon as he arrived with the pilot, they'd be airborne. The radar had cleared for the first time in days and it was September, their last window to retrieve the equipment from the stations and repair the antennas monitoring the volcanoes in the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes.

The summers in Alaska brought a scourge of insects that would have made Moses shudder. A few more stings and she might just head inside. Signs draped against the ragged terminal advertised exotic travel. In the village beyond, a few smoky pubs nestled against a machinist shop. Tender red welts formed on her wrists and neck. She sprayed more deet on her skin, took pleasure in the fog of chemicals, and then applied more and more and more.

She itched her bites and then her nose, her nostrils already raw from work at altitude. Her lips were beyond the repair of moisturizing. They had grown scales.

She hadn't seen Jasper in months. While she spent all summer racing through her fieldwork—understaffed as usual—he politicked for grant money in the lower forty-eight to continue their research with the Alaska Volcano Observatory. Although he had scrounged together the money year after year

for her position, the recent budget cuts made her work expendable. They measured volcanic gases and studied seismic activity, so how could anyone handling the purse strings possibly care?

Someone tapped her on the shoulder.

"Oh, Christ," she said. She turned around. "Jasper, I almost collapsed." Jasper was tall and lumbering as a moose, yet somehow perfectly capable of disappearing in a crowd. He was a brilliant geophysicist, a legend in the field twenty years older than she.

Before the summer, after a nasty fight with him over her career, she'd lied and told him she had plans to go to Chile and pick up work with some of their former colleagues. He was determined to stay home in Alaska where he'd lived all his life. Too proud to tell him she didn't want to leave, she still hoped for good news or she'd get sacked and flown back to England at the age of thirty-five to live with—oh God—her parents.

"Tara, look," he said. He put a hand on her shoulder and signaled toward the banks of the Naknek River just beyond the runway. It was a wide, sometimes violent body of water given to shifting tides. A floatplane rolled on top of the water with the current. "We have to come back and fish again in July during the salmon run. We've never used my parents' lodge."

It felt wonderful to have his hands on her after all this time apart, but he too must have known they loved each other only when they were alone in the field on some remote campaign, stuck in a tent together with nothing to do but the obvious. Years ago it bothered her to be another young woman crawling

into bed with her boss. Like all twenty-somethings, everything she did was obvious then. She'd been a twenty-something twit.

"Where's the pilot?" she asked.

He pulled out a piece of a paper and a brown sack tucked under his arm.

"I meant to tell you. Our normal guy is running supplies out to the bush. It was a last minute thing. We got a different guy." He scanned the printout. "Dillon Hamrick. You know him?"

"What do you have in the bag for me?" He handed it to her and she rummaged through it, pulling out a container of English chocolate biscuits. "Oh, thank you."

"You know this Hamrick guy?" he asked again.

Best that Jasper didn't know about her adventures with Hamrick.

"Oh, certainly. I remember him," she said. "He flew us out to the field this summer when you were in Washington begging for my job."

"They're not going to fund you this year," he said.

"Way to bury the *fucking* lead, Jasper."

"I wanted to tell you in person," he said. The university in Fairbanks funded Jasper, but she worked off the federal grant money. "There's always next year. I planted a seed with these people."

"What do I do until then?"

"We'll hire you as a tech. I know it's not ideal, but you can continue your work."

"I will not."

Hamrick pulled up then in his old Land Rover. The rig was caked in de-icing salts and on the back of the vehicle a bumper sticker read *Down South You'd Be Ugly*.

Hamrick climbed out like a bombardier and went straight for her.

As he got very close, she smiled so only he could see it.

"Tara Matheson." Hamrick engulfed her in his yellow windbreaker and squeezed her until she thought she might snap.

He let her go, pulled a tin from his pocket, and pinched together a preposterous amount of tobacco from inside it. "Are you McIntosh?" he said to Jasper and plugged the wad into his gums. She inhaled the nauseating smell of wintergreen and slipped back into a memory from the summer. It took restraint to block out a few of the fonder moments.

He wiped his fingers on his trousers and shook hands with Jasper.

"How many winters you been here?" Jasper asked. "I've never flown with you before." A strange question coming from Jasper. He was sizing up Hamrick.

"No winters." He smiled with flecks of tobacco stuck to his perfect teeth. Hamrick usually never gave a straight answer, but this was true. Most people in Alaska hung their winters like taxidermy. "I leave for Seattle tomorrow and I'll be in Hawaii by Christmas. It's too cold to be here. I wanted to geek out today but I had to get you two heroes up top." He pointed to a hanger. "I've got the fixed-wing loaded and ready to go once we're back

down." According to Hamrick, he spent all winter surfing, hiking, and rock climbing.

"Oh, I thought you were from here," Jasper said.

"I am," Hamrick said. He couldn't be counted on to do anything without that self-congratulatory grin. "Half-Aleut. My mom's side."

She'd heard this before. If it weren't for those dragon-like eyes, green and gold, you'd assume he was lying. He was almost certainly not Eskimo. Beauty wasted on the beautiful.

Hamrick was a great pilot, too. A pair of hen's teeth might fetch you an average one in Alaska. It was the only thing that made Hamrick worth keeping around. Sure he was great in bed, but he'd more likely take an office job than settle down with a woman.

She'd blown over from England, Swindon of all unlikely places, to study seismology, only to be taken by volcanoes. That was Hamrick, too. He'd stormed in like a tempest this summer when everything had been pointing elsewhere—to comfort, to love, to Jasper.

"Oh, I got you something," Hamrick said. He returned to the Rover and brought back a jar of Branston Pickle. "I was hoping to run into you before I left."

"Where in God's name did you find this?" she asked.

"Just making the rounds," he said.

She dropped it in the bag with the biscuits. Every bachelor on the whole damn peninsula was buying her gifts now. Best not to open one's

mouth to men about British treats. You say you miss the food from home and they start going on missions to buy you things.

\*\*\*

They took off in Hamrick's helicopter and flew towards Baked Mountain. She and Hamrick left loads of equipment there at base camp just months before when she'd installed the monitoring stations. The camp was the last refuge on a barren ridge before the summit push.

Jasper had taken the co-pilot seat before she could make a move for it, which left her stuffed in the back shouting up front to be heard. The chop of the blades, the vibrations of the aircraft, and the smell of motor oil filled the cabin. It was like riding in a mechanic's garage with a mountain view.

As they flew toward the Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes she saw, finally, her volcano, Mt. Mageik, a majestic fire breather in a chain of massive mountains. So many of these peaks rumbled and hissed with active fumaroles, a rare phenomenon in such a tight cluster. A hundred years ago a nearby eruption at Novarupta crowded the sky with hot ash as far away as Kodiak Island. She could have made a career studying that blast.

"You ought to teach me to fly," she screamed to Hamrick over the roar.

There was no response from either of them.

"I'd like to be able to do this myself," she added.

Out came Hamrick's smile as he turned back to her. "What's in it for me?"

"*What's in it for me?*" she said, rummaging through some things Hamrick had stacked in the back. "You may have just stumbled backwards into your epitaph."

"Why don't you fly down to Seattle with me for the offseason?" Hamrick shouted back. "We could fly every day if you want. By the time we make it back, you'll have enough hours to fly on your own."

It was unclear whether Hamrick was trying to cause trouble or whether he was clueless that she loved Jasper. She'd mentioned it over the summer. Not that it stopped Hamrick—or her—then.

"What a charmed life you lead." She found an odd attaché case in the back that looked like it might hold government secrets.

"What do you do for money during the winter?" Jasper asked him.

"I save up all summer," Hamrick said. "A few big jobs and I have enough for the offseason."

"I didn't know pilots get paid that much," Jasper said.

"Not working for you we don't. I have a few contracts that pay out much bigger. A few rich guys that expect me to go wherever they tell me at a moment's notice," Hamrick said. "Who pays you?"

"I work for the University of Alaska," Jasper said. "Fairbanks."

"Not me," she said. "I'm losing my funding."

"What happened?" Hamrick said.

"Talk to him." She patted Jasper on the shoulder.

"Don't you have something to fall back on?" Hamrick said to her.

"I can go to Chile." She lied again so Hamrick could hear it too. "We have a lot of colleagues down there in the Andes."

She rested her face against the glass, but the vibration was too much.

Mt. Mageik jutted 7,103 feet into the sky at the end of a long valley carpeted in pale brown ash and pumice. The formation was a devil's spire with a rolling plume for a crown. Not much grew here in the valley because the snowcapped volcanoes rained burning soot down on its floor, creating a basin of scorched dust. Yet the earth lived on somehow, despite the ages of eruptions. Rivers of melted snow sliced gorges into the beige desert of the valley.

But this was all down below. Her attention veered up top where the skies today ran clear, but where conditions there could change with a thunderclap. In the time it would take them to get their equipment into the helicopter, their window might close.

Hamrick touched down on Baked Mountain near the dingy storage building. He cut the engine, and she and Jasper waited for the blades to stop lurching. Without a word, Hamrick flung himself out into the wind and made for the toilet, an outhouse that stood thirty or forty meters from the rest of the buildings.

Jasper stepped out of the helicopter and she followed him out and they moved toward the top of ridge to take in the view.

The Baked Mountain huts were several corrugated tin shelters perched on a bed of rock that looked like the belly of a crab.

"Jasper, come and look." Had it really been a year since they were last here together?

The entire valley was a jagged bowl of mountains and volcanoes with Mt. Mageik towering above it all.

The Baked Mountain huts meant something much more, though. She and Jasper had had sex in the bunks here for the first time a decade before.

"Where will I go if I lose all this?" she now asked him. "I can't go home."

"Just stay here." Jasper kissed her.

"I'm not working as your lab tech."

"Move in with me," he said. Not once had he ever expressed a desire to live with her. "You'll continue your research."

"On an expired visa? Even if I did, I deserve to be paid."

Jasper scratched his jaw.

"What if we go to Chile?" She thought of the Italians that flew to Alaska two summers ago to study with them and would soon travel to the Andes.

"If you stay here, I can groom you to take over my position."

Hamrick returned from the outhouse.

"I'm going to need your muscles," Hamrick said.

"You've obviously come to the wrong place," she said.

They walked with Hamrick to the storage sheds and Hamrick led them inside to a large bin. He entered a code on the padlock and flipped it open.

Inside were blankets, jackets, and clean socks. He pulled up a few smaller crates and handed them to Jasper.

"They're heavy," he said. "Just leave them by the chopper. I'll load them."

Jasper grabbed the supplies and left the shed.

"What was in those boxes?" she asked.

"Dinosaur bones." Hamrick smiled.

"Tell me."

Hamrick put in a dip and smiled. "They smuggle them from Mongolia into Russia. I fly them down to Seattle and someone pays me more money than you make in a year."

"What's in them? Really?"

He rolled up some sleeping bags and warm jackets and shoved them in her chest. "Carry that out to the aircraft. We need to get moving."

\*\*\*

They were up the air again and ascending to Mt. Mageik. Except for the patches of charcoal rock exposed to the sun, everything here lay in the shadows of its towering summit. Even the town, so far behind and out of sight, was somehow contending with it. There was a reason the Greeks gave Mt. Olympus to their gods. Up top, a hundred meters in front of them, the massive crater bubbled and boiled.

They homed in on the rim of the crater lake with the helicopter. Hamrick landed on an icy bald just a short walk to the station.

"I'm staying here," Hamrick said from the cockpit. "I'll stay on the radio and check the weather."

Jasper flung open the door to the aircraft and they stepped out on the mountaintop. At this elevation, ice plated the ground like armor. It was so cold she could feel the enamel on her teeth, and she pulled down her balaclava to protect her skin from the sun. They waddled across the countertop of ice dragging a toolbox towards a shallow bowl to the monitoring station.

The station antenna was a meter tall and measured gas and chemical output from the crater burrowed down so many feet below. Perched like a condor's nest on a ledge above the massive broth of the volcano, it fed data into a storage locker buried in snow next to it. The station recorded the data methodically, week after week, waiting for her to extract them.

"We need a blowtorch to get the box open," she said.

"Don't know if we have one."

"I know Hamrick has one. I saw him pack it."

"I think I can get it," Jasper said. He pulled a chisel from the toolbox and began to chisel at the layers of hardened ice over the hinges. She found a flathead screwdriver and tried to pry open the door. It wouldn't budge.

"Let's just take the whole box if it won't open," she said. It was the size of a laundry basket.

"It's frozen into the ground."

"We're getting it out."

"Tell me about, Hamrick," Jasper said.

"Let's get back to the helicopter," she said.

"I want to know."

"Not now, Jasper."

"Nice guys finish last, huh?"

She smiled. "They finish first. You know that." She clutched his face, pulling him down, and kissed him. She loved him. Right now.

"Go get the blowtorch," he said.

She hiked back to the helicopter. The visibility was still holding. She could see for days. If they could pry the hinges open on the monitoring equipment, they'd be back at base camp by mid-afternoon.

Hamrick threw the cockpit door open just as she was about to reach for it.

"What's wrong?" she said.

"Take this," he shouted.

Hamrick shoved a paint scraper in her hands. "I need you to help me get the ice off the blades."

"What happened?"

"A patch of fog rolled in and dumped some moisture on us. It only takes a little to unbalance the rotors. We can't take off until they're clean."

Hamrick went to work on one side of the copter, and she worked on the other. It was hard to stand on the legs of the helicopter, keep her balance, and reach the blades well enough to get all the ice off.

No sign yet of Jasper, but he wouldn't think to come back for at least ten more minutes.

"Okay," Hamrick said. "Get down. Let me start it up."

They stepped down and jumped in the cabin and he fired up the engine.

The blades spun around a few half-hearted rotations and then cut off.

"There's ice still forming," Hamrick said. A slow moving fog crept in around them—sparse but present.

They returned to either side and started chipping away again. The ice was spreading haphazardly, and removing it was like trying to strip paint off a wall with a toothpick. She went at it for ten minutes but it was desperate and futile.

"Tara," Hamrick said. Then louder, "Tara." He was behind her, both arms around her waist. "It's done. We're stuck."

"We can get it."

"Stop."

"What's wrong?" she said. "Do you want to be stuck up here?"

"You can't sweat. You'll catch the chills."

"I'm not sweating."

"Exactly. Sit down with me and rest."

"What about the blades?"

He shook his head. "This helicopter just became a part of this mountain. Maybe you can study it next time you come up."

"We should put out a distress call," she said.

"In a minute," he said. "I brought cheese. I don't go anywhere without cheese." He pulled out a block of Swiss cheese and cut it with a pocketknife. He held out the blade for her to take it.

Alaskans prepared for disaster. They toted food, sleeping bags, and firearms everywhere they went. It was the kind of thing she had once abhorred but now understood. No atheists in foxholes. Country like this demanded preparedness.

He unclipped the radio. "I have to SOS the Air National Guard."

"I'll do it."

He handed it to her. "I need you to do me a favor. Whenever we get out of here, I need you to help make sure we get my valuables out."

"What's really in those boxes?"

"I told you. Fossils."

The door burst open. It was Jasper. "The weather's getting nasty."

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"Time to get friendly," Hamrick said. "It's going to get cold up here and we need to get close." He had enough sleeping bags packed for all of them and he started arranging them while they huddled inside the copter.

The emergency call had gone just as she feared. The pilots couldn't come up to rescue them for the same reason they couldn't leave the summit. Once poor visibility and high winds took over, there wasn't a helicopter or

fixed wing vehicle to save them. Until they had pristine skies, it was just the three of them in that tiny cabin.

Night came and with it a frightful sleep. Turn over. Lurch awake from a vivid dream where they are buried in an avalanche. Open the door just enough to let Jasper climb over her, go out, and use the toilet. Let the cold air rush in and use three bodies to heat it back up. They were packed in tight and Jasper brushed his body against her every hour to remind her that he was there. In her last dream she saw Jasper wandering the station, but it wasn't really the monitoring station. He destroyed the equipment and threw it into a volcano and watched it sink into lava.

She fought until morning and found Jasper still asleep next to her. She slipped out of her bag and went outside.

Rime ice grew like lichen on the helicopter. It was in her eyebrows now too. Crusty spots of it covered her knit cap and waterproof shell.

On the bald of the mountaintop she hurried toward the station. Twice the wind, fifty, sixty miles-per-hour, knocked her to the hard ground. In the distance she saw the cloud open and figured it was the clear patch the crew on the radio had told them about. But then the sky closed again and it was gone. Pushing ahead she found the metal box nearly completely frozen over and filled in with snow.

She worked a pick into the outline of the instrument panel. Once the edges were visible, she went at the top, scraping away the thick shell of ice. Now she was really sweating, but she kept working.

Another patch of sunlight appeared and the sky ripped apart.

She was determined to do what she came here to do. Working the point of the pick around like a letter opener, she tried to free the lid from the metal bin that warehoused her project. She remembered installing it here, how she'd discovered joy in the explosion of volcanoes—how happy she'd been to witness their elegance and awesome capacity for destruction. And it wasn't just the volcano that seduced her—it was the flights into shimmering Alaskan skies and the rush of knowing that death had once lurked near each avalanche of lava.

Then she heard a loud pop. It wasn't the volcano or a rescue party. It was the clicking of the box opening like a treasure chest.

SOON TO BE A MAJOR MOTION PICTURE

Movie season comes crazy early this summer. *Jurassic Park* drops in June, so my boss, Bill Kennedy, asks us if we know anyone to hire at the theater.

"Can't think of anyone," I say. My friends from high school would kill to have a job at Pleasant Valley, which is exactly the reason I don't tell them, so I'm still the only guy with the cool job.

A few days after Kennedy told us about the job, I catch up with Ally at the podium after my shift starts. When she tears tickets, she draws on a pad she carries everywhere. These days she sketches Wolverine over and over again.

"I've been thinking a lot about whales," she says. Her hair is blue. Last week it was pink. She slides her drawing over—it's a whale. It's pretty dope, but the next minute she's penciling in a harpoon through its heart.

"That's cold," I say.

She doesn't answer questions about her art, but at least she shares it with me and not anyone else. She tells me I get her. Since I met her she's been talking about how she's one quarter Indian, which I don't see. I tell her that's just what white people say to feel like they have some kind of heritage, and besides, I'm Mexican, not Indian. It's a hell of a lot different, although maybe not to her.

Ally's pretty hot, but that's not why I like her. Being in high school makes us pretty tight—we've got these big plans for the future and how we're going to get out of this town. She's going to go to New York and then San Francisco, or maybe it's the other way around. I'm going to buy a motorcycle, travel out west, and pitch a tent on the side of the road whenever I get tired.

There's this other connection, too. We take home an extra \$40, \$60, \$100 a shift ripping the place off, and weekends are easy with all the business concession does. You ring up the total at the register and then void out the stuff you recycle from the theaters—big paper Coke cups and popcorn bags—right as the customers hand you the money. Kennedy's a motherfucker with inventory, so you have to be careful. It's gross when you think about, but no one ever notices they're eating from the same tub of buttered popcorn as the guy from the previous show.

Since we don't have school over the summer, we're going to load up on shifts. Kennedy doesn't care if we work doubles and go into overtime.

Ally's not in a mood for talking, so I decide to split. "Before things get busy, I'm going to take my fifteen and get some food. You want something?"

"Nah." Ally never eats.

Twenty minutes later I'm upstairs in the break room eating two junior bacon cheeseburgers from Wendy's, when a college kid with a bushy, white-boy fro walks in.

Kennedy swoops in behind him quick enough for the blond part in his hair to take flight for a second. "Cesar," he says to me, "I need you to train Noah here on usher."

I hold up the burger as if to say give me a minute, but Kennedy just ignores the gesture. So much for my thirty-minute break.

"I've got to refund some tickets for some pissed off guests," he says and disappears. Dude always has something to do, so I get up to show the fucking new guy around.

I take Noah downstairs to the janitor's closet to grab the dustpans and brooms. "Get that big trashcan," I tell him.

We stack up all the shit on the trashcan and wheel it down to Theater One right as *Indecent Proposal* lets out. Roll credits. A few super fans watch them like they always do—to the bitter end—until there's nothing left but some shitty music playing against a black screen.

"I'm going to watch every movie in here before I leave," Noah says.

"You will," I say. "Over and over again—especially working usher."

"You don't like movies?" he asks.

"I can't sit still long enough." The lights come on as the last reel hits the end of the tape. "I'm squirrely, man."

Just then Ally comes in the theater holding the night's schedule. "Can you guys get this ready quick? I got people lined up already for the seven fifteen." She looks up from the paper and notices Noah. "This the new guy?" she says to me.

"Yeah."

"What's your favorite movie?" Noah says to her.

Ally sort of stops. "Like right now?"

"Yeah. What's the best movie you saw this year?"

"*Army of Darkness*," she says.

"Yes," he shouts. "Brilliant movie. Bruce Campbell is a fucking genius."

"All right then, but hurry up," she says and leaves the theater.

"Who's that chick?" Noah asks. "She go to school with you?"

"No, different school."

"You should be all over that shit," Noah says.

"Take all the cups out of the holders. Then sweep the rows."

Noah cleans up the trash quickly, but I catch him tossing out some Jujyfruits.

"What are you doing? Give me those." I pull them out of the trash and shake the box around so Noah hears them ping pong around. "These are still good, dude." I grab a few and toss the rest to him.

Noah's a good worker, but I don't know if he'll be cool with the shit we do around here. When I started last year I was a dumbass kid coming up from West Texas, where I spent most of my time skipping school and spending my allowance on Dr. Peppers and beef jerky from the 7-Eleven near my dad's body shop. The old man didn't even care what I did after my stepmom split. I'd probably be a dropout if we hadn't left Texas. We bounced after my uncle

got in trouble with some scary dudes. I still don't know much about it, but it was time to go.

Here, I got smart in a hurry. I go to a good school and I'm on the wrestling team. We live way out in the country, but my dad pulled some shit with the district so they'll let me go to a white school in Raleigh. They call it bussing, but I drive my own ass to school. There's no way I'm getting on the cheese wagon with those fucking rockbiters.

Me and Noah clean out the theaters all night really good. He's not one of those typical I'm-smarter-than-you college kids, but the dude is a pussy hound. I catch him flirting with some girl after *The Sandlot* lets out. It's packed too, but he goes up in our broke-ass theater uniform and starts doing some real player shit. He found a bracelet someone dropped in a seat earlier today and takes it up to this girl—right in front of all her hot friends—and he's like, "You dropped this."

"No," she says, "It's not mine."

"I know," he says and smiles at her so big it's almost uncomfortable. "I just wanted an excuse to talk to you." But it doesn't end there. The girl has a shirt on that says Stone Temple Pilots really big across her chest. "You ever been out to the quarry on Six Forks Road during a full moon?"

"Where?" she says. A few of her friends start tugging on her shirt like it's time to go.

"Yeah, behind the graveyard on Falls Lake."

She brushes off her friends for a moment. "Wait, what's that?"

"Tell you what," he says and puts his hand on his chest. "My name is Noah and this is my buddy Cesar." He grabs me with his other hand and pulls me close to them. "Give me your number and we'll take you there." He slaps me on the arm and says, "Get me a pen."

So just like that dude has her number.

Later, after we clean One for the nine-fifty showing, I tell Noah he can take off.

"You doing the midnight movie alone?" he says.

"Every Friday and Saturday." None of the college kids want to do it because they all want to get drunk, and Kennedy won't let girls walk out to the parking garage alone.

"I'm staying, man. I want to see that preview again for *Cliffhanger*."

Before the last movie of the night, Noah pulls me into Four, which is empty until the matinees tomorrow. "You smoke?"

"Yeah, man." And it's then that I realize he means weed because I can smell the stank out of his pocket. We get good and high and sit in the back row. "What goes on at the quarry?"

"Oh, man." he says. "It's a place you take girls."

"Why's that?"

"It just works, man." He snaps his fingers. "You aren't afraid of heights are you?"

"Nah," I lie. I can't even ride roller coasters.

The trailer for *Cliffhanger* starts running.

"Stallone," he says. "*Fucking* Rambo, man." We laugh our asses off.

\*\*\*

Just a week after Noah scored the girl's number, he corners me in the break room.

"Where you going to college?"

I laugh. "Shit."

"You're smart. Just play up the Mexican thing."

"Fuck you," I say.

"I'm just saying."

I cram a Bojangle's biscuit in my mouth. Noah lights a cigarette.

"What did you get on your SAT?" he asks.

"I did okay." Truth is I don't know what an SAT is, and I don't know how people apply to college.

"What's okay?"

"Like average."

He tops off a black ashtray overflowing with cigs. "Just get into school somewhere. What the fuck are you going to do if you stay here?"

"Work for my dad."

"And be one of *those* dudes?" He shakes his head at me like I'm some bitch.

"Like college is such a big deal," I say. He's going on cigarette number three. "You don't learn shit there, anyway. You just go there to get laid."

"It's just a game man—no different from any other one. The only reason I'm in college is because I applied." He points the cigarette at me. "As should you."

"So what's up with that chick?" I ask because he's pissing me off.

He holds a finger up. "I already called her. Set the whole thing up."

"Already?"

"Why don't you ask Ally out, man? Take her to the quarry with us."

I look to the door to make sure no one's around. "Nah. It's not like that."

"Well, it looks like that."

"We've just worked together for a while."

"You need to own it. Tell her." Noah puts his hands up in the air. "We should just smoke a blunt in here. Does Kennedy have any idea what's going on around here?"

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*Jurassic Park* opens in two weeks. Me and Ally are all alone in the back of Two.

"I talked to Noah about this thing," I say. "The old quarry."

We're sitting there eating a box of Dots, watching the end of *Menace II Society*.

"Oh, yeah. Heard about that," she says.

"Wait. Did Noah tell you?"

"I can't remember." She puts her chin to her collarbone and pulls her feet up on the seat. "I think we should tell Noah about the whole thing," she

says. "You know, selling the popcorn and drinks and all. We should get him in on the money so he knows what's up. Do you think he'll be cool?"

"I don't know about all that. Why get him involved?"

"I think we should tell him," she says. She's picking at her fingernails.

I lean up next to her and just think, *fuck it*, and say, "Yeah, do you want to come to the quarry with me?"

"Sure." She smiles now and puts her feet back on the floor. "Can you pick me up?" She writes her address down and tears the sheet out of her pad. No drawing, either side.

"What have you been sketching lately?"

"Nothing," she says. "I'm uninspired."

That night I walk Ally out to her car in the parking garage. It's dark except for the blinking floodlights. I'm as scared as hell when I have to walk with a girl knowing I want to kiss her and not knowing what she's going to do. So I grab her arm just above the elbow and go in close to her face. She's surprised but goes along and then she kisses me back and I push her back slowly, so she's up against the concrete pillar. She starts grabbing my dick and I rub her ass. It goes like that for a while until we pull back and look at each other. We do it all over again, but it loses momentum. Just sort of stops.

"I gotta go," she says.

I watch her pull away in her dad's Toyota and start wondering if I should have done more than just feel her up.

\*\*\*

It's a week before *Jurassic Park* drops and the afternoon before our big trip to the quarry. I'm carrying thirty-gallon bags of popcorn down to concession just before the three of us are supposed to head off to Burger King.

I can't find Ally and Noah anywhere for the food run, though, so I start looking for them in the back of the theaters. By the time I've hit all seven, I'm starving and I decide to go grab lunch myself. Before I can leave, though, Kennedy catches me in the hallway.

"Dude," he says, "I'm glad I found you."

"What's going on?"

"I need you to hold down the fort. Derrick is sick and I have to send him home."

So now I'm standing behind the register after all the movies start, with not much of anything to do but snack on popcorn. Then Noah and Ally slip out of Theater Four, right by the podium where we tear tickets.

"What are you guys doing?" I say.

"Yo, Cesar," Ally says. "Let's get strawberry shakes."

Noah laughs. They've been smoking.

"I'm stuck here covering for Derrick on concession. Bring me back a Whopper." I think about it for a second. "Better get me two."

Thirty minutes blow by and Noah and Ally are still gone, and then Kennedy, who must feel bad for me, relieves me.

I go up to the break room to wait for the food. Ally's backpack is on a hook next to the employee lockers. I zip it open and there's her drawing pad.

Without hesitating, I flip it open. Since the time we made out in the parking garage, there are a bunch of new drawings of a stegosaurus. At the end, there is a sketch of Noah standing in front of the box office, and it's all black and white except for the sky, which is blue. It looks just like him. I throw it back in the backpack and zip it up.

Noah and Ally come up a few minutes later, and I can hear them laughing from the bottom of the stairs, up all the way to the break room. They are two peas in a motherfucking pod, these two.

"Two whoppers, dude," Noah says to me.

"What do I owe you?" I rip them out of his hand. It's all I can do to not go off on him.

"A few bucks. I don't know," Noah says and sits down close to me. "So, Ally was telling me about how you guys make money." He sucks on a shake and stares at me like I've been holding out on him.

"Yeah, that's right." I look over at Ally, but she's buried in a pile of chicken nuggets.

"Well, come on, man." He nudges me with his elbow. "Tell me how it works."

"Just be cool." I tell him about the scam just to shut him up. There's nothing to it, really. Me and Noah will work usher and empty out the theaters. We'll take all the large, four-dollar drinks and popcorns and wrap them in a second bag we hide under the actual trash. Once we get it back to the janitor's closet, one guy will stand guard while the other rinses out the stash.

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That night, an hour before we're heading out to the quarry, I'm trying on every shirt in my closet. Me, pops, and my uncle live in this small brick house in Durham—out in the country—but it's on an acre of property with a fire pit in the back. My dad loves Camaros, so we've got three of them he salvaged from the shop. One of them is up on blocks and the other is my dad's, but mine's a Z28, a real fucking rocket ship. And I need it too, driving back and forth between here and school. I got a hardship license when I was fifteen, so I've been driving for two years now without a permit.

"A girl from school?" my dad says. He's old school as a motherfucker, thinks people should get married and settle down.

"I work with her." My dad's always wondering about the chicks I date. Not that I've brought anyone out here before. If you tell some white chick's dad that you live in Durham, you'll be holding your dick the rest of the night.

Dad's a funny dude. Says I'll take over the transmission business. He thinks college is for kids who don't want to work.

There's a knock at the door, and it's Noah.

"You ready?" he says. "Where's Ally?"

"I told her I'd pick her up as soon as you got here. Where's your girl?"

"She flaked out," he said. "She sucked, anyway."

"So it's just the three of us?" I say, scooting out the door so my dad can't hear. "Isn't that a little weird?"

"No, it's cool man," Noah says.

"I thought the quarry was where you take girls."

"At least you'll know where it is now." He starts to enter the house, but I block him.

"You need to stop it with Ally," I say. "This isn't what you do to a friend."

"What am I doing?"

Dad's just sitting there watching TV.

"You're alone with her all the time."

"She's the one doing it, man. Am I supposed to ignore her?"

I realize this kind of conversation isn't going anywhere with Noah, but he knows where I stand. "I'm driving, though," I say.

"That's cool." He keeps looking over my shoulder. "Let me say hi to your dad." He walks inside the house and plops down on the couch near my dad.

"Cesar says you're into cars," Noah says.

"Yeah," the old man says. He screws around with the clicker. "I got the shop down on Glenwood. The one by the Angus Barn."

"I hear you want this guy to take over the garage for you?" Noah points at me.

"*Chingada*," Dad says. "This one doesn't know how to change the oil in the car I give him."

"I'm in school, Dad."

"*La puta escuela.*" The old man starts swirling his empty beer can and looking at the lid. "They talk about feelings in school."

"School isn't that bad," Noah says.

"I had a family when I was eighteen," Dad says and walks into the kitchen to get another Budweiser.

"Now you see what I'm up against," I say to Noah. "Let's bounce, man."

Dad comes back and sits down, but he's happier now, or maybe it's just smugness. "Maybe it's different now," he says and cracks the beer. "Don't you guys need women to go on a date?"

We pick up Ally at her house in North Raleigh. I pull in her driveway, and she comes running down the lawn toward us. Her house is huge. It's hard to see her because I'm looking at the outline of it, trying to find where it ends, thinking, *damn, yo.*

Noah's riding shotgun and stays there, making Ally get in the back of the Camaro. He tells me where to go and we head out way north of town to Falls Lake, and then Noah tells me to slow down after we pass a gas station.

"It's coming up soon," he says, scanning the side of the road. We pass a chapel. "That's it." He pats me on the shoulder.

I park behind the church. Clicking on the brights, I light up a patch of woods behind it, where some headstones come up from the ground.

"This ain't that scary, bro," I say.

"It's the real deal," Noah said. "It's just through those woods."

"I don't like messing with churches."

"We should have a séance here," Ally says.

I leave the headlights on until everyone is out of the car. Ally hugs her pad and a fistful of colored pencils, as if they might blow away. Once we're on foot, we click on the flashlight and wander through the graveyard. Beyond it, there's a small trail that leads back into the woods.

Taking the path, it's hard to imagine there's anything out here. The woods end at a chain-link fence with barbed wire. There's a sign that reads, *Restricted Area, No Trespassing*. Below it in the weeds there are empty beer bottles and a torn condom wrapper. Just off the path someone's tunneled under the barrier.

We follow Noah under the fence and get back on our feet. The ground turns to rock, and then, suddenly, it opens up to a cliff over the water. Even though I'm ten feet from the ledge, I squat to get closer to the ground. You quickly start imagining all the things that happen if you fall.

With the moon all bright like it is, you can see a long ways over the lake, clear out to the dam. Couples' names are scrawled all over the rock. In bright orange, someone's written, *Jump Here!*

"From here?" I ask. We must be a hundred feet up.

"Hell yeah," Noah says. "You gotta do it. It's your first time."

Ally lays down a blanket and puts her supplies on top of it. I sit down next to her.

"No way," Noah says. "Get up. You're jumping, dude. We're not leaving until you do."

"Come on, man," I say.

Ally shrugs. "You can't come to the quarry and not jump."

Even though this is by far the dumbest thing I've ever done, I strip down to my boxers and creep to the edge.

"Don't look, Cesar," Noah says. "Just jump."

I look anyway. It might as well be the distance from where we are to my house.

"The only way to do it is to get a running start."

So, I come back a few feet.

"I wouldn't tell you to jump if it wasn't safe," Noah says and takes a seat next to Ally. What I'm pissed off about is this guy putting all these ideas in my head. He's the one telling me I should go out with Ally. He's the one telling me to jump, and instead of getting the girl, I'm watching him take her instead.

I sprint hard to the water, until it's too late to pull up. Launching off the top of the cliff, I push hard off my right foot to clear the rocks. For a second I'm flying away from them, but then I start coming down and all I see is the black of the water rushing up to me. I crash way down into the water until I bottom out. When I swim to the surface. Noah is whistling and cheering.

"That was awesome," Ally shouts.

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*Jurassic Park* just hit the theater, and shit is out of control. Lines run out the building. Grown-ass women try to sneak into the theater because we're sold out, and we have to shoo them away like raccoons.

Noah and I clean One before the midnight showing. It's been a long night. I've never seen the late movie sell out. We watch the first twenty minutes of it with our backs up against the wall.

"You ever been up in the projection room?" Noah says.

"No."

"Come on."

We climb the tiny staircase up to the projectionist's where it's dark, except for the light the projectors push into the theaters.

We're looking out into the Theater One. Tyrannosaurus Rex is eating a guy on the shitter.

I haven't talked to Ally since the night at the quarry, and everyone at work says she's fucking around with Noah. She's got black hair now, but I hear she's going platinum blonde.

I think about bringing it up with Noah but decide not to. T-Rex bares its teeth. The film rolls click clack click clack.

## MISSING PERSONS

Dr. Olivia Crane had a fibula and a pair of tibiae up on the table from a find just south of Los Lunas. She felt like she'd spent more time pleading for a good parking spot and sending out requisition emails for equipment than running her lab. Not a good start to her new job.

"You're not going to believe this." That was Conrad Waters, a first-year technician. "The police found more bones at the site in West Mesa. They think it could be a mass grave."

Olivia jotted down notes on her specimen. "Let's wait and see ourselves. We don't even know if the first find is human." A few days before, a woman walking her dog in a new development near 118<sup>th</sup> Street and Dennis Chavez had found a rib sticking out of the sand. As soon as the remains came in Olivia would verify them. The first responders would sometimes count two femurs as two bodies. Policemen had a terrible habit of creating crime scenes, especially when it came to skeletal remains. It usually started when someone found mule deer bones in the foothills of the Sandia Mountains and called the forensics lab to start a homicide investigation.

She had intended to study medicine but discovered the frail human body disgusted her—all its odors and moisture. Flesh was temporary. It drooped after a few decades and then shriveled to nothing if you were unlucky enough to live that long. Being dead wasn't as bad as people made it

out to be. Inevitability was by definition not random. That meant it was reliable, safe. Consider death as the law of conservation of energy: *energy is neither created nor destroyed*. The flesh became the yucca, the prickly pear and the lavender in the garden. It swirled in with the dust carpeting the desert.

She'd even taken a stab at archeology. That was a phase many of her colleagues fessed up to. They all wanted to find buried treasure and mummies. Digs were tedious, though—too much time brushing away dirt to find shards of pottery.

As a forensic anthropologist in the lab she could feel the bones in her hands. The visceral things she loved as a child: the cemeteries, Halloween ghouls and the Mexican holiday, Day of the Dead—those things manifested in her work. Cataloguing bones was elegant work. Skeletons lasted millions of years in the right conditions. A body in advanced decay had no maggots.

Merciless study weeded out many of her classmates—so did the incessant begging for grants, the scarcity of jobs, and low pay. Olivia was methodical and unwavering. Through school she worked as a forensic technician for the state, determining ages and genders and causes of death on skeletonized remains. That work lined her up to run the lab with the recent retirement her mentor.

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Olivia had containers of bones pouring in from West Mesa, and they were human: six complete bodies. She'd only read about findings like that. Her experience had told her not to expect much. Now she had the case of a

lifetime. Local news stations reported that a serial killer was to blame.

Camera crews arrived to film the burial site. A media fiasco brewed out in the desert. National outlets would soon be all over it.

Then word came down that Dr. Gil Needham, a man of enormous talents but questionable substance, was driving down from Santa Fe to help with the case.

The odds of such a find were infinitesimal. Was that Murphy's Law? *Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong.* She never liked Murphy. Maybe that's why she craved the searing dry climate of New Mexico whenever she left home. The desert behaved, it didn't allow for changes.

She felt an urgency to get information before Dr. Needham arrived. The techs organized the first body head-to-toe on a stainless steel gurney. Conrad washed off the dirt that had caked in the crevices of the bones. They had to scoop out the pebbles from the drain when it clogged up with desert sand. The pelvis was wide. Certainly a woman. She was young, too: maybe early twenties. You could see it in the teeth. They'd first want to get an idea of the postmortem interval and let the police know how long the bodies had been sitting there. There was no soft tissue left. That meant she'd been dead over a year, but she couldn't get an exact time until the techs ran a few more tests.

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"I know you have this research under control," Dr. Needham told her when he finally arrived. He walked around the lab in denim and cowboy boots, while

the rest of the staff wore lab coats. "The powers that be feel more comfortable with me around."

"Do you want to go over what we've found?"

"This is your rodeo, Dr. Crane. I'm going to go catch an early lunch. I figure you don't need me looking over your shoulder."

"I don't have time to leave. I'm taking my lunch here."

"I like to get away for lunch. You know it's good to get away from your work. Don't worry, I'll find a place. I know Albuquerque well. I used to come down for the festival every year. My brother flies a balloon."

"Do you want to set up a meeting with the staff?"

"Yes. Happy hour starts at five. I expect the whole crew to be out."

Olivia's thesis had been on the fallacies of creating subspecies in human skeletal remains. Every day you could pick up a scientific journal and some new glory-seeker had identified the next missing link, the newest ancient relative of *Homo sapiens*. Dr. Needham was one of these men. It was all defended—misguidedly—by bone fragments. In her thesis she sought to attack the reductionists who would relegate one human because of the irregularities of mandibles or the size of the cranium. What really made a person human?

After work, Gil—he insisted she call him that—led the staff down the street to a Mexican Restaurant. Gil ordered a round of margaritas and enough appetizers that no one would want a main course.

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Down at the dig site in West Mesa, nearly a hundred volunteers were raking for more remains. Others swept sensitive areas with dustpans and shovels. They used screens to sieve bones out of the soil. The land ran flat for long stretches with just scrub and sand until it hit the white hills. It was a sinister place to be left. Four more bodies had been found in the past two weeks. One of the bodies was an unborn fetus. That was an unpleasant first.

"Valuable experience for your staff," Gil said. He insisted on meeting all the volunteers there, shaking hands. Before they'd started digging, he'd sought out the camera crews and the policemen. He'd sweet-talked a cup of coffee from a woman's thermos.

"I don't know if I'll ever be of much use in the field," Olivia said.

"I lined up an interview for you."

"I'm not talking to anyone. You know they'd rather talk to you."

"It's all set up. Somebody has to do it and it's not going to be me," he said. "You need to practice this stuff. You're going to have to talk in court some day. The media needs to hear from you."

Fluff. That's what Olivia thought of putting on makeup and giving interviews. Seeking glory out on digs. Talking to the media. It was the paradox of enrichment. You fed an animal population too much and the whole ecosystem turned on its head. Equilibrium destabilized. She wanted to keep her footprint small, her ego small.

A woman in a blazer prepped her while two others discussed lighting and angles.

"Ready, one, two..." The interviewer held up three fingers. "It has been nearly a month since APD uncovered human remains in West Mesa. We are standing here with Dr. Olivia Crane, a forensic anthropologist with the New Mexico office of the medical investigator."

Less than a year before, Olivia had been unsure that her committee would accept her thesis. She was still a tech. Now she had a national audience, a woman addressing her as Doctor—an expert.

"What information has your lab been able to gather on the remains?"

"We know all the adult victims were female," Olivia said. She could see Gil behind the camera clapping his hands in pantomime. It was encouragement. "We believe the remains were placed here four years ago. Sometime in 2005."

"Can you tell us about the age of the victims?"

"That's much harder to be certain about. They were probably in their twenties at the time of death."

"So there is a pattern for the type of women the killer sought out?"

"I can only tell you what we've found."

"What about the race of the victims?"

"We know one of the women is of African descent," Olivia said. "The others are most likely Hispanic. We believe the DNA evidence will confirm our findings."

"Could you tell us about the cause of death?"

"It can be very difficult with skeletal remains. We don't have anything concrete."

She went home that night and watched herself on television before she went to bed. It was a terrible performance.

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Gil dragged the staff out to the field at least once a week. He treated office hours like the enemy. He would travel back and forth to Santa Fe frequently without warning.

"I need sunshine," he told her.

The site yielded one more body. By then they'd gone through every bone. When he was around, Gil worked closely with the younger graduate students. She recalled coming in one morning and finding him after he'd been up all night wearing the same clothes he'd had on the day before. In those moments he seemed otherworldly.

One Monday he came to her in the lab. "I have great news," he said. "I'm getting out of your hair. The medical examiner wants us to send the remains up to my facilities in Santa Fe." He sat up on a stool and his legs jiggled, an energetic tick he had that annoyed Olivia.

"I'm not done with the investigation," she said.

"You've done loads of work. I'm going to make sure your name goes right next to mine on the report I publish."

That's how it would be. She'd be a footnote on her own project. "You're taking the work away from me."

"You can come work with me anytime. You have no restrictions."

Then he called off the workday at noon and made everyone go out drinking with him. Olivia went out of professional courtesy. He pounded the table and offered cheers to the group. He invited everyone to his home in Santa Fe. A story was repeated about a dig in Egypt to the same raucous appreciation.

She left early. "Promise me," he told her, with gin on his breath, "that you'll come to the balloon festival in October with me. I don't want there to be any hard feelings."

"Just a few," she said.

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Out of some fascination with Gil, she attended the balloon festival in Albuquerque that year and ran into him while he was spread out on a picnic blanket and looking through binoculars. The balloons floated into the atmosphere one-by-one like dandelion fluff taking flight with the breeze.

"You made it," he said, "let's go check out my brother's balloon."

The two of them were in a sprawling field and balloons were taking flight one after another. He led her a short way to where a basket lay on its side, and they stood watching the crew fill the envelope with heated air. The men tipped it up and lit the great flame of the burner. The fabric filled up like a parachute opening on a free fall.

"Do you want to take a ride?" Gil asked.

"I'm terrified of heights," she said.

"Don't think, just hop in," he said. "Come on, we're tethered. We can't go but so far."

Fear of heights was natural. Trying to not look weak proved a more powerful motivation. Gil jumped in the basket and pushed a button to lower it closer the ground. He offered her a hand and she climbed inside. He fired up the burner and they ascended thirty feet. It felt like five thousand. From this height, she saw the field rolling out for miles and the slow rise of balloons as they sucked in air and took flight.

Gil popped open a bottle of champagne from a cooler on the floor and handed it to her. "Drink."

She slurped the bubbles out of the bottle.

"Hurry up, now. Drink fast. You're going to need it," he said. He took the tether and threw it to the ground. "I forgot to tell you something important: I don't know how to get down."

She gauged the distance to the ground as if to jump.

"We're in big trouble now." He laughed. "We're going to have to take off. It's the only way. I guess we'll come down when we run out of gas."

She let loose a childish half-scream. "You're insane."

"You have to enjoy the moment."

The balloon sped higher, until the ground seemed to be descending from them. They had defied gravity's pull. *9.8 meters per second squared*. The hot air in the balloon was less dense than the earth's atmosphere. In that sense there was nothing wrong with flight—it fell within the laws of physics.

When the world got too far away from her, she slumped down in the basket.

"Oh, come on, get up," he said. "You're not making this any fun. I know what I'm doing."

"You tricked me."

"What if I told you there's the prettiest view in the world out here. All you have to do is stand up."

Being this high was abnormal. Thrill seeking was unique to the human species. No other animal had been found to self-induce fear.

"You're going to love this, sweetheart. Stand up."

"An object in motion stays in motion," Gil said, channeling Newton. She came to her feet and saw bright, colorful balloons across the air, hundreds of them, like bees in a garden. That high up, when the ground seemed cartoonish and staged like a model train set, you could trick the mind into thinking gravity had no domain over you.

## SUNDAY BRUNCH

Miles needed to quit the restaurant business and get off this Mickey Mouse island. As he spread the checkbook out on a waterfront table, pen in hand, the Jamaicans pulled in the forty-foot catamaran they used to take tourists out to feed the stingrays and slurp mudslides from Rum Point.

The restaurant he managed was still exquisite and new—built in 2010 and named Camp—all crisp white, muted wood furniture, and a marbled, open-air bar the size of a studio apartment. His boss, the owner, Jonathan, was stuck somewhere in the mid-1980s (he had many friends from the Reagan administration, including a Brit with an eye patch). It was to be an oceanside Le Cirque in the Cayman Islands—a dining experience not to rival, but to outshine, Blue, Eric Ripert's restaurant at the Ritz-Carlton.

Jonathan had admitted to Miles he didn't want any poor people coming here. As the manager, Miles thought it was a fair request since no one came to the restaurant anyway.

Miles dialed Cayman National Bank on his Blackberry.

The smell of gasoline blew in from the fishing boats coming into Morgan's Harbour. A few men drifted on their jet skis. The waiters would be here in a few hours to wrap the dining room in white linen.

He walked up to the water with the Blackberry.

A big, silvery-iridescent tarpon swam by in the shallow water. Way out above the far-stretching ocean, out beyond the harbor, the frigate birds glided in the air like pterodactyls.

A woman answered on the other end.

“Yes,” Miles said. He gave the account information and password.

“What’s the limit for a single check against our account?” She transferred him to a supervisor.

He sat down at the best table in the entire restaurant, right on the waterfront. Miles drummed the table with his thumbs, his phone cradled into his shoulder, until someone important-sounding responded. She asked his name. “Jonathan Thorpe,” Miles told her, imitating a white Jamaican accent.

“I understand you want to know the limit for writing a check against the account.”

“Yes, for a Christmas party.” The accent was getting spotty.

Miles heard the supervisor punching the keyboard. “Ten thousand CI,” she said.

“Hmm.”

“I can raise the limit but I’ll need you to come down and sign on the account,” she said.

“That should be enough,” Miles said. “Bye now.”

Miles hung up and kept his eyes on the entrance to the restaurant. Still no one. He made out a check for CI\$9,574.59. Jonathan had already signed it—he always left a few signed for Miles, who then siphoned them off one at a

time to avoid detection. In the notes section he wrote *Christmas Party*, tucked the check into his pocket, left behind the ocean, and went inside to get ready for service.

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“Pass me those invoices please, Nadine,” Miles told the stupid brat back in the office.

She wasn't listening. He considered slamming his fist against the wall while she sucked on her skinny cigarette.

The cold air poured out of the air conditioner and ruffled her sundress. She didn't respond. It was a hot Christmas in the northern hemisphere.

“Nadine, can you pass me the invoices?”

“Hold on,” Nadine said. “I'm doing something right now.” She was on Facebook messaging a friend. Her tits were always in your face too, pushed up or out or both. Every time she caught Miles' eyes on her chest it meant one gold star. If someone flirted with her and stared at her cleavage it was two gold stars. She was keeping score.

Anything Nadine wanted—a better salary or permission to work a five-hour day—was taken directly over his head to Jonathan. Every pissed off customer and every mistake Miles made was relayed to Jonathan through phone calls. Miles had spent too much time trying to assert to this child that he was in charge. He accepted now, finally, that he wasn't.

“The only guy you can’t replace is the guy with the money,” Miles’ Dad had told him when they talked about having to fire people. Well, the guy with the money and the teenager that’s fucking him.

“Quit treating me like a child,” she told him.

The office, the engine room for this chickenshit outfit, was nothing but drywall.

“You’re nineteen years-old,” he said, wrapping a rubber band around some two thousand dollars. *No more payroll for her. No more anything for the whiny child.* Miles had once given Jonathan an ultimatum: it was either him or Nadine. But it was too late, because she’d already gotten on her knees for Jonathan. Miles would have loved nothing more than to lock her in the office that very minute and snuff her out over the holiday. But starvation wasn’t much of threat to someone who lived on mixed greens, double espressos, and panic attacks.

He had wondered for a long time why the brat was untouchable. Jonathan’s wife called Miles weekly to complain about Nadine and demanded to know of some infraction she committed so he would fire her. Miles begged Jonathan's wife to fire her, but he needed Jonathan’s permission. He had millions of infractions to report.

“I can’t believe I still work here,” she said.

“Shut up, I’m counting,” Miles said and then grabbed the checkbook to look busy. He saw that Nadine had received Jonathan’s signature for a few more checks.

The Saturday morning Miles found out Nadine was sleeping with Jonathan, he'd stepped out of the office and gone into the kitchen to make a cappuccino. He'd heard a noise in the dining room, poked his head out of the swinging doors, and saw her sitting on his lap. He watched until the end, and then some, before he snuck back into the office.

Later, she talked openly to Miles about the arrangement—Nadine was proud of it.

It was a typical island fling. It didn't even matter that Jonathan was almost sixty and married, and Nadine had a boyfriend somewhere that no one had ever seen in public. From what he'd experienced, sleeping with the boss was the smallest breach of her character.

"It's almost Christmas," she said, "Why don't we go catch lunch next door and call it a day?"

"I have to work."

"Oh, *come* on."

"Are you still coming to the employee Christmas brunch?"

"I haven't heard much about it. I don't know," she said.

"I'm not surprised. It is for people who work."

"Hey," she said. "Why did you take that check yesterday?"

Miles made sure not to freeze. "The check?"

"Jonathan had to sign those new ones for me since you took it," she said. "I needed it for payroll."

“Here’s the thing—” he said in a stage-whisper, “Jonathan wants to give everyone a bonus. You can’t tell him you know, though. He wanted it to be a surprise at the Christmas party.”

“Jonathan is off the island all week on holiday.” Nadine should have managed a nail salon. It was the only work she was qualified for.

“I know. He wants me to give them out at the Ritz-Carlton.” Miles took the check from his pocket and flashed it to her. “Look, you can’t tell anyone. Including Jonathan. He wants it to be a surprise.” He stuffed it back in his pocket.

“He didn’t mention anything,” she said.

“Just make sure no one knows about it.” Miles reconsidered locking her up. He could set a trap at his place with a cage over a carton of Virginia Slims.

“Wait till you see how much it’s for,” he added.

“Really?”

“Let’s go eat next door,” Miles said. “I’ll finish up later.”

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After lunch they ended up at Miles’ apartment for coffee. He wanted to make nice, and he’d promised her a ride home. They sat at his kitchen table sipping out of big white mugs.

“I need to shower, I’m a mess right now, and I have to get back to work soon,” he said. “Are you ready to head home?”

"Your place is really cute," she said. Dishes stacked to the crown molding. Footprints and mud stains all over the white tile. His bedroom a quarantine.

She leaned back at his kitchen table, tussled her hair, made herself obvious. He glanced at her, and her face flushed. Miles ground his teeth, grabbed her by the wrist, led her out of the chair, and pushed her against the wall. Miles bit her earlobes, and she stabbed her nails into him. A few minutes later, they were in his shower. Sex. Water. Noise. Climax.

He handed her a damp towel. He'd almost thrown his back out trying to lift her up in the shower and wasn't in the mood for chitchat.

"I can drop you off now," he said. Just as well—he had to pick up gifts for the Christmas party before service started.

They got in the car and she mumbled something about her aunt's house as they drove away. Her hair was still wet when she got out of the car.

"Why do you live with your aunt?" he said.

She got out of the car and slammed the door.

He rolled down the passenger side window. "I'll pick you up for the party tomorrow. The dress code is festive. Maybe a little casual dressy."

He swung the Jeep across the street towards town, but then he slammed on the brakes and screamed out the window, "Festive, don't forget."

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The day of the Christmas party, Nadine came out of her aunt's house in a purple sequin dress and got in his car.

"You look amazing," he said. He went to kiss her and she turned her head so far to the side, his lips ended up on the back of her neck. "It's great to see you."

"How much am I getting for my bonus?" she asked.

"Oh, quite a lot." They left West Bay and drove towards Seven Mile Beach.

When they arrived at the Ritz-Carlton, Nadine threw open the car door and stood off to the side.

Miles handed the valet ten dollars and asked, "Would you please help me carry some gifts inside for our table?" He opened the trunk and it was stuffed with teddy bears.

He and the valet carried the stuffed animals inside, and the hostess showed them to the table.

"Good afternoon, sir," said the waiter. His nametag read *Luca*.

"Thanks, yeah."

He instructed Luca and the valet to put a bear in every chair at the table, with an envelope and a handwritten name for all of Miles' employees. He thanked the valet, tipped him again, and sent him off. Then Miles put a hundred-dollar bill in Luca's hand.

The restaurant safe was empty now. As was the bank account. The only thing left was Jonathan's credit card, the one Miles used to make the reservation.

Nadine found the bear with her name.

"Don't open the envelope until everyone gets here," he said.

She sat down, put the bear in her lap, and hid behind the menu.

Miles picked up the wine menu, grabbed Luca, and found the second most expensive bottle of champagne. "Just bring six bottles of La Grande Dame and fresh squeezed orange juice."

"Of course, sir," Luca said and headed off towards the kitchen. It was the Ritz-Carlton way.

When Luca returned with the champagne, Miles reached for the wine menu. "Four bottles of this." He pointed to an Italian wine. Maybe Spanish. He went mid-grade, a 100-dollar bottle.

"Jonathan is going to kill you," she said out of the side of her mouth.

It was almost one now. The staff began trickling into the restaurant.

Gwen, one of the bartenders from Camp, came in first. She spotted Miles and belted out, "Sweetheart, it's so good to see you." She hugged Miles, and he gave her a kiss that lingered a little too long on each cheek.

"I showed up early," he said.

"Did you do this?" She was pointing at a bear wrapped in a pink bow with an envelope on its lap that read "Gwen."

"Please don't open it just yet. We're waiting for everyone to get here."

Luca arrived with the champagne. The kitchen workers, the chef, and the sous chef all came in next.

"Mimosas for everyone," Miles told Luca, and he made a circular motion around the table with his index finger. His Blackberry started going crazy in his pocket, and he pulled it out to take a look.

Jonathan.

Miles excused himself to go to the bathroom, cut out front, and answered the phone.

"I hear you are all acting like animals at the Ritz," Jonathan said.

"Hi, Jonathan."

"Animals."

"We're just celebrating."

"How are the women looking? What's Gwen wearing?"

"Everything's fine. The women are fine."

"I've been talking with Nadine."

"Now why would you do that?"

"We need to take a look at how much you're spending on this party."

"I'm following the budget you gave me." Miles flagged down the valet and handed him the stub.

"I heard something about bonuses."

"Well, not exactly." The checks he left in the envelopes were all going to bounce. "We can discuss all of this when you're on island. I'm happy to sit down with you."

"I'm coming home soon."

"Great. Call me when you make it back. Safe travels." He hung up the phone while Jonathan was still talking. He put the phone on silent.

Earlier that morning he'd driven to Cayman National Bank down the street. He'd handed one of Jonathan's checks to the teller and asked for the cash in American dollars and stood patiently while she counted out the bills. Then he drove to three other branches on the island, and they cashed the checks and he stuffed the bills haphazardly into his carryon luggage. Finally, he emptied his own thinning account and crammed it into a sock.

The valet returned his car, Miles tipped him generously, and he was at the airport in ten minutes. He left the Jeep unlocked in the short term parking with the keys on the driver's seat. The car was beautiful—the first payment was most likely due any day now.

He looked up at the airport, a thing like a backwater post office, its tiny strip of runway stretching straight out to Miami, and tried to ignore the scorching heartburn in his chest.

Miles was funneled through immigration, where the official looked at his work visa and asked when he'd be returning. Miles explained that he just had a few things to do back home, and she stamped his passport. "I love visiting Miami," she said. "It must be so nice to live in America."

"Oh yeah, it's great," Miles said. He looked at the passport. It read *Cayman Islands* with the date, and below that, *Exit*.

"Have a wonderful trip," she said. "See you soon."

On the runway, waiting to board the plane, a policeman at a makeshift desk snatched his ticket and said he needed to search Miles' bag. The official frisked him lightly and began leisurely searching his luggage. Inside the bag, it was as if someone had taken dirty laundry and a pile of cash and tumbled it through a cement mixer.

"Sorry about that," Miles said. His chest burned. His heart was in there, somewhere inside the burn, kicking.

"No problem," the official said. "Just be careful when you touch down in the States with all that cash. They may not be so understanding." The man smiled. "You're all clear to board."

"You beautiful man," Miles said and boarded the plane. He found his seat in first-class next to a silver-haired man in a fine suit and red silk tie. The man started talking to him before his ass hit the seat.

"Where you headed?" He was Australian.

"America."

The flight attendant came by. The man tugged at her sleeve. "I'll take a bloody Mary." He made eye contact with Miles. "You want one too? Yeah, you want one. Make it two. I wish I were going to America. I'm on my way to Sydney to settle some business."

"I'm between jobs," said Miles.

"What do you do?"

"I invest in restaurants."

"You do well?"

"I had a good week."

"Make sure you keep it. That's the problem. You make all this money, and every goddamn person wants to take it. The government, kids—hell, take my son's fiancée. She won't sign a prenup. I didn't make all this money just to give it to some big-titted waitress who married into the family." The man took out one of those airplane pillows and put it around his neck. The pilot fired up the engines. "I worked too hard for it."

The flight attendant brought the drinks and asked them to put their seat belts on.

"I know exactly what you mean," Miles said sipping his bloody Mary. *These* were the conversations he always wanted to have when he had money. He spent the next ten minutes hiding behind the inflight magazine and looking out the window. His was working up a good sweat now waiting for takeoff. It was time to leave.

At last, the plane lurched and began to taxi out toward the runway.

"I told my son he's out of the will if she doesn't sign the prenup."

Abruptly, joltingly, the plane braked to a stop, and a few people spilled their drinks on the floor.

"Oh great," the man said, peering out his window. "Just what I need right now." He scratched his face.

"What's that?" Miles said. The heartburn was insufferable now.

"They're taking the plane out of position for takeoff."

"What?" Miles said. "How do you know that?"

“I fly quite a bit myself. I own a little Cessna.” The man pointed to policemen who had gathered by the desk where Miles had his bags searched.

“God,” Miles said. “Who are they?”

“Looks like they’re after someone,” the man said.

Miles pulled out his phone. It had been on silent since he left the Ritz. He had nine missed calls from Jonathan. Immediately, the heartburn seemed to drain from his chest. He took a deep, cool breath.

“One more minute and I might have made it,” Miles said.

“Oh,” the man said, “all this is for you, then?”

“You could say that.”

“You must have done a number on somebody.”

“There is a woman, yeah.”

“Did you cheat on her?”

Miles squeezed the knuckle on his right forefinger until it popped loudly. “It’s about money,” Miles said.

“It’s always about money,” the Australian said.

Then Miles took the final sip of his bloody Mary, and unbuckled his seatbelt.

## HIGHWAYMEN

It was the last day of his junior year of high school, June 29, 1962, and Christopher Garvin was playing hooky to work at the garage with his father. He had just celebrated his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday. Just before lunchtime, a New York City policeman carrying a notebook marched into the shop—the Mobil station they had there at 90<sup>th</sup> Street and 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue. Christopher and his dad were rotating tires on a Ford. His dad hated policemen.

Most of the men who came to the garage wanted fluids checked, cars topped off with gasoline, carburetors replaced, and engines rebuilt, and damn near every one of them wanted to make small talk, even though his father only spoke three things: horses, cars, and sports. When it came to baseball and horses, everything came down to numbers. His dad was a bookie, and he took his customers to the back and wrote down numbers in a big, green book the size a priest's lectionary.

In the repair business he said little but was fair. If the transmission was shot, he sent them elsewhere, to someone who did really good work. If it couldn't be done right, like bodywork, his old man recommended a guy.

"Mickey," the cop said. "Do you have a collection for the department?"

His dad, a short man, turned around, walked to the office, and shut the door. Through the glass, Christopher watched the shadow of his father

kneeling before the safe. The cop looked at him and Christopher looked at the lug nuts in his hand as if he were counting the change from his pockets. His dad came out a few minutes later with an envelope, walked over and gave it to the cop.

“What’s that?” Christopher asked.

“It keeps the bad guys away,” the policeman said and then turned to his father. “Thanks, Mickey.”

“No, the pad in your hand,” Christopher said.

The cop smiled. “It’s a list of friends of the department. If I don’t write it down, I forget.” He pulled a pencil from behind his ear, jotted something down, and headed for the door. “Later, kid.”

Once the cop was gone his dad said, “Don’t ever talk to those guys. It’s a disgrace, these people. They are supposed to protect you, and all they do is shake you down.”

The shakedowns came from all sides, though. A few days later, Jackie Ruggieri came in to talk. Christopher went to school with his son, Johnny.

Jackie walked right up to his father and said, “How’s business?” Then he practically swallowed his dad with a hug, squeezing him like a python.

Jackie didn’t ask him for money. His father just walked into the office and returned with a small, brown bag, stuffed full, and handed it over.

Jackie landed a big kiss on his father’s face and said, “I’ll keep sending them your way, Mickey.” Before he left, he took a few bills out of the bag and handed them to Christopher. “Kid, go buy yourself a real glove. It’s a child’s

glove, the one you use. And you," Jackie said pointing at Mickey, "do you ever come see your kid pitch? He's got a left arm that comes around once every fifty years." Jackie pressed his hands together like he was praying. "Jesus Christ, come see Christopher play. You and the missus never come down. I gotta watch him strike out my Johnny four times a game."

"Sounds like Johnny hits like his father," his dad said and then broke into a rare smile.

Jackie laughed big. His father and Jackie had grown up together in the neighborhood, but Christopher knew that Jackie had a hair-trigger temper. "If you won't watch him play ball, why don't you come down to the track? I never see you anymore. You got yourself another girlfriend I don't know about?"

His dad rubbed his jaw. "I don't know. I've been taking a break from the ponies."

"Come on. I'll make your money back," Jackie said.

"Well, I do have to meet a guy in Queens," his dad said.

"This Saturday. I'll be waiting for you."

Christopher took the money and bought a new left-handed Spalding and began breaking it in on the street. He didn't believe in oiling, not when you could play it in. When he wasn't pitching he played left field, and he liked the challenge of catching a ball with stiff leather. By the end of July, the mitt creased and pinched shut as easily as a wallet. His father went down to Aqueduct with a tip from Jackie and won \$1,000 on a pair of stallions from Pennsylvania. Christopher always knew when his father won because he

didn't come home for a few days, and then when he did, he'd buy lilies for his mom and take her out for spaghetti and meatballs.

All that summer, when he wasn't playing ball, Christopher lived under the cars in the garage. His father taught him to replace brake drums on a jalopy, a 1941 Chrysler Saratoga, and change oil for the regulars.

One morning, in late August, just before school was about to start back up, his father told him, "You're not embarrassing yourself around here, anymore. Maybe I can teach you something for real." And that weekend his father left him alone at the shop for a few hours, and came back with an engine in the bed of a truck. It looked like a heart pulled from a man's body.

Over the next two weeks, after school and on Saturdays, Christopher learned how to rebuild an engine from a 1951 Chevy Deluxe coupe, with a stock inline six. They went down to the machinist to bore out the cylinders, and they replaced the rings with oversized ones. When they finished, his father rattled the keys in front of his face and said, "This is going to be yours one day, because you worked for it."

The more time he spent with mechanics, the more he took to their greasy way of talking, and as he learned, he noticed his father left him alone to talk to the men in their clunkers lining up outside the garage every morning. They didn't mind coming to him now, if his father was busy. They managed to remember Christopher's name, stop calling him kid.

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"Where's your father?" his mom asked one night after he'd walked in the front door of their apartment. He came home after closing down the shop. She had a box of crackers on her lap and was watching *Bonanza*. His mom was a dead ringer for his sister Barbara, who left one night for good a few years back and was now living with a Puerto Rican guy in Queens. At least, that's what he knew of it from what his parents said.

"He's out somewhere, Ma."

They had moved into a walk up a year ago when his father took over the gas station, and since they signed the lease on this new apartment, his mom didn't have to work anymore, so all she did was watch the television like some kind of zombie.

"What are you doing with your friends? I never see them around no more. All the sudden, we have this new place, and you don't bring anyone over."

"You know how it is with work."

"You don't look so busy right now. Why don't you go to the supermarket and get some groceries and cigarettes for me?"

"Sure, Ma."

"There's a list on a the fridge."

He grabbed the list and ran down both flights of stairs. The streets were full of people, probably going out to dinner, and it was hot and humid. It was not quite dark.

On the way to the store, he walked past Adelman's Deli just as Mr. Adelman was locking up. The old man waved to him and Christopher walked on. There was a bodega close by that sold everything they needed, but his mom insisted on going to McClary's. She said she'd rather pay the Irish than a bunch of immigrants and Jews.

Whenever he ran errands for his mother, he liked to make it into a full adventure, and so, rather than go straight to McClary's, he cut up north a few blocks out of his way, just to see what he could see. He took 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue up to 96<sup>th</sup>, right up to where things started to get dicey in the neighborhood. A few trees were turning red and gold for the season, and he figured it would only look this beautiful for another week or so, so he'd just take in a few more city blocks. He kept walking around—always aware of where he was going, yet making sure to walk past the buildings he didn't know—and later, when he saw a couple kissing on their stoop, he stopped to watch them groping each other in the porch light.

He ducked down 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue to check on the Mobil station and headed towards the marquee of The Ambassador, which lit up the whole block. But halfway down the block he saw that the lights were on at their garage, and when he got there, his father's car was parked in front of the pumps, with the engine running. Christopher ran up to the front door of the station and pushed his head against the glass and he saw the silhouette of his father digging through drawers in the office.

"It's closed," someone said to him.

He turned toward the voice, and there was a young woman in the passenger seat of his father's car. He didn't know how he could have missed her. She was young, very nearly his age.

"He just forgot something," she said.

When he didn't move, she scooted over behind the steering wheel and stuck her head out into the light. "It'll be open tomorrow morning."

"Oh," he said. Part of him was convinced he knew her from somewhere. Light skin, freckles, and blonde hair.

"I'll come back tomorrow," he told her.

She waved goodbye to him.

He turned his back to her, and then he walked away as quickly as he could before he got caught by his father. Practically at a run after he turned the corner, he headed towards McClary's to get groceries before they closed up for the night. His mom was going to be mad as hell he was late.

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One morning a few days later, his dad came into his room while it was still dark and shook him awake to tell him he had to open the shop. His dad was drunk, and he wobbled out of his room and disappeared down the hall. Christopher got out of bed, took a shower, and rode his bike down to open up. He unlocked the door, turned on the lights, and put on two pots of coffee for the early regulars.

By nine he was swamped, because they only had one guy to pump gas and another to help in the garage. Christopher was underneath a car

when, in the middle of all the chaos, the bell rang, and in walked Jackie. He wiped the grease off his hands and met him at the front door.

Jackie didn't look so happy. "Christopher, what's with you?"

"I'm sorry. We're really busy."

"Johnny says you barely show up for school anymore."

"I had to miss a few days," he said.

"Where's the old man?"

"He's off today."

"Where is he?"

"Don't know."

"Well, he owes me something," Jackie said. "I'm going to need to see him."

"I can get the money for you."

"Shh, Christopher." Jackie put his finger up to his lips. "Let's go in the office there."

They walked over to the office, and Jackie shut the door behind him.

"For real, now." Jackie put his arm around him. "Where's your father?"

"I got no idea," he said, "but I can pay you whatever he owes you."

"Just because you're speaking my language, I'm going to let this slide."

Jackie sharpened up. "It was three hundred for the month, but now it's five."

Christopher went to the safe and opened it up. He counted up the money. There was around \$200 in there. "Let me get the rest out front." He left Jackie behind and went out to the register, where people were standing

around with coffee looking for a cashier. He cashed them out, got them out the door, and then took out the last \$50 for Jackie. There was barely two bucks left in the place, and he was still short.

Jackie came out to the front and was picking out a soda from the cooler.

"It's not all there." Christopher handed the money to him, and Jackie rolled it up and put it in his pocket.

"You know I used to own this place, Christopher?"

He didn't know anything about the garage before his dad got it. "No."

"I sold it to him so he could take care of his family." Jackie popped the top off a bottle of Coke using the corner of the countertop. "But I am part of that family. Think of me like uncle Jackie. I need to eat too."

"We'll get you the money from now on."

"Your father ain't one for being a grease monkey. He likes to gamble too much. This betting shit? It's worse than drugs for some people."

A car pulled up to the garage. "I better get back to work."

"You, on the other hand, you take to this kind of thing," Jackie said. He chugged the rest of the Coke and tossed the empty bottle at him. "Don't make me wait for you to count it next time, either."

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Since he kept cutting class, he had to get creative to make practice.

Sometimes, after working all day, he'd change into his grass-stained uniform in the bathroom, take the bus on Second Avenue down toward midtown to his

high school, and sneak over the outfield fence. No way Coach would let him skip school and practice, and no way the teachers would let him in the front door of the building after missing about a thousand days of school.

That kept him out of trouble until June when his report card came home in the mail just after his 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. His mom put it on the corner of the kitchen table where she was sitting. Standing next to him with his fingers on his chin, his father turned back and forth between his mom and him like he was trying to see who would crumble first.

"What should I do about this?" she asked.

He'd failed English, which meant he couldn't pass to the next grade. Not that the rest of his grades were much better.

"It's okay, Ma." He walked over and hugged her while she sat, but she didn't move her arms. "I'll pass next year."

"There might not be a next year for you." She crumpled up the report card and threw it across the room. "What do you do when you're not here?" She was going after him good, and her anger was coming up from her gut now. "Do you even go to school?"

"You know, Ma, with the work and all I do, it's hard to make it every day."

His father made a move for the door.

"Are you going to say anything to your son?" his mom asked.

"I'll fix him tomorrow." Dad was halfway out the door now.

"He can't work at the shop anymore, Mickey," she said.

"I have some errands I have to run right now, but we'll make sure he gets to school."

After his father left, his mom lost the tough guy act and got all choked up. He walked over to her and wrapped his arms around her again, but this time she let him.

"What are you all sad about, Ma?"

She was sniffing hard against him. The pain was coming somewhere deeper than a few lousy missed classes and some bad grades. He thought about his sister. "Do you ever talk to Barbara anymore?"

She removed her face from his chest and wiped it dry with the tablecloth. "No, do you see her?"

"Why would I see her?"

"You take these walks." Her tears were mostly cleaned up now. "I thought maybe you saw something.

He had no idea how she knew about his crazy walks. "I don't leave Manhattan, Ma. God's honest truth. If I saw her, I'd tell you."

"I know she'll come home eventually."

"I mean," he said, "she really likes this guy."

His mom pounded the table and snapped up like a jack in the box. "Don't talk about that old grease ball."

"Who am I?" He touched his chest. "I didn't make the rules. These older men like younger women. You see it all over the place. Barbara's too nice to know better."

"I hope you have enough respect to find someone you grew up with, someone from the neighborhood," she said.

He went in close to her and squeezed her one more time.

\*\*\*

Before Barbara left the house a few years ago, Christopher had gotten stuck in the car with her and her boyfriend, Victor. They were supposed to take him home after he played in a baseball game across town. Instead, they told him they had to go over to Victor's apartment first.

"You cool back there, big man?" Victor said to him. The guy said it several times during the drive, almost like a mantra, and he always looked in the rearview mirror when he said it. Christopher was mashed in the back seat of a two-door Pontiac, and Victor had a grip on his sister's leg in the front as if it were the only thing keeping him in the car.

Victor had black hair with a few grey lines, and he wore a leather jacket and scarf. His cologne, which smelled like cedar chips, came at you from ten feet away. His mom didn't like them hanging out with a guy like Victor—which meant they would never tell her about it—but he still got a thrill out of being out with his sister. And Victor liked him well enough, so things could have been worse.

They drove over the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge into Queens, and he lost track of where they were going, but even then, before he had hiked all over New York, he obsessed over the contours of buildings, the patterns in sidewalks, and the colors of the awnings over restaurants. He was freaking out a little bit,

but he calmed himself down by staring out at the streets as Victor, who drove faster than any person he'd ever known, sped through the neighborhood.

"Christopher," Barbara said, "guess what I got this week?"

"I don't know."

"A job—can you believe that? At the jewelry department in Macy's."

"Oh, wow," Christopher said. His sister was the smartest person he knew. She used to pass classes without ever studying.

"When are you going to get out of that godforsaken house?" she said.

"When I play baseball for the New York Yankees," Christopher said.

"Besides, you're still at home, so don't look at me."

"Not for long," she said. "Mom married Dad when she was sixteen, and he's been walking all over her ever since. Our father has poisoned the well. I can't stand it anymore."

"You any good at baseball?" Victor said.

"He's the best kid on his team," Barbara said. A second later, when Victor veered into oncoming traffic to pass a car, she screamed. "Victor, oh my God, slow down, you asshole."

"We're fine, baby, calm down," Victor said.

They pulled up to the curb in front of a discount store, and they all got out of the car. "We're right there, big man," Victor said and pointed to his apartment. "Bet you never been inside of public housing."

"Stop trying to scare him, Victor," his sister said.

The building Victor lived in was brown, and it must have been forty stories high. It was just like the public housing he'd seen on their side of the bridge, not that he knew anything about it.

They went inside, and it was quieter than he thought. There was no hollering, but voices could be heard through the doorways. The apartments were packed tight here. They went up four flights of stairs, and Victor took them inside his place, and they all sat down on a couch, and Victor put the television on.

Victor pointed to a chair near the set. "Why don't you go sit up there. You can put the television on whatever you want. We'll just be a minute."

Christopher went up to the television and flicked it on. He scanned a few channels until he found the Yankees game. When he turned back, Victor was kissing his sister, and they were spread out on the couch.

Victor pulled away from her face and smiled at him. "You want to watch this instead, big man?"

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The first break-in at the Mobil station came a few days after he flunked the 11<sup>th</sup> grade. Nothing too bad, really. Just a few broken windows and some stock shelves pushed on the ground. Nobody even called the cops.

A few months later though, not long after his father was a week behind getting caught up with Jackie, the entire place was turned inside out, and they got a call from a detective in the middle of the night.

His mom begged them not to go down until the morning, but his dad, who was home for a change, insisted. "We need to get this cleaned up for tomorrow and let them know we're not a bunch of cowards."

"We can't stay here," she said. "You know what happens when you get on the wrong side of these men."

"Enough," his dad said. "We're not going anywhere. Come on, Christopher. Get dressed."

By the time they made it down to the garage, it was raining hard. The police were finishing up their paperwork inside, and they told his dad there was nothing they could do, but they'd get back to him later in the day with their findings.

"Do you have any idea who did this?" an older cop asked.

"That's the dumbest question I ever heard," his dad said.

"What kind of jerkoff are you?" the cop said.

"It must have been vandals, then," his dad said. "I got these teenage boys that are always hustling me."

The cop shook his head.

"I'm sure you'll find them," his dad said, and the cop gave him a long look.

Once the policemen got back in their cars and drove away, his dad kicked the counter as hard as he could.

Inside the shop, everything was ass over teakettle. There was little left but smashed glass and emptied cans of oil and brake fluid bleeding all over

the floor. Whoever trashed the place stole all the tools, compressors, and jacks, but when Christopher looked to the corner, to the office, everything there was still tucked away nice and tidy and clean. They walked inside and the ledger was sitting on the desk like some medieval warning, a head on a pike.

"Jackie's guys are going to put me out of business," his dad said. "Only next time this place is going to be on fire."

They couldn't reopen for a full day, and he and his father worked fifteen hours straight to get the shop in order. When they finally got the report the cops filled out, it said the cause of the accident was "storm damage."

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One afternoon a few months later Christopher heard the phone ringing at their apartment. It was just before dinner, and his mom had meat thawing on the countertop. The oven was on and leaking heat into the rest of the kitchen.

Christopher answered the phone. "Hello?"

"Christopher, it's your father." His dad was worked up. "Has your mom started cooking yet?"

"Yeah." He walked over and peaked in the oven. "Looks like steak and baked potatoes."

"Stop making dinner," he said.

"What?"

"Put the steak back in the fridge."

"What for?"

"I'm coming home right now. Tell your mom to get dressed. We're going out for dinner." Then his father hung up the phone.

Christopher went over to the couch and sat next to his mom. She was watching *Gunsmoke* and cradling a cigarette over an ashtray in her lap.

"Come on, Ma. We got to get dressed."

Almost an hour later, his father came bursting in the door. "Come on," he shouted at them from the kitchen. "Come downstairs. I got a surprise."

His father must have gone on one of his runs at the racetrack. They didn't happen often, but when they did his old man went from Ebenezer Scrooge to Merry Christmas, Hallelujah, really quick. It was one of the few times you'd catch his father smiling. Right then he looked like one of the crazy bums he'd run into at Penn Station, the ones that would tell you a dirty joke for a nickel.

His father all but dragged them down the steps, and when they made it to the street, there it was, a new two-door Oldsmobile Cutlass.

"Is this ours?" his mother asked.

His dad made his lips pop. "Until we want a new one."

"And," he added, "Christopher is going to drive."

"He doesn't even have his driver's license," his mom said.

"Ah, he's been driving around in these cars for months." His dad went over and grabbed his mother by the shoulders. "Don't worry, you got a bigger present coming."

"Dad," he said. "What am I going to do with this?" He imagined wrecking the thing two blocks from the apartment, running into a fire hydrant.

"You're going to take us out to eat, that's what you're going to do. This thing," Dad said, holding his hands out so wide he might as well have been Jesus Christ on the cross, "is a man's car."

His mother opened the passenger side door.

"Honey," his dad said, "you sit in the back. I'm going to ride up front and navigate." His dad opened the door, jacked forward the seat, and helped his mom into the car.

The Oldsmobile stayed in the family for about a week—long enough for them to have one dinner together—and then his father sold it to pay off a bad run at the track.

The day his dad got rid of the Olds, he came into the garage rubbing his face and trying to pulling his hair. He threw a set of keys at Christopher.

"For the Chevy," his dad said. "It's yours now."

The guilt had gotten to his father, and now Christopher had a car. His dad must have felt terrible about losing all that dough and giving up the Oldsmobile. Christopher had imagined getting it for his birthday instead, or maybe high school graduation, but the Chevy would do.

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Christopher was a no show for the first day back at school. Instead, he went to every Macy's he could find in the phonebook. At each store, he'd ask a cashier where the jewelry counter was, and then he'd make his way over to

her department, but it was the same story every time: nobody knew his sister, and no one named Barbara worked there.

On the second Saturday of October, he took the Chevy out from the garage and drove down to the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge and headed east out to Long Island. He followed the markers he'd remembered from when Victor had taken them to his place a few years back. When he found the discount store, he parked in the same spot Victor had.

He took his time going up the front steps of the building, found the stairwell inside, and climbed up three stories to the apartment. Knocking, and then really knocking, he put his face right in front of the peephole so she'd know who it was.

He heard footsteps up to the door and then a man's voice. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Barbara's brother, Christopher."

Victor opened the door in a pair of shorts and no shirt. He had remembered Victor as a big guy, but he was short and skinny.

"What do you want?"

"Is my sister here?"

"Which one is your sister?" Victor said and scratched his balls.

"Barbara. You remember."

"It's been awhile, big man, but I live alone. Always have."

Victor started to close the door, and Christopher grabbed his wrist.

"She's not working at Macy's. Where is she?"

Victor freed his wrist and came out into the hallway to grab him. Christopher shoved him as hard as he could, and Victor fell on his back into the apartment.

"You don't get it," Victor said from the floor. "I don't know where she went." He stood up as if to dust himself off and then charged Christopher. Christopher sidestepped Victor, put him in a headlock, and then muscled him to the floor. He buried a knee in his chest to keep him still. Christopher was trembling now and pushing hard to keep the older man still.

"Big man," Victor choked out. "I haven't seen her in years. I heard she left town."

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When he made it back to the car, he had to sit down behind the steering wheel for fifteen minutes until his hands stopped shaking enough to drive. People were walking up and down the sidewalk now, and he kept looking at all the faces. But that was pointless. She wasn't here.

On the way back to Manhattan, there was a Cadillac in front of him with New Jersey plates, and he thought about what it would be like to follow it out of the city. And when he got to New Jersey he'd follow another and then another until he was halfway across America. When his exit came up, he stayed in the middle lane. There were a thousand exits on the road, and he could take any one of them.

Gretchen Brubaker never missed the exotic persons auction in Atlanta.

A fat man in front of her kept wiping his sweat with layers of paper towels that lay in the chair next to him. Between slurps of coffee he peeled off a sheaf and wiped his cheeks. When the auctioneer's assistant brought out the nineteen year-old female, the fat man leaned back and complained to Gretchen that he was desperate for a nanny. His wife collected antiques full time and contracted out the care of the house and children.

"A ninety percent Norwegian female for a one-year contract," intoned the auctioneer. "Bid starts at one thousand, one thousand, one thousand."

The fat man counterbid every competitor until he'd won the bid. "It will be nice to have the house clean again," he said and labored to his feet and walked away, leaving his wet paper towels behind.

When they introduced the man named Marcus, Gretchen waved her card. She always bid first to get rid of her nerves, like a seminude tennis player hitting volleys before the match.

Another bidder whispered to her that it was ill advised to bid on a stud if you couldn't see his genitals. "The penis of the breeder should be healthy."

"Twelve hundred to start on a twenty-eight year old. We have the DNA papers." The auctioneer waived a laminated document detailing the Austrian's genealogy and contract stipulations. As a thirty-nine year-old attorney, a

senior partner, Gretchen had scoured over the details before arriving. She knew everything down to the last freckle. She rebid.

"Do I hear thirteen?"

Gretchen won the man, and after she signed the documents, she took him to his room at the estate and gave him the German-English translator. She handed him magazines about preconception-prenatal paternal obligations and explained that his contract would be up once she carried to the second trimester. "My cycle says that we need to conceive this Thursday and Friday. Depending on the quality of service, I have no problem keeping you here for a few extra weeks. You can eat from the carrot gardens, play seminude tennis and detox in the honeydew water cellar. Do not eat complex carbohydrates, meats, fructose or vanilla bean until I've conceived. It's in the contract and I can release you."

On Thursday she visited Marcus early and instructed him to shower for the mating. "Especially the pits. Use the honey-lard goat milk shampoo and the moisturizing lotions. Apply them before you dry."

She ogled his runner's legs. "How many children have you donated?"

"This is my first time," he said.

She stared at the translator. It never conveyed tone very well. *Was he being funny?* No, he was a true sex professional, she decided—the type that inspired the appendices to the expanded Kama Sutra. There was no reason to wait for the day's herbivore buffet or Pilates boot camp. She could breed

now and build up strength for an all-night session. The male pheromones smelled ripe.

"Undress," Gretchen said.

He folded his arms.

She swiped her butt against his hips, like in the stripper pole spinning class, and he backed away.

"I'm not going to do the feline dance if you don't want it. But you are under contract."

"I want to get to know you," the translator droned.

"Bullshit. Did you use to contract for the serial monogamists or something? I'm wearing a tennis skirt. Are you blind? Save your lines for a life-mate. I can shimmy slide and give you the biggest watermelon ice pop of your life."

"I have three months to meet my obligations," he said. "I drew up my demands in the contract. You had yours. I had mine."

"Fine. You don't want the catnip grind? Remember that next cycle when you're getting the Amish dry hump."

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"There was no role play," she told Olga, her house-maintenance technician. They were standing out in the gardens, drinking coconut water. "I played a game of seminude tennis to get my hormones in place. I slipped off my tiger thong and tossed it at him."

"Where did things go wrong? He's so cute."

"He won't perform."

"Take him to the doctor and give him Flaccid Reduxers," Olga said.

"He refuses to go. I sent his DNA papers over to the doctor for reevaluation."

"When do you hear back?"

She bit her lip. "I already have."

"Well?"

"The doctor says he has a homosexual profile."

"You didn't check this out before buying a man?"

"I don't know how I could have missed it the first time around. Besides, as long as he performs, it isn't willful deception."

"What will you do?" Olga asked.

"I may need to bring another man in the relationship like I did with Oscar. But I won't suffer that indignity. I'll have to give Marcus the leopard runway hips. All the way."

She couldn't release Marcus from his contract until he'd failed to impregnate her. "He won't work as a breeder again if he keeps refusing."

"Yes," said Olga. Her English killed Gretchen. When Olga spoke without a translator, like she was now, her accent was terrible.

"You need to practice your English more. Take Marcus to the English conferences. I want the southeast coast accent. No Yankee shit, either. The last instructor tried to turn Lars into a street jiver and I had to terminate his contract."

Gretchen ran The Fordham Firm in downtown Atlanta, a practice that she'd built from the rubble of a nonprofit that collapsed trying to bring down the auction houses. Morality never paid very well, she knew first hand—she used to work for pocket change trying to bring them down. She tried to break up unfair contracts. She battled with the major auctioneers. Just around the time she'd learned the job, old man Fordham told her that she would fetch a large salary in a private firm. She went down to the employment crowdsource, drew up papers for a five-year contract, put on her beige pantsuit and threw herself on the auction block. Her talents drew a two-million dollar bid.

Gretchen pounded on Marcus's door. She heard him scramble across the room.

"You better be looking for your translator."

The door unlocked.

"What are you doing in there?"

Marcus opened the door. He wore no clothes.

"It's too late for counter-seduction," she said. "My fertile period ended days ago. I wouldn't mind a little friendly sex, but I'm wearing my not-so-fun panties. Get your translator on so we can talk. You can walk around the estate without clothes if that's what you want. It might do Olga some good to see a naked man."

Marcus drew back a muscled arm and smashed his translator against the wall.

Gretchen yanked his wrist hard to stop him. He placed his hands on her and then the tongue touching went to biting and the heavy petting zoo. She kissed his chest and sucked on his nipples.

"Look at my face while I take off my bra and underwear. I didn't wear my seduction pair," she said. The nearly broken translator kept spitting out her words in German. Marcus silenced it with the hard knob on his heel. With one arm he lifted her and carried her over to his bed and got to work. They corkscrewed, fish-lured and finished the thirteenth chapter of the Kama Sutra. He performed the Orange Julius for her and she did the Bird of Paradise. When it was all over and she lay there getting her breath, she saw the boner pills on his nightstand. Marcus might have been worth the fuss, she decided.

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With Marcus and Olga taking English conferences all day, she returned to work fulltime. She hadn't even put a dent in her pre-pregnancy rumination holiday leave. In two weeks her gestation window would reopen. She aroused Marcus nightly with the kitty cat saunter.

Gretchen stepped out of work one afternoon to grab lunch and then go meet with Dr. Hanratty about the pregnancy. The doctor met her in the sound-proof room near his office.

She sat down and launched right into it. "He's meeting his duties. Just not at my desired peak optimal times. I don't want to antagonize him. I want a family."

"He doesn't like women. This data is clear. Something is odd."

"He performs," she said. "I'm not saying he doesn't perform."

"I want him in for an examination."

"Don't spook him. He excites very easily now. I think it's the kitty cat in heat I gave him."

"Lie to him," Dr. Hanratty said. "Tell him it's a routine exam."

"After the mating, though."

"The sooner the better."

"I'll see what I can do," she said with a hot little flutter in her chest area.

Things couldn't have gone better after her meeting with Hanratty. She passed the time until the next fertility window playing buttered biscuits and pigs-in-the-blankets. She and Marcus larked around the estate, running trails, tanning by the lake. Seminude tennis games—mixed doubles if Olga and the mail carrier were available.

By the time the pregnancy period arrived, he had suddenly disappeared. She ran the grounds in her four-wheeler, looking in all his favorite spots: the Zen rock garden, the firing range, even the hand-fed, Thai-massaged chicken coop.

*Escape. Contract breach*, she raged.

Back at the mansion she tracked down Olga and told her that Marcus had to go. She would hand him over to the auction courts and start over.

"We've become very good friends," Olga said. "Don't turn him in."

"Too late. He's going to the magistrate for a life of garnished wages. I'll find someone else. Plenty of studs at the auction block."

Olga turned off her translator and mumbled in Croatian. Gretchen could tell something was terribly wrong.

"You know where he is, don't you?"

"I loave him," she said with that accent.

"You what? Falling in love with a contract worker—are you insane? I can terminate you, you know. You know romance is forbidden in your contract. And to think I've given you full access to the vibration atrium."

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Marcus had been living on honeydew water and raw almonds for three days when they fished him out of the cellar. His cleanse had left him buff.

"I want to explain myself," he told Gretchen with the translator.

"Your career would be destroyed right now if it wasn't for Olga."

She told him she'd revoked Olga's cinema privileges, and she had to drink once-filtered tap water and non-hand planted vegetables.

"I'll give you the child," Marcus said.

"I'm not asking you to give up your platonic relationship with Olga. No more lies. No more breach of contract. I'm not even asking you to stop dating men. I won't quibble with you—I want your genetic strand. Please don't make me take you to court."

"I never left the grounds. I never broke contract."

"Who do you think they'll believe, a greased up love stud or me?"

Marcus took off his translator. "Do you love me?"

"Did you learn that in the conferences? Your English is pretty good."

Marcus made a fist and shook it. "Can you love?"

"If we drew up the right agreement I could love, yes."

He gritted his teeth and talked into the translator. "I want a new contract."

"You've already signed one."

"Do you want my baby? I'll go to the garnishment courts. I don't care."

"You are all talk and no hip thrusting. You might be the worst breeder in the whole world."

"I'll have your baby but you have to raise him in the real world."

"With the plebs? What would it do to our baby?"

"I want you to raise our child, together, in the community zone."

"What kind of conferences will our baby go to? Conversational street jive and Yankee bang drums?"

"Then it's straight to the courts." Marcus flung his translator against the door and stomped it so it detonated like a terror bomb under the sole of his new Romanian slip-on loafers.

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Several days passed and Gretchen could find no legal reason to file papers against Marcus. She walked from the koi aquarium to the tennis courts and watched Marcus play seminude tennis with the gardener, Stefan Kuwolski, and his children. Stefan spoke with a provincial model of translator, which

meant he spoke pleb German. Marcus—a highly articulate man for a breeder—played set after set with Stefan. Marcus waved at her. She sat in the grass—Stefan kept the grounds greener than algae. She ate the radishes and carrots plucked from the garden, the taste of earth still clinging to the quad-filtered, hose-washed vegetables.

She dozed in the sun and when she was awake, Marcus was sitting next to her. They read electronic pamphlets together. Nearly everything he read excited Gretchen. He devoured politics and free verse electronic poetry. She downloaded seminude tennis guides and crowdsourcing law manuals. Then he read her something in German, a couplet about genocide. A glob of tears rolled down his face.

A contract groundskeeper woke them up in the late evening. Gretchen was so happy Marcus was there that she forgot the egg fertilization period had begun, and it wasn't until she made it back to the manor that she thought to swab her glands for a pregnancy confirmation. The applicator turned turquoise with an emerald green stripe, and she double-checked the code index: a healthy heterosexual male.

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Dr. Hanratty called her after her first gestation-planning visit.

"I'm telling you this outside of contract because I like you," he said.

"The baby's genetic material does not match the DNA papers."

"I haven't been kitty-cattin' around the suburbs if that's what you're getting at."

"Gretchen, I know that. That's what I'm trying to tell you: he isn't Austrian. He isn't who you think he is. Your baby is thirty-three percent Swedish and seventeen percent French."

A long period of silence passed.

"You need to come in so we can terminate the pregnancy."

"I can't wait for another stud," she said. "I'm almost forty. This is my baby."

"This is rape, Gretchen. A stud falsifying DNA papers—you need to end this now."

"Please don't turn us in."

"I'm calling the contract police as soon as this conversation is over. You know that. I want to tell you as a courtesy."

Back at the mansion she rushed, her heart pounding, down to Marcus's room and interrupted his gratification hour. "Who is Marcus?"

"I am."

"Who is he?" she screamed.

"He was my neighbor in Austria."

"Did you kill him?"

"No, he died of natural causes. I wanted to come to America and get my visa so I could sell my body like everyone else."

"You falsified records."

"It was the only way. They wouldn't take me because of my lineage."

"What's your real name?"

"I've taken the name Marcus now. I am reborn."

"You are from the sand zones."

"My mother, yes. My father was French. He was a doctor. We moved to Austria when I was young."

"You lied about your DNA helix. That is rape in this country. I can't register this baby, his genetics will delegitimize him."

He stood and howled at her. "You will not kill our son."

"I won't let them have him."

"We must go, then."

"This is out of contract talk. I've never said anything like this before. We need to run to the plebs. We need to disappear into the community zone where they can't find us."

They ran the cobblestone road to the cellar and gathered everything essential to survival: water purifiers, tooth polishers, camping equipment and bladders of honeydew water. The grounds ran clear to the pleasure forests sandwiched between the estate and the community zone, and to make it before the contract police came they'd have to disappear under the canopy trees, where there were no cameras. Before they left she sought out Olga.

"I'm signing over power of attorney to you," she told Olga.

"Do you need a place to stay in the community zone?"

"They'll interrogate you, Olga. I can't tell you anything. Run the estate as long as you can. I'll have to fight back like I used to: we need to topple the crowdsourcing power regime."

"I am sad as the caged hippopotamus in our zoo," said Olga's translator.

She handed Olga a year's worth of salary. "It should be enough to buy a condo in the community zone."

Olga took the money. "I learned so much here. I hope Marcus warms your heart. He is a good man. If I had the money I would buy his contract every year.

They gassed the four-wheeler hard to make the forests. A hurricane siren sounded—the police had breached the security gate. In the woods they set the vehicle on autopilot as a decoy and ran on foot through the undergrowth. That first night they walked and did not sleep. Off the roads in the pleasure forests they saw things they'd never seen before: rotted out houses coated in ivy, tent villages full of hippies without contracts, and wild-fed deer that fled at the sight of humans. They took shelter in an old chapel on the outskirts of the community zone.

"I know just what we're going to do tonight," Gretchen said.

Marcus went outside to use the portable shower and took the bucket of sanitary supplies. Gretchen took out her touchscreen and began scribbling out an electronic pamphlet.

When Marcus returned she showed him the contract she'd drawn up.

"No more contracts." He wagged his finger.

"It's the last one you'll ever sign."

The document said that Marcus and Gretchen Brubaker cherished each other and promised to mate for life. There would be no concubines. They had to sleep in the same room unless away on business.

"It's just like in the old days," she said.

Marcus smiled and wrote his electronic sign on the touchscreen.

"Shall I pleasure you?" he asked.

"I'm too tired."

"Me too. It's been a long day."

"We've got a lot to do tomorrow. I want to start checking out properties in the community zone early. So let's be up at five."

"I love you," Marcus said, and bit into an unwashed carrot.

"I love you too. Baby, can you do me a favor? Next time you use the portable potty please put down the seat. I almost fell in."