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THE CHILDREN ARE ON FIRE

By

Thomas Nathan Cooper

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Major: Creative Writing

The University of Memphis

May 2020

*For my wife, Lauryn, who supported me emotionally, mentally, and fiscally to achieve this the
final product, this book.*

And for Patricia and Steven Cooper, who had patience in raising their writer son.

Abstract

The Children Are On Fire is a work bred out of the frustrations of blue-collar job and detrimental encounters with masculinity there-in, work such as, AC repairman and maintenance worker. *The Children are On Fire* is a collection of short stories based in realism depicting character's who lives are touched social and economically by the specter of masculinity with explorations in the genre conventions of magical realism and the post-apocalyptic. Magical and the post-apocalyptic element serve as a means to interrogate character relationships within the realm of generational trauma from masculine societal norms, often in the form of religion. *The Children are On Fire* adopted genre elements of magical realism and the post-apocalyptic genres in the form of: scars, magical stitching, post-apocalyptic stories of a world burning, and of adventurers who can divine knowledge. They connect thematically to the realist pieces in the collection by maintaining the detriment of masculinity, blue-collar thinking, and religious myth-making.

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The Train Runs Through You

Malone stood in the mouth of an archway and balanced on a metal rail of a train track. This was the three-story high foundation of the Turner home, built over the railroad tracks. Its tall brickwork foundation was perforated with the mouth of a tunnel by which the trains moved beneath the house. There was no train coming now. The house rested in a secluded valley carved out of the Smokey Mountain by an ancient creek and it was dead silent, save for the crows chattering in the barren snow-covered trees. Malone's eyes flowed the length of the railroad that ran alongside the flow of the creek towards Brenham, Tennessee and out of the mountains. This home was Brenham's claim to fame, which adorned the town seal. The Turners had been bought out by Brenham when they defaulted on their loans. It was an attraction, of sorts, that earned Brenham a small fund from curious tourists. Brenham had allowed the Turners to stay as caretakers, and to be responsible for a small rent, along with the house's upkeep. After all, what would the Turner home be without Turners? Malone was about to find out. He was the town's servicer, clutching a manila folder, which contained the eviction papers for Sue Turner. She'd failed to pay rent to Brenham, but worse, in Malone's opinion, was the ramshackle state of the home. It decayed with the decreasing number of trains that ran through the mouth of its foundation. Sizable chunks of brick were missing from the mouth of the archway. Rotted holes in the wooden siding exposed puffy pink insulation. Malone imagined all sorts of vermin made their way between the walls, huddling together for warmth, gnawing at the insides, breeding. Sue couldn't be the caretaker the town wanted. Malone could. He'd drawn up plans to remodel the home as a museum on the first floor and living space on the second. His connections with the mayor and town council already gave him the Turner home. He'd been the only person in town close to the family. Twenty years prior, he'd been engaged to Lana Turner—no, not the famous

actress—before she skipped town and skipped Malone along with it. He'd fill it with the grandeur of his memories. The task: head up the precarious staircase, knock on the front door, and hand over the manila folder, evicting Lana's sister. Simple.

The wooden staircase creaked with the weight of Malone's thick boots. The sounds ricocheted through the valley. The crows perched nearby took flight, filling the coal-colored sky, cawing in a great mad cacophony. It began to snow. Malone paused midway up the stairs. The crows subsided, becoming dots in the distance when the front door swung open. Sue Turner stepped out onto the staircase. Her checkered long-sleeved men's flannel draped over her thin frame like an oversized tablecloth. She wore thin pajama pants and fuzzy slippers. Youthful chestnut streaks clung to her short grey hair. She didn't look a day over fifty.

"Malone, what's this ruckus?" she asked. "You've gone and put the birds in a tizzy."

"Not my intention," he said. "We need to talk, Sue."

"If this is another citation, you could've sent it in the mail like the rest. Has a brick nearly clocked a conductor again?"

"No conductors have been harmed in the making of this document. This is no citation."

Malone hesitated to move up the staircase; should he be too bold; Sue might retreat to the safety of her home. He would have to appear tactful, as he did with all other homeowners he'd evicted, which was not often. They didn't put up a fight, but he suspected that Sue might be difficult. This was generational property and Sue was the last of her line. She leaned against the doorframe, appearing to chew on her tongue, while her deep blue eyes sank to the coffee mug between her hands. The smell of a hearty dish wafted out of the house.

"Do I smell chili?"

“I’ve got a bit of deer sausage simmering with onions and the like. Dinner will be ready soon. Look, I’m sure you’re not here for a friendly chat.”

“It’ll only be as pleasant as we make it,” he said. “Coffee with dinner too?”

“Coffee ‘cause it’s blistering cold.”

“Blistering cold.” Malone drew his arms to his chest, rubbing himself for warmth. He nodded and watched the snowflakes fall.

Sue rolled her eyes. “Would you like dinner?”

He brushed away the snow on his shoulders and bald head. “You wouldn’t mind?”

“I would, but my kindness is getting the better of me.”

Malone thanked her and ran inside. The mahogany floorboards still gleamed. The walls were spotted by sections of the crumbling sheetrock. Black and white pictures of ancient family eyed him from their ornate frames. Entering the living room, he spied a familiar green-and-red sofa. The same sofa the Old Man, Sue’s father, used to let him sleep on during his high school days instead of driving home. Home, in high school, was a place his parents had left behind when they hit a truck at eighty miles per hour. The house was paid off, but empty. Malone had no family outside of his parents.

He felt Sue’s hand bear down on his shoulder. She pointed at an open door.

“You’ve found the living room,” she said. “Looks like you’ve forgotten where the kitchen’s at.”

The pair passed through the dining room and into the kitchen where the aroma of tenderized meat and softened vegetables hung heavy. The sink overflowed with used dishes and greasy pans. The countertops were piled with all manner of documents. Malone’s grip on the folder containing the eviction notice tightened at the thought of the notice slipping away into the

multitude of papers. A silly thought. Whether or not Sue accepted the notice, the house's fate would be sealed. He'd dressed for the occasion in his finest jet-black suit and adopted a consoling manner. He didn't have to visit. This was a kindness. A meeting between old friends, if he could call Sue a friend. Well, not friends. Almost a sister-in-law. Lana kept them together and without her in their lives they'd grown apart. They didn't even see each other at the grocery store or gas station, living in seemingly separate worlds.

Malone eyed the series of papers in front of him. "Seems like you've got quite a bit going on."

"Hard to get much done," she replied. "Two jobs keep me busy. I've got little time to sort through the stacks."

Malone pulled a chair from the dining room to the kitchen and got to work sorting the closest stacks. One side was dedicated to Sue's Grandfather, who sunk the family fortune into constructing the Turner home over the train tracks. The next stack was dedicated to the Old Man and Brenham's acquisition of the home when the Turner family defaulted on their loan. The home was a museum for his viewing, but the collection ended with the Old Man's obituary. The papers didn't include Lana's skipping town. They also didn't include Malone's courting Lana. He mentally added that to the stacks. He peered towards Sue, who was at the stove stirring the chili. He thought about what she'd add to the stack if she could. Would it be filled with the loneliness that he felt?

Sue pulled a bowl from a cabinet and shoved it to Malone's chest. She filled his bowl and directed him to the dining table. Malone slapped his manila folder on the table.

"Folder hurt your feelings?" Sue asked.

“No,” Malone said. “It’s a reminder.” He wasn’t sure if it was more a reminder for Sue or himself. He was getting distracted by the house and the time he’d spent in it.

Sue made a low affirming grunt and nodded. “You know I won’t entertain business at the dinner table.”

“We need to go over this,” he said. “You’ve got to be concerned.”

Sue brought the spoon her lips and gave a long loud sip. The deliberate pace of her eating wasn’t lost on him. “Now’s not the time for concern,” she said. “I’ve got a hunger. Be grateful that I’m providing a sumptuous meal this evening. Warm those cold-ass bones of yours. Could’ve left you outside. Then where’d you be?”

“Frozen, I’d imagine,” he said. “I am grateful for this. It’s been a long time since I’ve been up here. Everything looks the same. More or less.”

“More or less?”

“Well, by now I’d thought the six-thirty train would roll under the house.” The Old Man was head of the table. Deer chili was his specialty and to taste the stuff was akin to a great honor. Sue was head now. The chili, he decided, was a good stab at the recipe. Something was lacking. Maybe, the chili didn’t simmer long enough? Or, the meat didn’t melt in his mouth the same way? Or, did Mr. Turner at the other end of the table add a flavor?

“You shoot deer like the Old Man?” he asked.

Sue shrugged. “Someone’s got to eat them. Might as well be me.”

An hour passed with Malone waiting for Sue to finish a single bowl. She took the dishes into the kitchen and started to wash them, still refusing to acknowledge the manila folder. Malone leaned on the countertop and felt it give beneath his palm. That’s when he heard a low wailing in the distance.

The six-thirty train ran under the house with three elongated blasts from its horn. Its passing rattled the crumbling foundation of the home. Malone thought the house might topple over. He braced against the countertop. It broke off in his hand and he fell to the floor. He couldn't hear Sue laughing at him as the horn sounded again, but her wide grin told him he looked like a damned fool.

Sue took Malone by the hand and hoisted him back to his feet. The train passed. She took the piece of countertop away from him and chucked it in the garbage. "I thought you'd get a good kick out the train," Sue said. "Didn't think you'd tear up the house, though."

"Sorry," he said. He grabbed the manila folder and held it like a loaded gun, hoping to get even for the embarrassment of falling. "You're being served."

Sue glanced at the folder and reached into another cabinet.

"Dinner's over, Sue. Time for business."

Sue pulled out a bottle from the cabinet. "Time for drinking," she said. She set the bottle against the light and jostled the contents. She repeated the examination over again.

"The hell are you doing?"

"Checking for flakes. Brandy's been sitting a while. Kind of look like fish flakes. You get those in your Brandy?"

"I don't keep liquor."

"You should. You'd be more pleasant."

"Excuse me?"

"Malone, you haven't been here in years. Why not enjoy yourself?" Sue reached into a cabinet and produced two dusty snifters. She took a washcloth, cleaned them, and fill the glasses

to the top with brandy. She hovered over the glass and inhaled. Her eyes rolled back, and she sighed. “Humor me.” She raised a glass towards him.

“I’ll take the brandy if you take the folder.”

“I’ll take the folder after you finish your brandy.”

Malone set the folder aside, grabbed the glass, and knocked back a significant portion of the brandy. He spewed the drink against the ceramic dishware in the sink.

“That doesn’t count,” Sue said. She took his glass and refilled it. Sue held out the filled snifter to Malone. “Do me a favor and drink properly this time, then we can peek at the folder.”

Malone held his tongue between his teeth, waiting for the numbness in his mouth to dissipate. He scooped the brandy from Sue’s hand and gave a sip. Without trying to drink it all in one go, the brandy was tolerable, even pleasant.

“Was that so hard?” Sue asked.

Malone shook his head and looked around the room. “It has been a long time.”

“Would you like a tour?”

“The Old Man didn’t like tours or visitors.”

“Dad’s underground and you’re no regular visitor,” Sue said. “Tour or no?”

Malone’s instinct was to call it quits and shove the eviction notice into her chest. Maybe, he owed Sue this time? “Tour,” he said.

He followed Sue around like she was a docent in a museum. Malone knew the whole story. The town plotted to remove the Turner family by building a railroad directly through their house. The Turners, in the early stage of the town’s development, were a nuisance, connected in some way to the mob. Sue’s Grandfather had a massive fortune and subverted the city council. When the town rebelled with the railroad scheme, her Grandfather knocked over his own house.

The railroad was constructed, and her Grandfather used his fortune and remaining influence to build the current house over the train tracks. This spiteful homebuilding exhausted the fortune.

Sue and Malone made their way up to the second floor, to Lana's old room. A poster of east and west coast beaches was hung on the walls. A desk with a typewriter sat in the corner. Lana's bedroom window was shattered. A piece of plywood was nailed to the outside to keep the weather out. Still, the room was freezing. Manuscripts were littered on the floor along with glass. Malone brushed away the glass with care. He read through paper after paper while sipping his brandy. Lana had written herself into places she wanted to travel. Malone didn't exist in any of them.

"What happened here?" Malone asked.

Sue sat on Lana's bed with her second glass of brandy.

"A bird happened," she replied. "It must've known that nobody's been using the room."

"This is weird," Malone said. He gulped brandy, emptying the snifter. "This feels like trespassing."

"Tends to be the case with former lovers," Sue said.

Malone watched the room slant as he leaned against the doorframe, his shoulder slumped, and his eyes looked over Sue. She and Lana looked nothing alike. Lana had the Old Man's thin blonde hair. Malone used to admire her curves, her fullness, and the warmth of her embrace. By contrast, Sue was a stick who enjoyed large clothing draped over her like a poncho. He found himself looking at her fondly.

"You're a poncho," Malone heard himself say. He blinked, wondering why that left his head.

“You’re a jackass,” Sue said. She’d had two glass of brandy in the time that Malone had one and she still seemed lucid. “You’ve lost that budding alcoholic in you. Drinks too expensive for you?”

“I’m cheap,” he said. “Money equals priorities” His head knocked in a rhythm against the doorframe. “See this. I don’t need this to stand.”

“Oh, no?”

“Definitely not.”

“Come sit right beside me.”

He fell face-first onto the bed. The snifter fell from his hand and shattered.

“Wasteful,” Sue said.

“I’m not wasted,” he said. He rolled over and watched the popcorn ceiling go in and out of focus. He reached for something solid and found Sue’s arm. His other hand landed on the bedsheets, and he grasped for the manila folder. “I left it in the kitchen.”

“What?”

“The forms. My folder.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Sue said. She set the brandy down and lay beside Malone. Her warm breath brushed against his neck.

“How’s Lana doing?” Malone said.

“She doesn’t call, and I don’t know how to reach her. I think she was tired of the way this place ties you down. The men in our family screwed us over with this house.”

“We’re practically a part of the house. Maybe that’s why she keeps away?”

The question floated in the frigid air between them. Malone listened to the wind howl. The bare trees creaked in the wind as a calling, one that Malone understood as the trees sending their love to leaves gone by.

“Lana dared me to jump the train once,” he said. “She said that I should jump the train at the edge of the property, before it gets to the mouth of the archway, climb to the top caboose, and lay flat when it went under the arch, otherwise I’d lose my head to the brickwork. I couldn’t bring myself to do that. She didn’t explain how I’d get down, or, no, maybe I’m not remembering right?”

“On the other side of Brenham, where the train leaves town, there’s a field overgrown with wheatgrass. That’s where you’d tumble. It’s not a soft landing. You’d get some cuts, but you’d live. You should feel honored that she even suggested that to you. That’s been a Turner pastime.”

“Might’ve made me one of you.”

Sue entertained the rest of her brandy and said, “Might’ve.”

“Guess she didn’t need me,” Malone said.

Sue grabbed his hand. “Me neither.”

The rumble of another train passed beneath them. He imagined the train was running through him, passing between himself and Sue. Somewhere, in the middle of the two, he felt the train connected to Lana at an unmarked station. He held Sue’s hand tighter.

“We couldn’t keep her forever,” she said.

“We wanted to,” he said.

Sue nodded. “That why you never married?”

“Yep. That’s the only ring I intend to give.”

“She still has it,” Sue said. “I’ve never found it in the house.”

“Can’t fathom why she would keep *it* and not *me*.”

“It counts for something when it’s the only thing she took with her, besides cash.”

Sue rolled on her side and rested against Malone.

“I’ve got to give you something,” he said. His free hand searched for a folder that still sat in the kitchen. “Important. Life-changing.”

“Don’t doubt it,” she said. She kissed him on his neck.

Malone’s face ran red and he squeezed her hand without thinking. The manila folder began to fade from his thoughts as she kissed him again, this time on the lips. Malone didn’t kiss back at first. The moment hit him like a brick to the head. Until now, Sue hadn’t shown any inclination towards him, even in his younger days when he was handsome, no pass was made. Sue took his face in her hands and kissed him hard. Malone felt himself slip away and the hand that reached for the manila folder reached for Sue, found her, warm to the touch, and pulled her close. He began to kiss back. His eyes shut and thought of Lana.

Lana and Malone balanced on the rails that ran under the foundation of the house, sporting a handle of vodka in each fist. Lana thought aloud about people living outside Brenham. They were like islands with private beaches and she wanted to be her own island. Malone gulped out of one of his bottles. It was what he needed when she talked about leaving Brenham, even for vacation. Malone hadn’t fathomed leaving Brenham, not forever, though he had no family of his own to keep him in town. He hoped to make a family here, with Lana, after he was through with college.

Lana took a swig of the vodka and splayed herself on the tracks looking up into the arch. “Some days, I think I’d like one of the bricks to come loose and clock me over the head. It’d knock me out and I’d wake up in a new place, like San Francisco.”

Malone looked up at the archway above and counted all the missing bricks aloud. “Forty-three. So far, you’ve missed forty-three chances to get hit by a brick.”

“You should count how many chances I’ve got left.”

“We’d be here all day because I’d lose count.” Malone stood over Lana. One of her handles of vodka was empty. He thought to take the other one away and say she’d had enough to drink, but he reconsidered when he noticed an empty handle in his fist. He lifted the handle towards his eye and looked through it like a telescope towards where the railroad tracks disappeared with the bend of the creek. The railroad, like the creek, wove through the town and out of the mountains. Through the wavy lines in the handle, the world bent in all directions. There was no way he could get a good look at the world beyond the archway, so he turned away from it.

He squatted next to Lana and laid the empty handle by her head. Lana looked in the direction of the bend. Too often, she’d looked out toward the edge of the property. “Why do you stay here?” Malone asked. His face hovered over hers, inquisitive and serious. Lana looked at him with surprise. She shrugged.

“I don’t have the money to leave,” she said.

“You could snatch up what the Old Man’s got in his wallet. Take it while he’s drunk.”

“He’s always drunk.”

“Then you have no excuse not to take the money and run.” Malone’s face went red and his eyes became glassy. A tear rolled over his cheek and onto Lana’s face.

She wiped it away like it was no more than rain. “What’s the matter with you?” She looked into his glassy eye with a disgusted face.

“You’re always looking away, lately. It’s scary.” Lana brushed the back of her hand against his cheek. He felt the tears come faster. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“You’re away at college all the time. What’s to say, when I’m looking out, that I’m not thinking of you? Tell me.”

Malone didn’t want to say that it was the vacancy in her eyes that made him weary. That the vacant look was all he needed to know that he wasn’t on her mind, that she was already far from the Smokey Mountains.

Lana gripped the back of his neck and tugged him forward. He stumbled and found himself nuzzling his head into the hard collar of her shoulder. Malone set his vodka down and wrapped his arm around her midriff. He put his head against her chest and Lana wrapped her arms around him. His cool tears soaked into the fabric of her shirt where he rested his flush cheek. Shutting his eyes, he focused on the warmth. Her nose wedged into his hair, her chest rose and fell as if to take in his smell. She held her breath for long periods, to this feeling, this warmth, he thought. But she exhaled and the air was soaked in alcoholic breath, which stung his nostrils bitterly. Lana shut her eyes. The metal tracks rumbled in a violent progression; it was almost painful to feel the tracks vibrate against the body. A train blared its horn in the distance. Lana and Malone didn’t move. Together, they wait for the train. Their grip tightened. The heralding horn would separate them at the right moment. Desperation overcame Malone like he’d be letting go of a piece of himself if they parted. The train loomed, its horn sounded, and the couple released one another. They clung to opposite sides of the archway. The train running through them. His vodka bottles shattered under the weight of the train. Through the gaps of the

cars, Malone watched Lana fade in and out of view. It was like he was examining a film reel, each slide depicted Lana, watching the train as it snaked around the bend. Lana vacantly stared at its passing. Malone could tell she was on the train in her mind.

Sue brought Malone out of his head when she guided his hands to the buttons of her flannel. Malone pulled away.

“What’s wrong?” Sue asked.

He rose from the bed with a sickness in his stomach. “I need to use the restroom,” he said.

He went down the hall to the restroom and puked onto the toilet seat. He took a roll of toilet paper, not bothering to tear off pieces of the roll, he instead dabbed the whole roll against the seat. When he heard a scratching on the wall, he stopped. Malone suspected that it was the house settling until the tacky wallpaper began to pulse. Had Sue put hallucinogens in his drink? Was the house breathing? A small black claw tore through the wallpaper, wriggling. Malone fell back against the door, wide-eyed and wary. From the ever-expanding tear, a raccoon slumped out, hissing. The raccoon knocked against the mahogany floor, rolled around, confused, righted itself, turned Malone’s way, and gave a directed hiss that sent him out the door in a rage. To know that vermin did live in the walls tipped him to the brink of yelling through all the rooms of the house. Anger morphed into resolve, as he thought of patching the gaping wounds in the side of the house. This dying beast, this home, would survive. All he had to do was give Sue the folder. Less than that. She’d already defaulted on her rent. Her eviction was inevitable. No, he was going to show his displeasure. He was going to hold the eviction notice in her face. There

was no need for the pleasantries of a tour, a dinner, or drinking. There was no Lana and nothing standing between him and this house.

Malone rushed into the hallway and called out to Sue. No response. He made his way to Lana's room. Empty. There were cracking and grating noises coming from downstairs. He slumped against the staircase handrail, and as he descended, the grating noise increased in ferocity. Once at the bottom of the stairs he noticed Sue, crouched by the fireplace, stabbing at the fire with an iron poker as if to commit murder. Fresh flames engulfed the article. Malone knew what it was. Sue looked at him; the poker still jabbing into the roasted carcass of the manila folder.

Sue said, "I'm not sorry."

Malone wrung his hands.

"When did you decide to burn that?"

"When I let you in," she said. "I didn't have to try too hard to get the folder away from you."

"Sue," he said. "Nothing changes, besides more paperwork. You're still going to be evicted. Are you trying to make me mad? Is that it?"

"Brenham can't have this house. It's all I've got."

"They won't get it. I will. They'll hand it over. They can't possibly remake this house as it was. It'll be mine. I've got *that* kind of pull with the mayor and town council."

Sue studied the hot tip of the iron poker in her hand. She said, "I'm going to stall for each second I still have in my home." The raccoon from the bathroom waddled into the kitchen. Sue saw the raccoon, looked at Malone, then back at the poker. "You're as bad as the raccoon."

“I’m not vermin,” he said. “This place is as much mine as yours, or would’ve been, had Lana not dumped us both. You can’t make this place what it was, but I’ll do better.”

Sue gave a hardy meanspirited laugh. “I inherited ruin. You think you can fix this by throwing me out in the cold? I’ve got nothing outside of this place, save for Lana, and the woman could be in Europe for all I know. No, you can’t have the house. You’re not even a Turner.”

“I was almost a Turner. Almost family. What other hands would you have delivering this place from ruin?”

He sensed she wasn’t looking at him directly, but to the room, all its corners, cobwebbed and molded. Blemishes from owner to owner, carried on over the years, to end with Malone. Sue pointed the hot end of the poker towards him. “My own hands,” she said. Her voice was low and vile. She walked towards him at a deliberate pace, holding the poker out like a sword. Malone didn’t move. He braced himself. He remembered being on the train tracks with Lana, waiting till the last moment to move. He’d do one better. He outstretched his arms to embrace the heat of the iron rod coming towards his chest. The heat plunged it into his chest, and while it burned like hell, he didn’t waver. It was Lana’s warmth intensified. He’d held it inside and now it was on his skin again. He grinned and closed his eyes to this happy thought.

A month passed and Malone’s connection to Brenham’s upper echelon had panned out. He stood in the living room, having converted the upstairs into his living space and the downstairs into a museum. He was deciding in what order the myriad of Turner family photos would be placed into their glass display cases. The portraits and photos went back further than Sue’s Grandfather. All the Turners were before him. Lana and Sue were last in the line of

succession. Though he could not put himself next to Lana, physically or otherwise, he could live in the space she had occupied. That was enough. All was in its place as he arranged the pictures from oldest to newest. He closed the case and headed up the stairs to Lana's old bedroom, his bedroom. He changed into pajamas and laid in the darkness but was unable to fall asleep. He was compelled to look for something. He couldn't say what it was, but he'd lost it somewhere along the way, he knew. He checked each display case, the cracks in the floorboards, and the kitchen cabinets. There was a piece to his collection, an item that lingered near the back of his mind, one he couldn't picture because it was already far off. A train horn called out in the distance like the ringing of church bells. He thought of the hand he used to hold, balled up tight. It opened to him slowly, and before he saw what it contained, he shuttered. He worked furiously to clamp the hand shut, his hands clenched the skin at the top of his head, but couldn't grasp the torment, or tear the horror out of him. The hand in his mind opened to an engagement ring. The memory of it faded and returned like the violent passing of trains.

Stitches

I was five when my Grandmother introduced me to Jesus. He stood at the back of St. Aloysius's property, under shade of a sycamore grove. His fingers dipped into stone flesh, holding open a self-inflicted wound, exposing a heart impaled by a cross. Grandma sat me on a bench and pulled out a water bottle with a rosary strung around it. She muttered about how Father Mallory wouldn't baptize me without my parents' consent. She said that during ancient biblical times baptism was performed by the lay people to cleanse original sin. Father Mallory said such an act was unsanctioned by the Vatican. Grandma wasn't allowed to take me to church. This was a trust exercise. My parents said she had fervor and five-year-old Guy didn't know fervor from forever. They talked like Grandma had an infection. Grandma unscrewed the top of her water bottle and threaded the rosary through her fingers. She said it was stolen holy water, rubbing it into my scalp, before chanting the words a priest or deacon would've said to an infant over a baptismal font. She said I wasn't saved, but that I wasn't doomed either. I'd been purged of original sin. I didn't know what that meant, but I knew not to tell my parents. I didn't get much alone time with my grandma, but I wanted to know more of her, see her more. I was fascinated by the idea of someone else who might love me as much as my parents. She prayed the rosary, kneeling before the statue, her words like incantations for a spell to draw me closer.

I imagined I was chaining Jesus to the bucket of the tractor with the rosary. That was less sacrilegious than the chain-links looped around his neck. I wondered if it would strangle the part of me that remembered Grandma the way I wanted to remember her, as someone who taught me to knit and showed me kindness. My real Grandma kneeled with unblinking eyes as she moved the rosary beads between her fingertips. I imagined her fingertips trickling down my spine to let

me know she disapproved. I'd been trying to bury her image since before the funeral, but Grandma planted herself in my skin. She was in the scar on my arm, she'd put it there, and sowed it up. I was volunteering. I didn't like the church, but the community was alright. I couldn't carry Jesus like they could, but the parishioners didn't mind. I was still my Grandma's grandson, and they valued the connection. Emery, the tractor operator, pulled back on the throttle. The bucket rose, as did Jesus, till he was high enough to eclipse the sun. Jesus was strung up like a hillbilly-pagan offering. Jesus's hands reached perpetually towards the center of his chest; the heart etched with Latin. The crooked cross staking his heart looked painful. The statue smiled, though it was a picture of agony. He was caked in moss and mold; a fungus was growing between a toe. Had he always been this way? This exposed?

Rufus, the parish's property manager, came out of the field. He held a hand to his ear to catch the sound of my voice and fiddled with a black box that'd been attached to his hip. Rufus reached inside his ears, removed two flesh-colored earbuds from a black box attached to his hip, pursed his thinning lips, blew into each, and placed them back into his cauliflower ears. "Speak," he said.

"Where's this going?" I asked.

"To face Main Street," Rufus said. "Nobody wants to walk over here and visit him, besides your Grandma."

"Lovely funeral," Emery said. "You know, that's the first time I've seen your Mama and Papa in years. They hadn't the best relationship with your Grandma. I didn't see you there. What's that about?"

"Got to say plenty of goodbyes while she was at deteriorating. Don't need a funeral to say it again." Hate was hard to talk about in relation to family; it was woven into my scar.

Dangling out of my sleeve was a lead of red yarn. I lifted my left sleeve and looked at the cross-stitching. I tried to tuck my finger underneath the yarn, but it phased through, as usual.

“Mosquito bite you, Guy?” Rufus said.

“No, it’s my scar. I felt a prick.”

Emery examined the scar closely. “Looks normal.” He doesn’t see the red yarn. Only Grandma and I could. “Speaking of a prick, you used to knit scarves in the fall to fundraise for the church. You knit?”

“I’m familiar with the needle,” I said.

“How’re those hands, man?” Rufus asked. “I could use a scarf come fall.”

“I’ve got slow hands. Look elsewhere.”

“You’re the only one your grandmother mentioned as being a knitter, all the others have passed.”

“She didn’t know me much as a knitter. I did most of that on my own time. She wouldn’t have known, I don’t think.” How could she have known I knitted? I used to make her scarfs in secret, but there wasn’t a way for her to know it was me. The threads of yarn laid flat against my skin and were rooted within me. Was it broadcasting? Was I an open channel? How much did she hear or see? Where is she seeing from now, if that’s possible?

“Sounds like you’re accusing your Grandma of totting a fantasy.”

“She liked things her way.” I rolled my sleeve over the scar, out of sight.

“She told us she’d wanted you to be a deacon. Church needs more deacons, more people in general. What’s left of the parishioners are mine and Rufus’s age. I intend to take what’s left of it and fashion a younger audience. It starts with this statue.”

“What’s after that?”

“God only knows. I can’t think in long terms. Emery, let’s go ahead!”

Emery grabbed levers and pulled back in his seat. He hoisted the statue into the air and drove the tractor into the field at a brisk pace until it jerked. The back wheels hovered above the ground. Emery punched a throttle and lowered Jesus to the grass. Emery said we needed ballast on the tractor’s tail end, where the tiller was hitched. Rufus wobbled atop the tiller by his heels and flashed me a thumbs up while rising to his feet. Looking at Rufus and Emery, I thought being an old man meant living in exaggerated motion, if coping for age was to be haggard in all tasks. I climbed up and Rufus clung to my shoulder as to reassure my balance, but it was for himself. Emery started up the tractor and moved across the grass at a slow pace. I looked back towards the sycamores and the barren place where Jesus sat.

Rufus asked me, “What kind of man knits?”

Grandma sat in the parlor room at a cheap card table with her knitting bag, surrounded by porcelain children. Their shiny white cheeks were blushed a rosy red. Boys and girls alike wore dresses. A gaggle of siblings, blue-eyed, with dead forward stares. I was thirteen and had just come in from sawing a tree limb to pieces in the cold. Grandma’s tulip poplar had died, and the winter wind sundered its branches in piecemeal. When I came in from the cold, the porcelain children stared at my skin tone and eye color. They recognized me as their own. It made me shiver harder indoors than out. I kept my jacket on. I told Grandma the branch was hacked up and waited for hot chocolate with marshmallows floating on the top, that was my fee. Cocoa was for children, but I enjoyed this pampering. The cocoa was for me, from her, and that filled me with the kind of warmth I get from sunlight. It let me know she loved me.

She lit the old-fashioned gas burner that clicked like tap dancer's heels before it produced a flame. Flames caressed the sides of the pan. I imagined that warmth holding me and looked to Grandma's arms sprinkled with goosebumps from cold. The kitchen radiator gurgled and moaned. I huddled close to the residual heat.

"Damnit," Grandma said.

"Who do you call to get a radiator fixed?"

"A plumber, but we're not going to need one of those. We can double up on clothes."

"Because you can't afford one?" I didn't mean this as an insult.

She grumbled with displeasure. Her breathe became visible in the frigid air. Grandma had one daughter, my mother, who married a fireman, my father. Mother was a bank teller in the next town over, thirty minutes from home. We didn't have much to give to Grandma, but what little that was available purchased distance from her, in my Mother's case.

Grandma turned the burner off with a hard flick of the wrist, retrieved a mug from the cupboard, and slammed it to the countertop. Grandma returned to the parlor room, covered herself with a fleece teal robe, and took up her needle and yarn again. Her fingers worked furiously on a scarf.

I poured myself cocoa and blanketed the surface with white pillows. I came into the parlor, set my mug down on the card table, and took a rusted folding chair from the corner of the room. Grandma harrumphed and glanced in my direction. I held the mug between my freezing hands, sipped it. The way Grandma worked her hands to create the scarf was quick and meticulous. I was relegated to "man's work", especially when I vocalized my want to knit like her.

"Did I say something wrong?" I asked between sips.

“You’ve got your parent’s manners,” she said. “They’ve got money on the mind more often than the Lord or me. Money’s gone to their heart too.”

“It keeps you warm, though.”

“Not in the right way,” she said and pointed a needle to her heart. “Not in the soul.”

“Why don’t Mom and Dad visit? They always drop me off, they never come in.”

“Their kind of care is distant. They send me you and money.”

“You don’t work?”

“I don’t work for anything but the church, but that pay’s different.”

I put the mug down and watched Grandma make a stitch with red yarn. There was some deftness to the work that attracted my eye to her knitting that was different from breaking down tree limbs. It was the act of creation.

“Can I try?” I asked.

“Boys should stick to manual labor.”

“Handwork’s manual, Grandma.” I reached into Grandma’s knitting bag and I snagged the yarn by its loose end.

“That’s your run,” Grandma said, taking the threaded needle from my hands. “Knitting is like knotting for the arts. You’re in boy scouts, aren’t you? You know your knots?”

“I wasn’t even in cub scouts.”

“You’re a blank slate, then? You ought to make a fine deacon someday. Deacons can have kids, you know.”

“Do I want kids?”

“The Church says so, and I agree. Children are fun and new, but they can be defiant.” She motioned for me to look closer at her hands. It reminded me of the tender handling of the good

utensils on holidays when Mom broke out the fine china. We'd eat at the four-person table and left the fourth seat open, Grandma's seat. Grandma was a part of us in empty spaces.

"Your parents don't raise you right," Grandma said. "They don't prep you for the Lord."

"I'm trying to make it through high school, Grandma. Don't put more on me."

"The Lord's truth is terrifying. Not everyone is saved, but everyone can be on the path to salvation. Your parents dug their own path off the road that leads to Jesus when you were conceived. You know what conceived means?"

I shook my head. I lacked understanding of sex and its mechanics thanks to southern righteousness leaking into the school system. I'd heard the word handjob for the first time, repeated it in front of my parents, and watch their eye grow wide with existential dread.

"It's what your Mama and Papa did out of wedlock," Grandma said. She looked to her porcelain children, pristine and glistening in the dim winter sun. "You were a beansprout in your Mama's belly in a California motel before your Papa convinced your Mama to elope in Indiana. This what happens when folks marry outside of their denomination."

"Denomination?"

"Your Papa's not Catholic, he ascribes himself as a Christian, but mixing faiths is a bad look. Taints the family with confusion. You need doctrine. For now, the Lord's preserved your innocence. You still got the rosary I gave you at your baptism?"

"Yes," I replied and retrieved it from my back pocket.

"Good," she said. "Been making your prayers like I told you?"

I shook my head.

“Listen, boy,” she said. “You don't slight the Lord and His precious Mama with your silence. Prayer is his word and I'm the only one speaking it true. You've got to join in this tradition. Your parents' taint can't be your own.”

“They're not bad.”

Grandma grabbed my arm; her nails could've penetrated my skin. “They keep distance from my conviction. I called them out to their faces that they're damnable souls need Christ to be saved.”

“You can't talk to them like that, they'll keep hating you.”

“I know that, but they feel sorry for an old woman with no one to do the manual work. Got news for you, Guy, I'm plenty capable. What I need's you. I play feeble and they send you. I can't fix your mama.”

“Mom doesn't need fixing. Neither does Dad.”

Grandma laughed. “They've got you fooled. You're stitching is off.” Rage worked my fingers, till the stitching turned into a jumbled mess. She took the needle from me once more and rushed to undo my damage.

“I'm sorry,” I said and pulled away from her.

She scrutinized my work and pushed it aside on the card table. She darted towards her bedroom and returned with a knitting needle, old and jagged, like the blade of an ancient sacrificial knife. “Hold it,” she said. “I made it from the Tulip Poplar. Neat, huh?” She watched intently as I took it in my hand. The needle pulsed off-beat of my heart as if it were trying to follow the rhythm. The bark stripped into tiny fibers that folded into the lines of my palm, latching to my skin. Grandma smiled wide and crooked.

I tried to throw it down on the card table, but after three good shakes I couldn't get it off.

“What is that?”

“It's a knitting needle, my Mother had one too, but this one is mine.”

“Does my Mom have one? Do Moms everywhere have one?”

“No dear, just me and your Great Grandma.”

“Why won't it get off?”

Grandma took it easily from my palm. The needle didn't attach to her skin. “It's mine. It doesn't know you. It doesn't know what to do with you. We can make you one, one that responds to you.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means, we need a bit of blood.” Grandma went to the kitchen and returned with a vial. Grandma took my arm and rolled up the sleeve in sloppy frantic motions as if possessed. She drew the knitting needle closer to me, its fibers wove together into a blade, and I jerked back, but Grandma held firm. She wasn't kidding about being capable. She cut me open with one swift slice and there was no pain. I screamed when the warm blood trickled out my arm. Grandma gathered it in a vial. I stood up and knocked over the folding chair, which collided into the shelf of porcelain children. They're shining white skin shattered. Pieces of their dead blue eyes glared at me. She set the filled vial aside, grabbed a lead of yarn, and her knitting needle morphed to accept it like a hand outstretched for a communion wafer. “Hold fast, Guy.” I screamed harder and arched back.

Grandma yanked me closer. “Remember this for when you have your own needle. Yarn won't work to sew up a wound normally, that's me and this needle, we make this possible.” Grandma began to stitch me with yarn. With each stitch, my skin pulled together, but something

felt added. I suddenly desired to attend church regularly, find a woman, marry her, become a deacon, father children, introduce them to the Jesus statue, make sure they're baptized in holy water, make sure that Father Malory baptized them because he's the fool who wouldn't do his duty when it was my time, make him baptize all the children, keep them close to Christ, and stitch them, if I had to, with His love.

"I need a hospital," I said.

"Don't cry, Guy, calm yourself. Hell's worse than this. I'm just fixing you up." She stopped stitching and strung the rosary through my fingers. She folded my hand over it tight and told me to say my prayers, but this was when her grip loosened, and I pulled away. I ran out the back door. I took up a piece of the limb from the tulip poplar tree I'd hacked away at and chucked it at her when she came out after me. Startled, she stopped and dropped the needle. I moved behind the poplar, another limb in hand. We remained this way for the thirty-minutes, one waiting for the other to make a move. The wound in my arm was still bleeding, but I didn't care. The threat that my Grandma presented was greater than my worry over the uncomfortable amount of blood running down my arm and pitter-pattering on the ground. It counted down the moments to my mother's arrival.

When my Mother picked me up, I showed off my arm and I was rushed to the hospital. Mom didn't acknowledge my Grandma. Mom looked at the stitches and all the color left her skin. Mom rushed me to the hospital where the wound was reopened, disinfected, and re-stitched. The thoughts I'd been having faded in intensity, but they wriggled below the surface of my skin like parasitic worms. I kept them mentally in check until I felt them as an afterthought. When the nurse pulled the stitches from the wound, she marveled at the way the yarn had accomplished the task. She said it was strangest how tightly it held, how it resisted her surgical

snips. She didn't notice that, as she removed the stitches, another pair remained like an imprint. The lead of the red yarn dangled from my arm. I tried to tug it, but my fingers went through the line. The nurse applied stitches to the wound, and they laid over my Grandma's stitching as if they weren't there. I flicked at the repair and couldn't feel the imprint of my Grandma's stitching. The nurse left. My Mom was beside me, staring. Her eyes could've burned a hole in the stitching. Mom asked if Grandma had given me anything else. I took out the rosary and held it up to mother. She looked it over, sighed deeply, reached up, and threw it into the biohazard box with the used needles. With her arm raised, I saw a lead of blue thread dangling from her underarm.

I was kept away from Grandma. When Grandma's name lit up on the caller-ID, my Mom wouldn't answer. The name came up often on the phones for a month. I didn't miss her. Still, I was compelled to be near her in some way. I couldn't tell if the stitching was responsible or the empty chair at the dinner table. I think my Mom sensed this too. When Grandma's name appeared on the phone, she'd stare, not with the burning look she'd given my scar, though it was still burning. Her lower lip moved with an occasional quiver and her hands would fidget with one another like they were in struggle to keep the other away from the phone.

I used my allowance to purchase a knitting kit, which I hid in my room in my sock drawer. It was at this time that I took up doing my own laundry, which my Mom didn't find odd in the slightest. She wouldn't have thought of it as a rebellious act, that when I knitted, I imagined Grandma fixed. With each stitch I created, I gave life to someone new and loving who could fill the empty space Mom and I felt. I worked on a scarf and used the internet as a teacher for my knitting. With each stitching I created a kind of permanence, a woven image I could cling

to, a Grandma who loved me for who I could be, regardless of what she wanted. I remembered Jesus under the sycamores. That was her spot.

I snuck out. It was cold and dark, but I had the scarf I'd made in hand. It insulated me from the night. Jesus was waiting with his heart exposed to me. I removed the scarf and wrapped it around his neck. It was for Grandma, that maybe I had the power to make her better without weaving a piece of myself into her. She was the only person who'd visit the statue, and I was banking on the idea that no one would come across it but her. I sat on the bench before Jesus, I worked between my fingers an invisible rosary, and said prayers for the person she could be.

I visited the statue in the afternoon. The scarf was gone.

The bucket of the tractor dropped to the ground. The chains held Jesus firmly to the bucket. I fell off the tiller and landed headfirst in the grass. Rufus landed on the box that connected his hearing aids. He knelt beside its corpse, loose wires and chunks of plastic, and lamented over it. Emery worked to get us free of the hole, shifting back and forth on the throttles. I pulled Rufus off the ground and we pushed to get the tractor free of the pothole. With a good heave, and Emery kicking and punching the throttles, we were able to escape the hole. We got back on the tiller, Rufus latched onto my shoulder again and gave me a nod that I'd supposed I should've taken as reassurance. Emery hoisted Jesus up and drove us through the field at a steady pace.

"You know," Rufus said, "your grandma talked a big game about you, beyond knitting."

"Oh, yeah," I said. I braced myself for what else she might've known.

"She said that you were devoted, that you were a deacon at heart, that you'd come back to the church someday."

“What?”

“She said that you went to college in Knoxville, for literature, that you were interested in biblical literature. Retellings of the Word were making up for your lost education in the faith, no offense to your parents, mind you. But she liked to tell us that it brought you closer to the Bible. You’d told her that you read it sometimes in your dorm room, when you were alone.”

“Can we talk about something else?” I got goosebumps all over. This was true. I was interested in the bible, but I scanned its passages for the needle or any reference to the thing Grandma wielded to make the scar. I’d even read the Apocrypha for answers, because the needle carried a sinister character, but there wasn’t anything about Grandma’s needle. The knitting needle seemed of her and the tree she’d fashioned it from.

“Do you remember the rosary that she used to carry around? Rufus asked. “She’d wear a veil over her hair, the white lace floral print, and she’d walk the grounds with her hands folded. That rosary had mahogany beads and a cross, real expensive thing. She told us it was yours now. Have you got it?”

“Rufus, that’s the one I had. Rufus?”

“She used to take you by the hand, and you’d walk through this very field. The whole congregation could see the two of you from the parking lot. You’ve always had a place in our eyes. The church, you’re a part of it.”

“Emery,” I said, “what’s up with Rufus?”

“Other than he can’t hear?” Emery asked.

“Obviously.”

“Seems to me like he’s trying to make conversation.”

“This isn’t conversation, this is like a lecture. Tell him to shut up.”

“Why? He wouldn’t hear it anyway.”

“Your parents are sexual hooligans,” Rufus said. “Your Grandma convinced us of that, in detail.”

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Means she *knew* what they were up to,” Rufus said. “I shouldn’t have to explain the motions involved, the lewdness.”

“How did she say she knew that?” I asked.

“Gross people, your parents.”

“Is your hearing selective?”

“Why would you even need *enhancers*?”

“Emery, kill the engine so I can yell at Rufus.”

“We just got started again,” Emery said. “We’re going to ride this puppy to the end. Just cover your ears if you’re so sensitive.”

“He doesn’t get to talk about my parents like that,” I said. “He doesn’t know what he’s saying.”

“Your Grandma used to say that we’re all called to something,” Rufus continued. “She’d meant Jesus, but I think you were called to your Grandma. All this is forward of me, I know, and I’m sure you’d agree. You agree?” He looked at me like we’d had a real conversation.

I grabbed his arm and watched his beady eyes get wide as saucers. I didn’t want to hear about what Grandma knew or how she knew it. There’s a lump in my lung where all my hatred ballooned with my breathing. “Stop talking,” I yelled over the engine. Rufus squinted at my mouth. I mouthed the words slowly. “St-op talk-ing. I-do-not-need-this. I-do-not-need-your-shit.”

“He's just trying to be friendly,” Emery says, turning around.

Rufus glanced at Emery. “What he said.” He hasn't heard Emery's words.

I let go of Rufus. My blood simmered in my veins. I looked back at the sycamores, and for the first time, I wanted to put Jesus back. I made so many scarves and left them there for my Grandma, each disappearing. I'd seen them, stashed in a closet, each neatly hung up. They didn't look used. Though she was dead, she'd never gotten better, but it was my ritual now. These were my offerings to her, my remedy for her, but she was still a sour creature bent on making her own dreams come true. It was then, as we made it through the field and into the parking lot, that the statue morphed, and I could feel the real image of her there. The one that tried to rewrite me. The statue would be on Main Street soon. I'd have to pass it every day on my way to work, and remember the woman who cut me, who spied on me through stitching, and wove into me her desires. I decided that Jesus needed to go.

Grandma had cancer of the bone. She was too poor for proper end-of-life care she needed, and my parents couldn't cover that bill. My parents had been taking shifts to watch over her, making her take her meds, get her lunch and dinner. This was the first face-to-face interaction between my parents and my Grandma. I asked my mother what to expect. She replied, a husk. The dead tulip poplar, whose limbs I used to saw, lorded over Grandma's house. Its limbs had disappeared with the seasons till it was bone white and solitary. When I walked in, she seemed petrified.

“Guy, you don't look too different,” she said.

I wanted to tell her that I was different, that I'd successfully become a version of myself that she couldn't fathom. Her eyes were sunken. She was in her teal robe. I listened for the

radiator to clunk and chug to life, but all I heard was Grandma's unsteady breathing. I thought I could see her breathe. "Had your pills today?"

"The ones that keep me lucid or the ones that keep the pain down?"

"I don't know."

"Your parents have kept you from me."

"No, you did that," I said.

"I was afraid you'd been tainted like your parents," she said and coughed. A bony hand came to her mouth. I could've counted all the joints. "When I cut you and sewed you, there was no pain, that's God cutting into you. That was His will I'd sewn. That's how I came to Him, that's how I return to Him daily. It's a choice now. My stiches fell off when they became my choice." She shivered. "Heat's out, again. Radiator's too pricey to fix, your mama tells me. Can you fetch my knitting bag?"

"As long as you don't prod me with it," I said and headed to the parlor room.

"I don't have that energy," she said.

The parlor room was dingy, the surviving porcelain children had faded ivory skin, their blue eyes were pale. The cold took the color from everything. Grandma's knitting bag was stuffed on the same bookshelf as the years before. I brought all this to Grandma and set it on her stomach. I sat in an armchair near the fireplace. She rummaged through the bag with eyes as dead as the porcelain children. She paused her needlework and rested the points against her paper-thin skin. "Your mama said she tossed the rosary, the one I gave you."

"In a hospital. We left it in a biohazard bin."

"Must've thought it infected. You're treading your own path like your Mama." She said this like it was preordained. "How'd I birth a callous creature like Dorothy Anne? I'll ask the

Lord when I come to His gate, which should be soon. I feel the pain slinking back into my bones. It's the pain meds I need. The blue gel capsules are what I need, look like jelly-beans.”

I went to the kitchen counter where there were two sets of pill cases, each labeled by day and use, and I grabbed her blue gel capsule pills. I knelt beside her with a glass of water and the pills, which is when a smell, fierce with human degradation, shot up my nose. Her shriveled lips parted, placed the pills on her fuzzy tongue, and gulped them down with water. She places my hand to hers. This smell was of sadness and loneliness, two things I'd recognized, but never put to my grandma. These qualities were real in her now and I fought a lump that steadily filled my throat. I was familiar with that lump being hate or anger at the memory of who she was, but this was hard seeing the woman I wanted to change, be changed in body so drastically.

“You stink,” I said, returning to the armchair.

She sniffed towards her armpit and grimaced. “Been a while since I've bathed.”

The smell exuded from her soul. I wanted to fill her with the person she should've been. A person who loved me, and who I loved back. “What would you say to a bath?”

“I'd be naked. You don't need to see that.”

“You need a bath.”

“You try smelling peachy when your bones are breaking down.” She ran her fingers through her cobweb of hair and gave a deep sigh. “You'd have to help me to the tub.”

“I don't mind, I would've had to do the same in getting you to the toilet.”

“Don't remind me.” She was quiet for a moment, then raised her hands towards me, and said, “Get this over with.”

“You'll feel a little better when we're done.” I got up and took her by the hands, gently tugging her from the couch. She looked like a corpse rising from a casket. We shuffled slowly

towards the bathroom down the hall, attached to her bedroom. I drew a warm bath for her.

Grandma sat on the closed lid of the toilet with her hands in her lap and tapped her feet on the tile floor. “You’ll have to get underdressed.”

“I’m working up to it.” She chewed her tongue and said. “Would help if you’d skedaddle.”

“I’m going to see you anyway.”

“No need to help me with a washing. I’m all cracks and crevasses.”

“You can’t wash yourself, can you?”

She blinked. Grandma asked me to turn around and I waited for her to get underdressed. I did and waited. The robe made a cascading sound as it hit the floor. The rest of her items landed with a plop. Her feet squeaked against the tile as she shuffled to the tub. She grumbled when trying to lower herself into the tub. I offered a hand. She relented and took it. I placed her gently in the water. Grandma hunched over with her knees towards her chest, her eyes fixated on the movement of the water. The corners of her mouth drooped, and her hands wrapped around her shins. I grabbed a washcloth from the sink cabinet. I tried to hand it off, but she remained petrified. I wetted the cloth and rubbed the bar soap to it, till it formed a thick lather. Our eyes met. “Go ahead,” Grandma said.

I ran the washcloth over her shoulders and couldn’t remember being more uncomfortable in my life. There was a scar on her back, where my Great Grandma had surely made a cut and stitches, that threw me from my hesitation. This was a service, one that would make her better. From her shoulders, I scrubbed her arms, down to her waist, to the outside of her thigh, and down to her toes. I wanted to bring her into the empty spaces of my life. I wanted to see her seated at the table with my Mom. I ran the cloth across her scar, hoping to find her healed by the

gesture, her skin new. The scar remained lengthy a purple discoloration on her back. Where I couldn't go, Grandma took over. When it came time to wash her head, I cupped water into my hands and let it loose to fall about her cobweb hair. Grandma shut her eyes and let the waterfall over her. "Do you remember the water bottle?" I asked. "The one you filled with holy water."

Grandma nodded and said, "In front of Jesus, yes. Father Mallory said I'd done a self-righteous deed, usurping the Church's authority on sacramental matters. Said I needed a proper confession, but I wasn't sorry. What's the Church for if it doesn't act on morals? We don't stand on our own two feet, we stand on God's ground, God's principle. What your Mama and Papa have set in you is a sin I can't wash away."

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that," I said and poured water over her head. Her hair darkened and reminded me of a wet mop. "You're always blaming Mom and Dad for the way I turned out."

"Parent's got more say in their children than they like to think," she said and pointed to her back. When she looked up at me, she said, "Your Mama feels obligated to give me her time, because we're family, but that's not meant much to her. She'd been around more otherwise."

"You didn't make much effort either."

"Didn't I? I tried to stitch the child, but like you, she high-tailed it." She took the shampoo and lathered her hair until her head was thick with foam.

"You're doing it wrong."

"My hair?"

"No, our family. I think you'd be back in it for real if you were sorry."

"I'm not sorry, though. I can't be. That'd get rid of all the work I'd done for Jesus. That's the greater allegiance." I felt my blood boil. I hadn't thought it before, but now I wanted to stitch

sorry into her, right next to her back. Part of me thought she'd caught on when she glanced in my direction. "What're you thinking?"

"Nothing," I said and ran water over her head. "Please, let me take care of you."

Grandma frowned and lowered her hands from her lathered hair. She held herself at her sides and stared into the gray clouded water looking into the reflection that gently churned with the movement of her toes. She'd recognized herself in the water. She'd seen herself as I did. That the cleansing she needed couldn't be found in water but me. "You shouldn't be taking care of me," she said and without looking at me. "No, not like this. There's something for you in my bedroom closet. It's behind some scarves. You should fetch it."

I got up from beside the tub and slowly made my way to the bedroom. On opening the closet, I found all the scarves I'd ever made for her hung up neatly. Brushing them aside, I found an ornate box with my name on it. Part of me knew what was inside, so instead of opening it there, I brought it to the bathroom. Grandma looked up at it from the tub. "Why did you make one?" I asked.

"Seemed like a waste of blood not to," she said. "Did you open it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't want this."

"You do. I can tell. It's crossed your mind." She reached out her hands. "Bring it here." I did and she opened it. The knitting needle inside was bone white, petrified, with several swirling lines of decay. "I made it from the tulip poplar, like mine. This won't stick to you like mine. This one knows you."

I put it to my hand, and it pulsed to the rhythm of my heart. Its wood fibers curled into shapes, as I stared at the scar in Grandma's back, almost making a blade. Grandma saw this and smiled. I lurched back and dropped it to the tile floor. "Oh child," Grandma said and picked it up. She quickly tossed the needle to me before it attached to her hand. "What's stopping you?"

We were enveloped in the emptiness of the home, abandoned and cold. My hands trembled as the needle fibers became blade-like. I held myself, my fingertips were knives against the goosebumps that formed, and a chilling sensation spread out from my core. The needle in my hand was a solid blade now, there was no mistaking the way the fibers had arranged themselves. The yarn was in the other room. Grandma's back was exposed. Under my skin, an old sensation of Grandma's desires returned in force, but they had morphed somehow. They were overridden by the powerful urge to write sorry into her back with the blade. I threw the needle into the tub, breaking with whatever spell it was casting on me. I crouched to the floor, holding my head in my hands, and leaned against the side of the toilet. I felt that I might puke for a time, but it subsided. Grandma motioned towards me that she wanted to get out of the tub. I got up to help her, despite a rising feeling that caring for her was a mistake. Her hands in mine, I helped her to stand, but I got distracted by the reflection in the bathwater. Grandma and I, we were one filthy image.

We must've looked majestic, plowing through the tall grass with Jesus strapped to a tractor, but we were blazing through the parking lot. My Grandma was close, on the tractor near Rufus, in the driver's seat with Emery, and in the statue. I sweated, not from heat, but from nerves. It had to break. I saw Grandma in the bathtub curled up like a shrimp on the tiller. A

lump lodged itself in my throat and tears formed at the corners of my eyes. She wouldn't go away, even in death.

I grabbed Rufus by the sleeve and said, "I can't look at Jesus anymore."

"What?"

"I can't look at Jesus anymore." Grandma, in the tub, was balanced atop Jesus's head.

"Guy, I can't hear for beans, speak up."

"He needs to break." Rufus turned away and his face changed to a scowl, he hadn't heard me, not really.

I crouched and crawled over the tiller to Emery. Rufus grabbed me, yelled that I was going to fall, but he couldn't hold me. I was fixed on the chains that kept Jesus to the bucket. I'd tied Jesus up. I knew what part of the chain I needed to pull to send Jesus plummeting to the ground. Emery swatted at me with his hat. My palm went to Emery's face. I clamped down in the space between his beady shifty eyes and the brim of his nose. I felt his nose go flat when I pushed him out of the driver's seat. As he fell, I was able to reach for the chain, and undid Jesus. Emery reached for me, then the tractor, and then towards the pavement. His body, along with Jesus', crashed against the blacktop. Both were broken, and the tractor slowed on a pulverized piece of Jesus. Rufus lunged from the tiller, cursed me, and hobbled to Emery's side.

I hopped off the tractor and dropped to my knees among the pebbles and chunks of Jesus folding my hands as though in prayer, but I was holding myself together because I could see Emery wasn't moving. The blank eye of Jesus stared in the direction of the tractor, which continued to barrel towards the Main Street at a slow pace sprinkling what little it still carried of Jesus as it went. I imagined a thread that ran from me to its cross-impaled heart. I clutched at the loose thread on my arm, and for the first time I felt it. It unraveled with a tug, then dissolved in

the air. The vibration of the tractor held a beat, the life of Grandma in the rhythm of my heart,
matched by rattle of chains dragged over the pavement.

Stinker Pot

Laramie spread the chemically treated sod over where his nephew, Robert, had puked. Laramie worked as a janitor for Bates Middle School. This was the second incident from Robert, but Laramie didn't mind cleaning up the spill. It meant the company of Ms. Apperson, Robert's fifth-grade teacher. Laramie was at least twenty years her senior. She stood by her classroom, arms crossed, and propped herself against the doorframe. A plastic monarch butterfly was pinned to the sunflower pattern of her dress, resting by the exposed skin near her collarbone. He envied the closeness of the butterfly. He stared at the sawdust soaking up puke and wanted to soak up Ms. Apperson's warmth like a sponge and retain that heat for a while. After a year, the sensation of a woman was wearing away in his memory like the soles of his dime-store boots. He turned his foot over to the crater in his bootheel and watched flecks of rubber detach from his shoe like a crumbling foundation.

"It's like watching paint dry," Ms. Apperson said.

Laramie looked up at the butterfly and then her eyes. She brushed some of her hair behind her ear and goosebumps spread like a wave over his body. "Have you ever watched paint dry?" he said.

"Can't say that I have. You?"

"Done it once on a bet. Solid two hours in a chair with my face two feet from the wall. Fifty bucks richer for it."

"Sounds like a raw deal for fifty dollars," she said. "What kind of people start a bet like that?"

"Family. The kind best kept at arm's length." Laramie stretched his arms out. He held the broom and dustpan by the neck like how he wanted to do to his brother, Jermaine, when he bet

the fifty bucks for Laramie to stare at the paint dry. Laramie owned a mason jar atop the refrigerator labeled: Jermaine's Fortune. "Don't bother me much," he continued. "That's more than four hours of paid work. Janitorial staff don't get much."

"I thought you were maintenance."

"Bates doesn't want to pay extra for a straight-up maintenance guy if I can do all the simple stuff. I'm a mixed bag. I get fidgety waiting for accidents and messes and find myself in a place that's hard to get comfortable in, so I learn a little of everything. You ever feel that way?"

She shook her head. "I'm set on teaching, but with these fifth-graders, I don't feel too much, except," she paused, and leaned in towards Laramie with a hand over her mouth, "contempt. Two years into the job and I've already lost enthusiasm."

"No," he said. That shouldn't have surprised him, but Ms. Apperson's honesty had nearly knocked him over.

"Yes," Ms. Apperson said and shut her door most of the way. She put an ear towards the door, seemed to listen, then nodded in satisfaction towards the slim connection to her class. "Last year, I had the most immaculate class. They were willing to learn, quiet, and attentive. Those were saintly kids and if I could've held them all back to spare me from this class I would've. They refuse to learn. Working with this class costs me a bottle of wine a night."

"Sounds rough," he said, poking his broom into the mess on the floor. The puke was almost soaked up completely.

"Robert's trying my patience today. Well, not Robert. Robert's parents. You don't mind me saying so?"

"Not a bit. What's Jermaine done?"

"Robert's parents are out of town."

“They are?”

“They didn’t tell you?”

“I’m not kept in the loop.”

“Well, Robert’s grandmother isn’t answering her phone. She’s the contact your brother gave us. So, Robert’s stuck, can’t focus worth a damn, and the other kids are waiting for him to projectile vomit. This didn’t start till after lunch, so I’m thinking it’s food poisoning.”

“We’ve got the school clinic. Why not set him up there?”

“The nurse is gone for the day and no one’s available to watch him.”

The puke on the floor had completely soaked into the sawdust. Ms. Apperson had been the bright spot in a day plagued by clogged toilets and lightbulb replacements. Then, he thought, a gesture of goodwill could go a long way in seeing her more often. “I could take Robert home.”

Ms. Apperson’s shoulders slumped, and she let out a long sigh that Laramie took as a soothing sound. “You’d do that?”

“Sure,” he said, sweeping the mess into the dustpan. “He’s my nephew. I’ll give my brother a call.”

“You’re a peach.” She smiled and Laramie nearly dropped his broom at the sight of it.

The school gave Laramie the rest of the day off to take care of Robert. The school office phoned Jermaine, who said a spare key was under a decorative rock beside the porch. Laramie wasn’t allowed a key. Jermaine was still under the impression that Laramie had stolen a few plates of fine china, which wasn’t true. Laramie knew the culprit was his mother, which he made public at Thanksgiving. She’d been jailed for stealing from a convenience store she’d worked for while the brothers were in high school. Stealing was her way of providing, but the money she’d

made went to Jermaine's college fund. The college had sculpted Jermaine into an engineer. This was treason in Laramie's eyes. Treason cemented in the brickwork homes engineered by Jermaine. This was the same neighborhood Jermaine lived in and the newest addition to the aging small town of Bates, Tennessee.

Laramie found the key. He dialed for his mother and the voicemail answered. She must've fallen asleep watching her soap operas. He left a message saying that Robert was home and she could come to claim him any time. Once inside, Laramie had Robert lay down on the couch. Robert had bags under his eyes, a downturned mouth, and flushed cheeks. Robert sank into the couch. He folded his hands together, rested them on his chest, and stared up towards the light that hung over him as if it were the light to heaven. Laramie thought the kid looked ready for the grave.

“Uncle Larmy,” Robert said. “I feel gross.”

Uncle Larmy was Robert's best attempt at saying Laramie at age two, which was endearing, but Robert was a fifth-grader now and Laramie couldn't shake the feeling that the name placed him in a cutesy category, one that Jermaine was happy to keep him in. A small act of justice for missing china.

“You've got to start calling me Laramie, buddy,” he said. He went into the kitchen and grabbed a wastebasket. He placed it to the side of Robert and pulled up a chair. “Want some water?”

Robert shook his head. “Where's Grandma?”

“Fallen asleep, I'm sure,” he said, “Put her in front of a television and the lights go out like that.” Laramie snapped his fingers and made himself chuckle.

Robert was unfazed.

“You need something in your stomach. Want a soda?”

“Yeah,” Robert said. “Ginger ale’s in the fridge.”

Laramie turned on the television, switched it to cartoons, and went to the kitchen. He pulled out a ginger ale from the refrigerator. He noticed the cabinets’ glass doors, the set of fine china Jermaine displayed as prominently as a sports car. The set was abhorrent in its expense, floral and gilded. Jermaine gravitated towards expensive objects. Laramie figured Jermaine got married so he could wear a polished fourteen karat wedding band rather than for love. Laramie remembered the ginger ale when Robert called out to him.

He went back into the living room, popped the top on the can, and set it in front of Robert on the coffee table. “Drink up,” he said, “it’ll help calm your stomach.”

Robert sat up and took a sip of his soda. “Uncle Laramie, could we not watch cartoons? Grandma and I’ve been watching her soap operas.”

“How many soap operas?”

“A few days’ worth.”

“A few days— how long have your parents been gone?”

“A few days.” He began to twiddle his thumbs.

Laramie flipped the station to one of the local channels that his mother would watch. The picture quality on the screen took a dive and all the actors looked like they had a hard time saying their lines.

“That’s it,” Robert said. Robert’s eyes glazed over and seemed to transform into his Grandmother’s. Some people had bookshelves brimming with novels, while Laramie’s mother had recordings of soap opera on VHS tapes packed in cardboard boxes.

Laramie heard the front door unlock and turned around to see his mother shuffle in.

“Good deal,” she said, looking at the television. “Got here on time.”

“Hey Grandma,” Robert said, gripping the back of the couch.

“Hey, honey, how you feeling?”

“Your ears must’ve been burning,” Laramie said. “Turn the TV on and poof, you appear.”

She gave Laramie a smoldering look behind her wide lenses. Her hair was flat on one side and poufy on the other, confirming Laramie’s suspicions that she’d fallen asleep. She was wearing sweatpants and had her shirt tucked in. A style Laramie found ridiculous. He tried not to smile when he saw her.

“Uncle Laramie, don’t talk to Grandma like that,” Robert said.

“It’s okay, honey, Uncle Laramie’s got to go back to work.”

“I’ve got the rest of the day off for taking care of Robert. The way I see it, I’m picking up your slack.”

“Slack? Son, slack is beyond me. I’ve got a good hold on Robert. You go home.”

“But I want Uncle Larmy to stay,” Robert said. “I haven’t gotten to see him in a while.”

Laramie thought he could make out intention in Robert’s voice. The way Jermaine talks when he wants to be slick.

Laramie’s mother rolled her eyes. “Uncle *Larmy*,” she said, “won’t know what’s going on. He’s not watched this in years. The plot’s going to be *way* over his head.”

“I’ll stay for this episode and then I’ll skedaddle,” he said.

Laramie's mother shot a quick scowl his way. She sat on the couch beside Robert. The soap opera started in an over-furnished office, dimly lit, with the couple on screen in formal attire. They were arguing about a potential love affair.

“I can tell you right now, their marriage is failing, that’s obvious,” Laramie said.

A small popping sound came from Robert's soda can. Laramie saw Robert's fingers digging into the metal. On-screen, another man barged into the office. He was well dressed, but his tie was crooked, part of his collar flipped up, and his suit coat on the right shoulder was torn. The man's long hair was distinctly ragged, but he still managed to look better than Laramie could on his best days. The man held a pie.

“Okay,” Laramie said, “I’ll bite. Who’s that and what’s with that pie?”

“That's the wife's lover,” Robert said. “They've been plotting to murder her husband because he makes her unhappy, but he's got money and that's all she wants, besides her new squeeze. The wife's lover doesn't feel the same way. That pie is poisoned for the husband. The lover's got a backup pie for the wife. Like, a celebration pie for when she gets all her husband's money. She might have to fight her husband's children for it before she sees a dime.”

Laramie glared at his mother who shrugged like she hadn’t infected Robert with her habit. “Murderous pastry sounds as cliché as poisoned apples. A show like this needs a little peace.” Laramie’s peace was in terms of Ms. Apperson’s sunflower dress neatly hung on the knob of his door. The butterfly pin let alone. She’d be barefoot and naked, almost gliding about a home he could be proud of where the roof didn’t leak, and the floorboards didn’t flex. He’d be reading a book in a sunroom and the book would be smart, like *War and Peace*. Ms. Apperson would fall into his lap, interrupt his reading, and ask him what the book was about. He'd find something substantial to say to her then. They'd carry on talking in pleasant unwavering company.

Robert crinkled the can and began making a rhythmic tinny pop to a beat that Laramie couldn’t follow. “Is that why you haven’t been around?”

Laramie and his mother exchanged nervous glances. “No, buddy,” Laramie said.

“There was a lot of arguing last time you were over,” Robert said and laid back down on the couch. “You and dad got loud. Grandma cried. Dad yelled at me to go to my room, but I wouldn’t, so Dad picked me up and put me there.” Jermaine had scooped Robert up like baggage. “What were you arguing about?”

“Nothing honey,” Laramie’s mother said. “People have their spats.”

Laramie nodded in agreement.

Robert crossed his arms and rubbed them as if the temperature had dropped significantly. “I’m cold,” he said. “I want a blanket.”

Laramie’s mother touched the back of her hand to his forehead. “You’re sweaty and burning up,” she said. “Whatever do you need a blanket for?”

“Because I’m cold. Do I need a better reason?”

Laramie's mother pulled back as if she'd been stung. Laramie let loose a faint chuckle and tried to cover it with a heavy cough, but his mother caught on and threw him a death glare. “I’ll get it for you,” Laramie said, rising from the chair.

“No, I’ll help,” Robert said, shooting up from the couch. “It’s a certain one. In my closet. My closet’s a mess. You might not find it without me.”

Laramie went down the hall with Robert to the bedroom. Robert flipped the lights on revealing a sparsely furnished room. Robert darted to the closet. There was a bed, a dresser, and a bookshelf with a small tin slot machine on top. Laramie took it up in his hand, shook it, listened to the change jingle against the tin belly, and pulled the flimsy lever on the side. The bottom of the machine popped open with about five dollars in change. It struck Laramie that Jermaine’s Fortune was an accumulation of allowances, a child’s pity fund to burn a hole in

Laramie's pride. He set the slot machine down hard and began helping Robert dig through a pile of old toys. They unearthed a blue fleece blanket. Laramie picked it up and noticed a weight and firmness uncharacteristic of blankets. Laramie knocked on the blanket and heard the muffled clanging of porcelain. He unfolded it to find the three missing pieces of fine china.

Robert's eyes met the floor. "I was going to sell them. To help Mom and Dad out."

"With what?" Laramie asked, and held his breath.

"Money. They argue about it a lot."

"Who'd buy them? Kids at school? Ms. Apperson?" Laramie imagined Ms. Apperson meeting Robert in a trench coat wearing sunglasses and scoping out the area for cops. Robert let out a deep sigh that originated from his bowels.

"Laramie, do I need to come back there," his mother called.

"Stay put, Mom," Laramie said. He rushed to Robert's bedroom window and flung it open. Laramie couldn't get Robert to the nearest bathroom. He grabbed Robert by the arm, pulled him along, and put his head out the window. Robert threw up into the bushes outside the windowsill. Laramie pulled Robert back in and had him sit on the bed. "Feel better?"

Robert shook his head. "All this is over plates, isn't it Uncle Larmy?"

Laramie felt the purposeful tug on his heartstrings with the use of his nickname. "No, buddy, that's on me. Your Grandma used to steal; she was a real stinker pot." Robert looked at him like he spoke another language. "My Grandma used to call nasty people stinker pot. Mischievous people. Anyhow, I told your Dad that your Grandma stole them. I was wrong."

"I've been a stinker pot."

"Me too," Laramie said and looked at the plates.

"Uncle Laramie," Robert said, "don't tell Grandma. We can hide them again."

He knelt beside Robert thinking that was the way to talk to children when they'd done wrong. "I'll put them back where they belong," he said, peering out the window. "Go out with the blanket and watch that asinine show with your Grandma." Laramie picked up the plates and went out of Robert's bedroom window. Laramie felt a burden pass between them. A mistake added to the station of a family pariah. A distinction he wore like armor.

Laramie stepped around the puke and went to a side door off the kitchen. He slid the spare key in and opened the door careful not to alert his mother. From the kitchen, he could see Robert drape the blanket over himself and cuddle up next to his Grandma. Taking this as a distraction, he opened the cabinet containing the fine china and put all three plates back onto their display pieces. Everything in its place. Jermaine's existence was like a display and Laramie wanted to knock it all down. In the living room, he saw how easy it would be to return to the family and watch his mother's soap opera play out, like normal, until the plates were found in the cabinet. Accusations would fly, and all fingers would point Laramie's direction.

Laramie shut the cabinet, so his mother could hear.

He felt her eyes looking passed him. Laramie got out of the way and his mother came over, opened the cabinet, pointed, and began opening and closing her mouth like a fish. "How?"

"How else?"

"You," she said, now pointing an accusing finger in his direction. "What's the point of making a steal if you're going to bring it back?" She flung her arms out in a show of disgust. "Accuse me, to what, spite me? Son, son, son, I'd slap you if weren't my son. I'd slap you." She clapped, producing a spectacular sound that should've cracked the glass on the cabinets. "That hard." She shook off the impact as if to shake off hurt. She balled up fists at her side.

Laramie spied Robert in the living room, rolled over and looking directly at him. Robert's face was caught somewhere between relief and terror. Laramie tried to motion that it was all right. Tried to let him know, that he was already too far gone to care for what his mother or Jermaine thought of him.

“You invested all that time and money into Jermaine,” Laramie said. “Now, that's left me to take after you.”

She leaned against the counter. “Pinning bad behavior on me,” she said, shaking her head. “Jermaine's lost his job, Bates doesn't need more houses, and opportunity hasn't popped up in another town. His marriage is going belly-up from stress. Their marriage counselor told them to get out of town to reconnect. Who knows where they found the money to do that? You've been jealous of Jermaine ever since he got college and a good job.”

“Clean the bile, poop, and garbage of a school for years and you'll get it. It doesn't pay to be in my position. It's barely enough to live on.”

“I had to clean up your messes for years before you could clean your own. Your brother's in a spat and you can't seem to pull that head out of your ass long enough to see that not everything is about you.”

“No, no, you like this,” he said, “the drama. You're big on soap operas. Probably why you're indoctrinating poor Robert. Trying to pull him down to your level.”

“Son, we're bad,” she said, “but television is worse. I store it up like memories, so I can look back, and say, things could be worse. We could be worse.”

All Laramie could say was, “We are the worst.”

A week passed, Laramie was invited to the faculty lounge for a buffet put on by the Home and School Association, which meant stale taco shells with overcooked beef. The conciliation was another opportunity to see Ms. Apperson. Their exchanges of hellos and short genial conversations had increased, but Laramie still didn't have substantial talking points outside of work conversation. He entered the faculty lounge. Ms. Apperson was sitting alone. Her hair was pulled up into an elaborate bun and her dress had a woven wavy pattern to look like the ocean. She was holding a paper and all her attention seemed to rest on the page.

"Afternoon," he said, sitting next to her. "Interesting read?"

Ms. Apperson looked up at Laramie without enthusiasm. Laramie made out a cross between confusion or disgust in her face. "I'm glad you're here," she said. Laramie's heart jumped. That was the first time she'd expressed a semblance of need for his company. She lowered the paper and held it out to him. "Read this please."

Laramie took it and noticed that Robert's name was on the paper. "What's this?"

"I asked the class to write an essay on someone they admire," she said. "Robert's is about you."

"That's flattering."

She nodded in silence then said, "It is until it isn't."

Laramie began to read through the essay. Robert had written out the fiasco over the set of fine china but failed to mention he'd stolen the plates and hidden them away. How he missed his Uncle and wished the family didn't fight. Then, the handwriting shifted on the page, becoming more erratic and replaced Robert's language. The essay began to refer to Laramie as garbage, then as worse than garbage. That he was a disgrace and that selfishness pumped harder through

his veins than blood, that “good ‘ole Larmy” had to be himself and wreck the family. Larmy was printed in large exaggerated letters. Laramie knew Jermaine wrote the rest of the essay.

He looked up at Ms. Apperson who was actively trying not to make eye contact. “I’m not going to dock Robert’s grade for this. He’ll get a redo.”

“My brother’s on a constant campaign to grind me down, but that’s my mother’s fault,” he said. “The moment she picked a favorite is when she separated us. Now that I look a little closer, some of this is my mother’s handwriting. Don’t put too much stock into what he’s written there.”

“Have you tried resolving the situation?” she asked and took the essay back. She put it away in a satchel as if to catalog the incident.

“I haven’t,” he said. “You think that I should, don’t you?”

“Someone has to. This is detrimental to Robert.” She folded her hands in her lap and leaned in close as though she were lecturing a student. “I’m saying, maybe consider Robert and how this is affecting him.”

“I have. The essay doesn’t say it, but Robert was the thief. Imagine the flake that kid would get if his dad found out.”

She looked at a clock on the wall and grabbed her satchel. “I’ve got to get back to the class. In circumstances like this, someone’s got to break down. I think that person can be you. Think about what I said.” Ms. Apperson walked away.

Laramie stared at the space Ms. Apperson had occupied, dumbfounded. He thought Jermaine and his mother would be angry but didn’t think it would manifest in his nephew’s schoolwork. Laramie envisioned Robert in his bedroom desk, shoved aside by his father, while Jermaine added word after word of vendetta to the essay. Before long, Jermaine would come for

that money in the tin slot machine. Laramie's hands closed around an invisible mason jar, Jermaine's Fortune. Laramie wanted to force each cent of it into that slot machine, he would give up everything for the price of peace.

A Trail for Horses

Drew worked on AC units and those days were miserable. There wasn't a moment that he didn't regret going to trade school for AC repair and replacement. The air wouldn't go below seventy, the elderly woman said. Her voice was blessed with the rasp of an avid smoker. She called out to him from the bottom of the fold-out staircase, while he waded through the heat of her attic picking apart her unit. He was already certain that this job wasn't worth his time. This client had called about the same problem three times now, but Drew couldn't tell her what to do with her money and his boss couldn't say no to cash, which left Drew to soak in his fluids. He opened the face of the furnace and discovered that the filter was caked in grey particle and black mold. He checked his phone to distract himself from the unfulfilling prospect of explaining to the elderly woman that she had more than AC troubles.

Allison texted: *Hi.*

Drew texted: *Oh, hey. I wasn't expecting to hear from you.*

Drew and Allison had been sleeping together since meeting at a party a few weeks ago. She didn't normally reach out to him before nine in the evening. He was starting to catch feelings though, so he was hesitant when she texted him back.

Allison: *Want to hang out?*

Drew: *In what capacity are we talking?*

Allison: *Actually hang out. I'm off work. Are you at work? If so, want to take a break?*

He answered yes without thinking about the elderly woman's house and opted to take an early lunch break. He hopped into his work van when she gave him the name of a park that he'd been familiar with as a child.

Allison was waiting at the head of the trail. Drew didn't know how to respond to a hang out, so he gave her an awkward hug. The two went down the trail and Drew soon found himself drawn to a childhood play space. He pointed it out to Allison, who withdrew slightly. Drew told her that it was a secret trail, not on public land, which didn't come across as reassuring.

"You stayed the night plenty of times," he said. "Nothing weird has happened so far."

"You mean like taking me to a forbidden part of the woods?" she asked.

"I have a way to remedy this."

They went back to his van and he opened it up his stash of tools.

"Take your pick of any sharp object you see."

Allison took out the sharpened putty knife and jabbed it in his direction.

"You feel good about yourself?"

"It's like a maintenance dagger."

"Sure. What you said."

Drew and Allison wandered off the trail towards a hollowed-out stump. It was across the creek. A downed tree allowed for crossing the water, and on coming to the stump, Drew veered east catching a brisk pace with the wind at his back. There was a worn dirt trail through an amalgamation of tall weeds. They stepped around downed branches and poison oak. A barbed-wire fence was ahead. Allison shrugged, content to occupy herself with avoiding the forest debris for now. A place steeped in personal legend, held in the arms of a towering beech grove, under which beams of light fell between the leaves. Drew felt the scar on his leg through his work pants and tugged the barbed wire that had created the scar. The wire was rusted and broke easily. This reassured the voice at the back of his head telling him to turn around. He pulled at more of the rusted wire, creating a hole large enough for him to crouch through.

“Are you a fan of destruction of property,” she said, and her hands rested on her hips. The putty knife handle was looped into her belt like a gun holster.

“We don’t need to get cut up by rusty wire. That’s the best way to get tetanus.”

She leaned her head over the fence and looked from side to side. “I was sure you’d lead me to a secret waterfall. This is another trail.”

“Not just a trail. A trail for horses. This is a horse ranch. What gave you the idea of a waterfall?”

“Videogames,” she said, biting her lip. “I half expected something mystical.”

“Waterfalls are mystical?”

“Mystical isn’t the right word,” she said, vaulting over the fence. “They’re treasure troves. Forgotten spoils that become yours. Is that helpful?”

Drew was at a loss. He crouched through the hole that he’d made. When he passed through, his instinct was to grab hold of his leg and find missing skin. Drew didn’t talk about the scar he suffered from the incident. It was this ugly jagged mass that marked a path of destruction about his leg. When they had sex he turned the lights out before getting naked. Midsummer heat was the worst. He sweltered, a boiling mass, trudging through the day, working his nine to five job with the utmost discomfort. “Weird,” he said.

“Weird?”

Drew told her that his leg poured blood like a waterfall. He called out to his friends for help. They rushed over, all taking turns commenting with one obscenity or another with middle school vocabularies, the kind that relied primarily on shit and fuck for adjectives. His leg was ripped open by an elongated barb from the fence. He remained snagged to the fence by his calve. The metal sunk into his skin, but he didn’t cry. The strongest of the group took hold of his leg to

rip it from the barb. The boy tore the leg from the wire. Flesh stripped away with the wire glistening red against the light that broke through the forest canopy. Drew examined the piece of himself hanging there on the fence, glanced at his leg, and back again. A part of him would be left behind to bake in the afternoon sun until the natural cycle of decay broke down the sum of its parts, leaving nothing but the wire.

“That’s gross,” Allison said. “How have I not seen the scar?”

“I kept the lights off.”

“I thought you liked it that way for performance reason.”

“No,” he said. “I’m ashamed of my body.”

“Your scar sounds wicked.”

He ran the tips of his fingers against the length of the scar, feeling the line carved out by the barbed wire and shuddered. “No,” he said.

“Why?”

“I’ll show you further down the trail. It’ll make more sense in the scene where it happened.”

“Will it be a secret waterfall?”

“There’s water at least.”

The week earlier, Drew scrambled to get pants on, hide his ugly leg, and make breakfast. Didn’t matter whose apartment they were at. His role was cook and it suited him fine. He had a myriad of cookbooks stocked on a bookshelf in his apartment from Greek to Japanese, he loved it all. Though inexperienced, the man could do wonders with breakfast foods and pastries. He went Greek this morning by making a Bougatsa, a flaky pastry made of airy phyllo and filled

with cream. He pan-fried bacon in case Allison wasn't a pastry person. When she emerged from the bedroom, there was a full spread on the dining table.

"Wow," She said. "This isn't some sort of weird form of thanks is it?"

By this time Drew had caught feelings, and it made him smile to see her in pajamas with her long hair messy from sleep. "Good to have a real meal with someone," Drew said. "Work keeps me busy, so I don't see my friends much. You're the only person I've seen regularly in months."

"Same to you," she said and pushed down on the crust of the Bougatsa. "This reminds me of strudel. I make it for myself with a cream cheese frosting. Is this cream cheese?" The cream was oozing out the side as she plunged her finger deeper into the pastry. Drew shook his head and Allison joked with a frown. She took a bite and smiled wide.

"I've succeeded, then?"

"Yes, this is wonderful. A little grainy in the cream though."

"I have a big sweet-tooth."

"Where'd you learn to cook this well," she said and shoveled bacon in her mouth.

Drew looked her over from the stovetop, noting her black and gray Star Wars shirt and the bright yellow of her pajama bottoms. Her almond hair was draped over her shoulders. He couldn't look at her without a slight smile. "I watch too many food shows," Drew said. "Read too many cookbooks." He pointed at the bookcase and spoke of the online chefs he'd ritualistically watch, videos about food prep, and recipes when getting creative with sandwiches got stale. Allison watched them all while she scarfed down her Bougatsa.

"Food's basically the only thing that I splurge on," he said. "I'm terribly frugal otherwise."

She turned this over in her head and said, “I swear I’d eat this way all the time if I could. I’d probably have a heart attack. You’d have to cart me off to the hospital. Do they make vaccines for sugar highs?”

He laughed. “I doubt it. Do you cook? You mentioned strudel, very German of you.”

“*Kiene Deutsche Essen*,” she said.

“What?”

“I don’t cook German food. I’ve got a weird schedule too. I normally don’t have time to cook, so the microwave’s my best friend. He’s easy to deal with. He’s got buttons and you push them. Minimal effort.”

“Glad you can pencil me in.”

She returned a small smirk.

“What keeps you busy?”

“Oh, well,” she said, biting her lip. Her eyes began roaming the length of Drew’s cramped dining room. “School,” popped out of her mouth, “school keeps me busy.”

“What do you study?”

Allison curled up in her chair bring her knees to her chest. “I don’t have a major. I’ve been learning German and online marketing mostly.”

“Neat,” he replied. “If you ever wanted a good meal sometime, I could make dinner. My skills and time aren’t limited to quality bacon frying and breakfast pastries.” The words ran out of him like water and spilled all over the floor. Hadn’t meant to ask for more than sex, but there it was, out in the open. His feet sweated and he could feel his lungs caving in as he exhaled hard.

Her eyes shied away to the corners of the room as if to search for an escape. “I work pretty late,” she said.

Drew stared into his plate; he hadn't touched his food. "Doing?"

"Work."

"As a?"

"You'll laugh. You don't want to know."

"I repair and replace AC units as a living if that helps. My time is spent in other people's homes fixing machines that aren't broken. The working conditions are egregious, and I don't get paid well."

Her eyebrows shot up and her mouth flatlined. Allison turned a shade of crimson and said, "I review video games for an online magazine. I work on it at night for cash." Her elbows dug into the table with a thud, burying her face in her hands.

"That's a pretty cool venture."

"Do you play?"

"Not in the slightest. I have fat fingers and typing on the keyboard can be hard. You can try to prove me wrong, at dinner, maybe?"

"I don't know," she said and stabbed at the cream that was left on her plate.

"We don't have to."

"It's not that I don't want to, it's that we're at a certain distance with this booty call situation and I'm not sure if crossing into being emotionally intimate is a good idea." She got up from the table and went back to the bedroom where she changed out of her pajamas and into plain clothes. "I'm going to head out, but thanks for breakfast." She grabbed her bag and was out the front door.

Drew sat down at the dining table with his own plate of Bougatsa. He wolfed it down and the bite was bittersweet because there wasn't anyone to share his time with.

Drew and Allison walked under the canopy of the woods towards the place Drew had promised was like a waterfall. Drew could see the younger version of himself moving up and down the trail with the group of boys. Whenever he saw himself, it was before the scarring. He seemed played hide-and-seek in the trees. That was when Drew heard the clopping noise growing louder in his ear.

Allison perked up. “Who’s that?”

“Shit,” Drew said. “Hide.”

The two hid on opposite sides of the trail. Drew ducked behind a tree and saw his younger self, shaking, with his ears covered as he hid. Drew could see Allison gripping the sharpened putty knife. He motioned for Allison to take cover. They were trespassing. Drew put his back flush against the tree. His younger self was gone, probably to a better hiding spot. The horse sounds faded in a few seconds time.

“Are you alright?” he heard Allison say. She ran over to him. She patted his back as to reassure a child. “You’re all dirty back here. Did you have to pick the mossiest tree?”

Her long face greeted him with a short smile and large blue eyes. They were like pools fed by glacial water, trapped for a lifetime. Drew covered his eyes.

“Headache?”

“Yeah, headache.”

“We can turn around.”

“No,” he said. “We’re already here.”

She nodded and returned to the trail.

“I used to come here,” he said, coming to her side. “Some of us kids. We’d run around like we own the place. I guess I’m a frequent trespasser.”

“We’re not hurting anybody by being here,” she said. “I’m sure it’s fine.”

Allison looked back from where the horse sounds had traveled. The wind fluttered through the trees and she stared up. Drew looked up expecting to find the wind, but a multitude of children lunged through the treetops. Allison made no mention of the children, she didn’t seem to see them. They’d looked familiar. He’d gone to school with these boys. What were their names? They moved from limb to limb like animals. He’d called them friends once. He squinted his eyes to try to get a better view, to recall them with the utmost clarity. Silhouettes of children popped in and out of shrubs. They covered their mouths and pointed towards his leg. Allison was oblivious. She moved forward with a lively step. Her gaze shot off into the distance. Drew could tell she wasn’t here, not really. She was looking for a waterfall when all she needed to do was look in his direction. Drew was overcome by a noxious odor.

“There’s a stank,” he said and sniffed at the dusty air. “You smell it, right?”

Allison closed her eyes and conducted a quick scan with two loud sniffs. “There’s a faint stink, like someone’s shit stewing in water. There’s horse poop down the trail.”

“No, this is stank.”

“Huh?”

“That’s no stink,” he said, beaming a smile. “That’s a stank. Mud, decaying plants, and animal excrement all in one. That’s a stank. I’d know it anywhere! We’re close.”

Drew’s pace picked up considerably, almost running to the destination. He didn’t stop to gauge Allison’s interest in running off to another vaguely defined area, didn’t stop to question why she might be tagging along. Following the smell, Drew came to the crossroads where a

winding creek spilled over into a pond. The beech grove strayed from here, sectioning off the area for the bald cypress trees with their bulbous bottoms rising out of the water, close enough that one could leap from one to the other with ease. The sun poured in heat enough that the scar began to react and soon he struggled not to scratch.

“Is this enough of a waterfall for you?” he asked.

“Well, there's water,” she said, pinching her nose. This made a sound like she was speaking through PVC pipe.

“You don't like it.”

“Everything smells so bad.”

“Good old stank,” he said, hopping onto a cypress. He was getting fidgety. Allison stayed on solid ground a few feet away, while Drew went around and around on the bulb of the tree talking. He said that the first time he was on the trail, he and the other children had found this small swamp with its bulbous trees. They hopped from the bulbs without much care for the way Drew's leg bled or the way he told them about how the trees were spinning when he moved too quickly. His leg was bled profusely. *I swear*, he, said, *I almost died*. A man wearing a cowboy hat rode in on a horse and found Drew half delirious from blood loss, the wound scummy with bits of plant matter floating in the water. The man scooped Drew out of the water like a fish. When he got to this point in the story, Drew's scar roared to life. Children all around him pointed to his leg. He leaned against the tree, reached down and began to scratch furiously in a futile attempt to rub away the mark.

“That's the scarred leg?” Allison asked.

“Yes.”

“Can I see it?”

“No.”

“Why not? It can’t be that bad.”

“It *feels* bad.”

Drew pulled away when she reached for him. This was the first time he’d denied himself her touch and he felt a pang in his chest at the realization. “Doesn’t normally do this,” he said without thinking. “It itches in a festering kind of way, like it’s infected.”

“I’m sure it’s not,” she said, patiently. “Have you showed it to anyone before?”

“Not since initial accident.” He reluctantly rolled up the pantleg, revealing the reddened irritated skin around the scar. He scratched harder because he knew it to be an ugly thing and maybe he could rub it away. Maybe, he could remove the part of himself that no one should see?

“Wow,” she said.

“It looks ragged. I’m sorry. I’ll put it back.”

“Why does it look like a Cypress tree?”

“It doesn’t. It looks like a long wart. Or syphilis. A syphilitic wart! You need to get your eyes checked.”

Allison grabbed the pant leg before he could get it back over his exposed skin. “That’s a cypress. Same as the bog. How’d it get like that?”

“Something in the water?”

“It’s pretty.” She traced the lines of the scar she saw with her index finger. He watched as she moved in and out of the scar tissue, following a path he could not see. “Is this why you turn the lights out?”

“That’s not where it is,” he said.

“Then what am I touching?”

“It’s skin, can’t you tell?”

“I can’t. I don’t know what you must be ashamed of. This isn’t the least bit concerning.”

“I’m silly then?”

“No, I’ve got a similar thing I hide,” she said. “I don’t like to let people know I am playing video games for a living. They think I’m childish or not really working.”

“Why’d you tell me?”

“You’re nicer than the other people. When I talk to you it feels like you *want* to listen, even if it’s silly.”

“Same to you.”

The two peered into each other’s eyes. Waterfalls were supposed to have treasure behind them, and wasn’t Allison a waterfall behind her eyes? Weren’t they a waterfall to one another? Drew thought about all this while she continued to draw the outline of what she saw on his skin. The way she traced the piece of him that he’d thought so ugly made him look at the scar differently. Maybe it was as a Cypress? He looked around and saw the children watching from behind the trees. They grew tall, with their elongated masculine features. They pointed at Drew. Drew pushed his pant leg over his scar and the men stopped pointing.

“What’s the matter?” Allison asked.

Drew looked in the water and saw himself, young. There was a change in the wind. The tree rustled and the men disappeared. The beating of hooves steadily approached. Young Drew curled up into himself. Allison pulled the sharpened putty knife from her pocket at the sound of the rider. Drew whispered as the rider came to what sounded like the edge of the water. Probably the same rider from years ago. *Probably the same rider who smacked me around*, he said. Drew had complained about the pain his leg caused him towards the children, but the children scoffed

at him, making a mockery of his hurt for their fun. The dizzy sensation doubled when Drew had been pulled out of the water by the rider and was hoisted onto the horse. This was after the rider scolded him and the lot of the children for playing on his private land. On the horse, Drew felt he could cry in the presence of an adult, who he believed would understand a child's pain. The rider whipped Drew across the cheek with the back of his hand, a struck him a few more times afterwards. Drew lied at the hospital, when they asked about the other injuries, that he'd fallen off the horse.

Allison stood there listening more intently to Drew. Her whole body seemed to inch forward in increments when the hooves halted, and the sound of spurs took over. The voice of the rider called out, beckoning those who might be present to come forward. Allison put a finger over her mouth to say, quiet. She looked around the tree and said. "He doesn't see us yet."

"How's that?"

"He's prowling. It's in his eyes."

Drew glanced at the rider. He was older and feebler than in his memory, where he loomed on his horse like a cowboy. It was hard to image this same man striking him. one that had rescued him from bleeding out. He thought this might've been a different man, but it was the eyes that gave away the cowboy's identity. The searing look of the rider's contempt was enough proof to know that this was the same man. Drew's heart stopped and he leaned against the cypress.

Allison glanced at him with a concerned look. Her attention was divided between Drew and the rider. Drew tapped her shoulder and she spun around. "That's the same rider," Drew said. "That's the man who beat me. He's why I don't look at the scar the same way you do."

“I’m sorry he did that to you,” she said and gripped his hand tighter than she’d ever held him during sex. “I’m about to do worse to him.”

“You can’t take him.”

“He’s not armed.”

“He’s not worth it either. That man’s all bones and attitude and I’m done with him. I’m not done with what he did to me.”

Drew tapped his scar. The men were back and pointing as the cowboy waded into the water. Drew revealed his scar and tried to perceive it with the same affection as Allison did. The men shuddered. Drew traced the outline of his scar and shut his eyes. A cypress tree began to form in his head and his finger followed suit until image and reality were the same. Drew opened his eyes and saw the cypress tree on his leg. The rider galloped down the trail. Drew and Allison cautiously waded through the water to the dirt trail, stopped, and listened to the sounds of the wood. Allison holstered the putty knife to her beltloop.

“This was probably a lot more than you bargained for by coming with me,” Drew said.

“He hurt you pretty badly, didn’t he?” she asked.

Drew looked at his scar and his eyes followed the lines of the branches sprawling from the bulb. “It helps that someone else can look at what happened and reshape things.”

“I’m glad I can do that for you.” She grabbed his hand and the two sat shoulder to shoulder in the stank. “Would you like to go out again or we could do dinner at your place?”

“I would like that.” “None of this was off putting?”

“I think I’ve been looking for a waterfall for a while,” she said. “You might be that waterfall.”

They walked back together, the sound of their wet footsteps on the trail plunked like the sound of hooves. Drew sensed what had been within him, it wandered the property as men, and drenched the air like stank; a strip of himself he'd left on the barbed wire. Drew was of this land, the men who pointed knew he did not belong, though they grew from the same place as the cypress trees, out of the rot and rank of stagnant waters. The scar on Drew's leg hardened, becoming as resilient and beautiful as the cypress trees.

The Children are on Fire

A customer fell ten stories from his apartment, naked, after learning his air conditioner repairs would cost thousands of dollars that he couldn't muster. Falling was the better option than burning. His AC Unit hissed and sputtered followed by a sickening clunk. Sloane was his technician. She told him that he'd burn if he couldn't find working AC. People weren't into sharing AC. He'd need money for entering any establishment with working AC and people guarded their AC. Desperate people were prone to stealing parts from others. She said that she was sorry. She said this to tens of other customers, all of them burned. They reached a temperature of 105 degrees Fahrenheit and caught fire. That was burning. No human who burned could be extinguished. She left each customer carrying the weight of a kill. By not fixing their AC, Sloane felt complacent in their burning. It was the same with this customer as the watch on his wrist counted down his Time-to-Burn. Sloane left her customer cradling his head in his hands. She went to her Company-issued boat on the boardwalk and the customer's body landed at her feet. His blood splattered on her blue technician's jumpsuit and up into the inner rim of her nose. The blood gathered on her upper lip, and she allowed it to linger as an act of contrition. She stared at the wristwatch on the corpse. It calculated the Time-to-Burn with an infinity sign. She understood this as the amount of time it would take for Sloane to forgive herself.

Sloane's apartment AC chugged and pattered out. She opened the closet where the AC was located. She knew which part had failed by the sound. It would take thousands of dollars she didn't have. The watch on her wrist beeped. Her Time-to-Burn had begun. It would be four hours till she burned, the standard amount of time for an adult. Her temperature read 98.7. She didn't panic. She called her boyfriend, Cyrus, to give him the news and to ask if she could crash at his

place for a while. Her voice trembled over the phone, “My AC’s busted. This is what I get for killing so many customers. I lost another one this morning. He fell to his death right in front of me.”

“I’m sorry you had to deal with that,” Cyrus said. He was whispering. “That’s an AC technician’s specialty, making people die. But it’s not your fault that the Company doesn’t lower the price of repairs or parts.”

“Why are you whispering?”

“The kids are sleeping,” he said. His voice was cracked and distant. “I don’t want to wake them.” Cyrus had two children from a previous marriage before his wife passed away in a boating accident. Sloane wasn’t attached to the children and they were in no hurry to get to know her. Their mother’s passing was still fresh. Sloane wasn’t trying to replace their mother. She hadn’t wanted children of her own, but she wanted Cyrus. Having come from a Company-sponsored orphanage, Sloane had known what it was to be alone and she relished any opportunity to soak up Cyrus’s attention and care.

There was a clicking sound on the phone line Sloane registered as Cyrus’s tongue against the back of his two front teeth like the sound of a metronome keeping time. Cyrus said, *I’m so sorry*. It was the kind of sorry that she used on customers. She whispered the words to herself, but the phrase came out paper-thin, and she wanted to call and report herself for terrible customer service.

“I have something to tell you too,” he said. “My AC’s been out for about an hour. I didn’t want to worry you.” Cyrus kept his problems close to spare Sloane grief. Cyrus was attentive to everyone but himself.

Sloane put the phone down to enter the closet adjacent to the AC Unit referred to as the oven. The oven was a large air-tight closet where a tenant was contractually obligated to burn to avoid property damage. If burning occurred outside the oven, the incurred damage would be paid by the next-of-kin. It was also soundproofed. Sloane swore at her highest volume. Each *fuck* and *god dammit* returned with gulps of sterile air.

She returned to the phone clinching her teeth. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner? Why didn’t you call?”

“I didn’t want to worry you. I already said that.”

“Stop doing that,” she said. “You can’t keep shit like that from me. You understand how that’s shutting me out?”

Cyrus grumbled low, in affirmation. “What’re we going to do about our AC problems?”

“I could fix mine if I had the part,” Sloane said. This apartment, like all apartments, were Company property. A modification or fix to the AC without Company permission was punishable by expulsion. Silent alarms would alert the Company to tampering. Sloane knew how to by-pass them. She looked down at her digital watch and monitored her internal body temperature reading 98.9.

Sloane went back to the AC closet and came up with a plan. Her tools were in the apartment. She’d get parts from the Company’s supply barge. She’d convince the supervisor to fork over the parts on a loan or pay in installments. Cyrus would bring his children over and they could all stay at Sloane’s. She relayed all of this over the phone. “Trust me,” Sloane said. “The first step is that you get here.” Cyrus reluctantly agreed and hung up.

Her temperature rose by another tenth of a degree. She entered the oven and closed its heavy metallic door behind her. She stared at her digital watch. Her temperature remained the

same. There was no way to slow the burning process, but the oven felt like a good place to be insulated. A thought crept into her that she'd been trying to escape from since she'd hung up the phone. That the tether which bound Cyrus to her might snap if she couldn't save his children.

Sloane opened the apartment door. Cyrus had his children draped over his shoulders. Cyrus was a man with broad shoulders. They were limp as he laid them across Sloane's couch.

"Jesus," Sloane said. "What's their temperature? 100.6. Have they passed out? I've never seen them look so dead tired."

"I drugged them," Cyrus said. "I don't want them to wake up if the worst scenario occurs."

"It won't," she said. "I can fix this." She took his hand into hers. Sloane had met Cyrus at the Company supply barge. He was a welder that constructed turbines that used the Mississippi's immense current to produce electricity for the Antarctica Project, an incomplete city with a perpetually working AC Field. Cyrus would be in the water a couple of hours at a time with a thin metallic tether keeping him connected to the surface and away from the spinning turbine blades. That tether kept him alive but not living. Cyrus's children kept him living. He looked helpless as they slept. "They'll be alright."

"I want to believe that," he said. He knelt beside them and felt their foreheads. "Why do children have a shorter Time-to-Burn?" Sloane ran her fingers through his hair trying to soothe him. "The kids dream about being in Antarctica. They share this dream at the same time. In the dream the perpetual AC Field against the burning, it's finished, and they're older. People can walk outside freely again, but I'm not with them in the dream. What'd you make of that?"

"They dream this collectively?"

“Yeah. Same account.”

“Sounds like a miracle,” Sloane said.

“A miracle would be waking from the dream to find the burning has stopped.”

“A miracle will be convincing our supervisor to let me have the part to fix the AC Unit,” Sloan said. “The supervisor really is a one-time deal. We’re replaceable and he knows it. He’s not human. *You and I* are the only fucking *people* left in the city. The supervisor says, kids are better off in a Company sponsored orphanage.”

“They’re full,” Cyrus said. “I checked before you called.”

“I spent half my childhood in one. I wouldn’t want your kids living in one. It’s a lonely life around hundreds of children without parents.”

“Maybe, if two spots opened up, I could convince them to let me stay too?”

“Orphanages don’t take grown men.”

“A man’s just a grown-ass child,” Cyrus said. “Can that count?”

“I’ll ask my supervisor.”

Cyrus looked over his children, their slow breathing. “I know it wouldn’t help slow or stop the countdown, but I want to cover them in ice cubes.”

“Then we need to leave. We need to get the parts.”

The shadows of buildings loomed over Sloane and Cyrus as they sped through the waterways. She remembered the blood from the customer who chose to fall, the smell. The intoxicating aroma of guilt. She felt the wind and smelled smoke. They turned towards the Company docks and there was a marathon going by. The finish line was nearby, where there was an AC Field waiting for contestants. But this was the back of the pack. People started to ignite on

mass. Nearby bar patrons hollered towards television screens hoping to meet their bet on how many people would burn before the end of the race. A fleet of fireboats were there to contain the blaze with large metallic domes that acted the same way putting a lid over a burning saucepan would snuff a fire. The crucial difference was you'd burn until dead. The covering mitigated the damage, which is all the fire department could do. A trail of burning people were snuffed like candlelight. Those who participated in the marathons were adrenaline junkies. No matter how many people burned, the next marathon would have more contestants and more burnings. There was always someone to take your place if you burned, this was Company policy, but it couldn't be in Cyrus's case. If his children burned, Sloane wondered, would he burn too? If she couldn't save Cyrus, what would she do? White smoke rose from charred corpses high over the mist as a column and collapsed on Sloan as the wind carried it her direction. Sloan didn't cough when it over came her. She breathed calmly in death. It surrounded her daily. Cyrus grabbed her hand and held it tightly, his breathing uneasy. This was a small miracle, her relationship, when all others had burned away like her parents.

The Catholic myth for the burning states that it started with a miracle. This wasn't a popular myth because no one wanted to think of this moment as a miracle. According to the myth, the sun bounced about the sky, which people took for a dance. This was the Second Miracle of the Sun. Sloan tried to imagine this dance while she strangled her supervisor for not cooperating. She had her supervisor pinned to the floor and used all her weight to keep him there. The Company would replace him, she told herself everyone was replaceable. Those who could not afford to pay for AC fixes were the same. Company-sponsored housing was the best kind of living, but at a high price. The Company barge was lousy with incoming and outgoing

shipment. With racket of the crew on the main deck, no one could hear the ruckus Sloane caused in the office to get at her supervisor's throat. Cyrus didn't stop her either. He was stunned, but not enough to care about the supervisor. He darted towards the desk and pulled release forms for the parts that Sloane needed. Sloane tried to focus on the sun out the window instead of how her supervisor's neck muscles tightened under her palms. For the first time, she was killing for someone. She stared hard in the sun's direction and wished it would dance for joy at her violence, because this was a selfless act. The supervisor's life was a sacrifice to Cyrus like the ones her parents made to Sloane.

The first recorded Miracle of the Sun was in Fatima, Portugal. Children predicted it as a sign from the Virgin Mary to the people, that all might believe in Jesus Christ and be saved. Many people Burned with the sun's second dance and no one was saved. Sea levels rose and ice caps melted, animals remained unaffected by the Burning, and scientists couldn't be certain whether it was man or miracle that drowned the shores of the world. Sloan understood the Second Miracle like a folktale, imaging the sun in humanoid form breaking into a waltz across the sky, reaching for its dance partner on Earth, a human, to lose it mid-waltz in all of humanity. The sun, in its longing, searched for its partner in people. People who burned were the wrong dance partner. The sun still danced, her parents used to say, pray it doesn't dance with you. Maybe, that's what AC Fields were for? So, the sun wouldn't mistake you for a partner.

The Company was careful to train its technicians enough to where they could repair AC but not understand the mechanics of how the AC Fields worked. The Company's monopoly was final. Not even Sloane's supervisor could comprehend what the AC Field was. He gummied at the air like a catfish. The manufacturing of AC Field's was a closely guarded secret and its patent was kept under lock and key. Not even the supervisor's grubby weak grip on Sloan's neck could

wrench out the secret. Her supervisor's knee struck the small of her back. Sloan lurched forward. Cyrus grabbed a stapler and beat the supervisor over the head until there was a gash on his temple. With the supervisor's consciousness fading, he became easier to strangle. She prayed for his breath to go and it cemented when the supervisor's Adam's Apple caved in.

Sloan and Cyrus lifted her supervisor's body down the metallic staircase. The look in Cyrus's eyes held the same conviction as Sloane's parents when they carried her to the Company sponsored Orphanage. Sloane thought her parents were brave to conceive her during the Burning, before AC Fields were in common use and the Burning ignited people around the globe. Sloan thought of herself as brave too while the supervisor's feet clanged against the steps, when she dropped his legs. The commotion on the deck was too loud for anyone to hear when she lost her grip. She glanced at her watch and saw her Time-to-Burn decrease by two minutes. Her temperature had risen to 101.1. Sloane could feel herself getting warmer and more lethargic and wrestling with the supervisor didn't help. She wiped her brow of sweat. Cyrus asked her if she was alright. His Time-to-Burn was lower, how was he not feeling the same effects? Sloane looked him over and realized that he was drenched in sweat. He squinted in her direction, but she couldn't be sure that he'd seen her clearly. She grabbed his wrist and his temperature was 103. Cyrus was going to pass out if he continued to overexert himself and there wasn't much time left before his children would burn.

Sloan picked up the legs and the pair got to the edge of the barge. They struggled to swing the corpse over the railing and into the Mississippi, until half the body was dangled over the edge. They shoved the rest over and watched his lifeless head bob like a waterway buoy. The current sucked him under. They both fell to the deck, exhausted. They leaned against each other, hot to the touch, but Sloane didn't care if their combined heat made the Time-to-Burn go down

by another few minutes. This was a warmth she'd wanted, the kind she'd wanted to save. Cyrus, delirious, planted a kiss on the outside of her ear, then put his face into her hair. His heavy breathing knocked Sloane out of the moment. She scrambled to her feet, told Cyrus to stay put, and retrieved the papers for the release of AC parts along with papers for a workorder in the supervisor's office. He'd kept a stamp with his signature on it to approve everything, so forgery wouldn't be an issue. Sloan made her way back to the office, finished the paperwork Cyrus started, and stamped it. The distributor looked over the papers, then Sloan, then the papers again. It occurred to her that she looked disheveled from her bout with the supervisor. The distributor did another doubletake and signed the release forms for parts.

Sloan hopped back into her boat and unmoored from the side of the barge. She practically dragged Cyrus to the boat. Too much time was wasted killing her supervisor, but they needed the parts, and they couldn't let him live, or he'd expose Cyrus and Sloane. The children would burn soon.

On the way back to her apartment, a delirious Cyrus asked about how Sloane's parents got along with her in this climate. She hadn't told him before, that she'd canonized them in her heart, that they were sacrifices towards her future. She felt odd about sharing the way she'd admired them. She told him now that he was half listening. Sloane killed her parents, not like the supervisor, and not by complacency like the customer, but by existing. Before her parents Burned, they managed to secure her a spot at a Company sponsored orphanage for her. Her mother carried Sloane over her shoulder.

"I didn't know what was happening at first," Sloane said. "I knew the AC was out, and that was bad, but you couldn't have told me that I was being sent to an orphanage with all the other children. I remember how hot I was against my Mother. Like, I was burning from the

inside out, except worse because I could feel it under my skin. I didn't know that was heatstroke. I didn't know that was a symptom of burning like losing my parents. The money they spent having me, keeping me, could've been used to save them."

"You're blaming yourself," Cyrus said. He was going limp in the passenger's seat with all the cool air vents pointed in his direction. "This feels pretty good, comparatively."

"The cool air?"

"No, having children," he said. "Having someone to live for feels good."

"Do you feel that way about me?"

Cyrus fell quiet with his eyes shut. "I've built a life around my kids. I'm trying to work you into my life as much as I can, but it's hard. My wife is still attached to my children."

"She's dead. You're not lucid.

"I am though. I feel like garbage right now, but I know what's coming out of my mouth. The idea of burning makes it easier to talk. Let me have that, okay?"

Sloane stared hard at him and nodded. "She lives in them, my wife. When I told you about the how my kids share the same dream, she's there. I'm not there. When I look at my children, she's there in their eyes, so is Antarctica in their eyes. I wonder if there's room for me with them. That's selfish. I shouldn't have said that."

"Why didn't you tell me that sooner?" she asked. She realized that she was driving more slowly. The way that she lagged sent a chill through her overheating body. She convinced herself that this was the burning messing with her cognition. She gripped the steering wheel and braced herself against any short bursts of heat induced malaise.

"I didn't want to worry you. It didn't seem fair. That's why I drugged the kids, its fair."

"I think you did that more for yourself than the children."

“Oh?”

“Yeah, my parents never drugged me. I was awake when they left me. I got to say goodbye before they burned.”

“Goodbye’s a hard thing,” he said and slumped towards Sloane. He opened and closed his eyes as though she were hard to look at, like the sun. “Not seeing her off was a good thing. I can see her every day in their eyes without thinking about the loss, without her body in my head. They’re her image and as long as I’m caring for them, I’m caring for her.”

Sloane could feel her blood boil. She thought that the rate of her Time-to-Burn must’ve increased and for a full minute she said nothing and glanced between the waterway and her watch. Nothing was out of the ordinary. She bit her tongue from keeping all her obscenities in.

“Understand?” He asked. “This is how we keep intact. Your parents would’ve wanted you to care for yourself this way. That’s how you keep them alive. That’s how you keep children alive.” Cyrus passed out against her shoulder. Sloane shoved him to his seat and his body leaned towards the water. The urge to throw Cyrus overboard was intoxicating like blood in the nostril. But time was short, and her thoughts moved to the children that Cyrus could no longer take care of. She knew this wouldn’t be like her parents, who she saw in her head as dancing and in flames. She saw herself among the children of the burned and the charred. They inherited the ashes of their parents, but Cyrus’s children still had one parent and he still held them. That, she decided, was worth saving.

The children were still asleep when she dragged Cyrus through the front door. Cyrus was fading in and out consciousness. Sloane checked the wristwatches on the children. Ten minutes

to fix the AC before... She brought the parts with her and rushed to her tool kit. The work order gave her an access code to silence the alarm on her AC. She got to work on replacing the parts, but her vision was blurred, her hands wouldn't operate as she needed. The fire brewing under her skin was enough to make her topple over. There was an audible countdown coming from the children's watches. Their Time-to-Burn was almost up. She looked at the AC, then the oven.

The children slept as she closed the heavy door. Cyrus came to. Sloane watched him look towards the couch, then to her. She sat pressed up against the door, guarding it. He crawled to her, sweat drenched and feral. "I have to—" He pointed toward the oven door. The hyperventilating started, and it sounded like laughing. "Let me by."

"You couldn't get the door open if you wanted to," she said.

"Watch me." He staggered to his feet and crashed to the floor.

Sloane felt the door getting warmer. Above her head was the porthole the apartment manager could peer into to make sure you'd stopped burning. There was an orange flash which steadied into a consistent glow.

"Why couldn't you have called me sooner?" She asked. "This might've been prevented. I could've had more time to fix the problem, you hesitated. Now, the children are on fire."

"You killed them."

"No. You waited and they're dead now."

"They're still sleeping, aren't they?" There was no way to know unless one of them looked through the porthole. Screams couldn't escape the oven. It was insulated from the rest of the world, which wanted you to die quietly, because the worst thing was to watch you burn, to announce your death with fire. Sloane understood this. "Let them dream of Antarctica," Cyrus said. "Don't wake up—don't wake!—" He was out again.

Sloane forced herself to the AC, trying not to think of the children burning nearby. Instead, she worked for the lives that she could still save.

Sloane watched her internal temperature fall from 102.8 to 98.8. The watch's face glowed Time-to-Burn: indefinite. The fire in the porthole had come to a smolder, the last of the oven's oxygen was running out.

"You did it?" Cyrus asked. He laid on his back with his hands resting on his chest, that same way that corpses look in caskets.

"I did." For the first time all day, the thought of her parents burning, and the customer's suicide were far off. The smell of blood in her nose was no longer present. She focused on the life she was given, the one she'd curate for herself. "What're you going to do?"

"I have to *go*." He stood up to leave, but it didn't sound like he meant from the apartment.

"You don't want to see the children before you go?"

"No," he said and rushed to the door. "For all I know, they're in Antarctica with their mother. Sounds like heaven. Might as well be heaven."

Sloane went to the oven and flipped the latch. "You have to see them. You have to see what you've done." She swung the door open wide and a thick wisp white smoke billowed out with the stench of melted flesh and charred bone. She dared not look inside. This wasn't her mistake to behold. "Look at them! This what happens when you wait. This is what happens when you hold it all in for yourself."

Tears streamed from Cyrus's face as he reluctantly peered into the oven. A shaky hand covered his horrified gapping maw. He backed out of the apartment hyperventilating. He

screamed down the hallway. Sloane shut the oven door. Part of her wished he'd go back to work, get in a diving suit, cut the tether, and let the turbine churn him to the size of fish pellets. Sloane rested on the couch and noticed the setting sun's orange hue coming through the window. The burning light of the children brilliant, tragic, and momentary as the sunset. The children lived with her now, burned in the back of her mind with her parents. They too shared a reverence in Sloane, that they'd burned together dreaming of Antarctica, a place where their father couldn't be, a heaven. She'd join them one day, she knew, but she was alive for now and they were alive through her. These were the lives she saved for herself, the face of those gone, of customers burned, and blood in the nose. She smelled the blood and burning, bearing their deaths as a memorial, with a promise to never look away.

On the Victorian Bluff

Since Lyall's divorce six months ago, his mother kept trying to sell him to church women. Lyall thought by not attending mass at St. Rita's Catholic Church that his mother would become disinterested in setting him up with married churchwomen, but it didn't work. Worse, the townspeople were avoiding Lyall in public spaces. He was at the grocery store when he saw people scuttle in the opposite direction of him. The cashier eyed him warily as each item was scanned, not breaking eye contact. He placed the groceries into the truck and saw a man rush his wife away at a quick pace. Lyall sighed heavy and resolved to have a talk with his mother about her escapades. He had to pick her up in ten minutes to attend a prayer service at St. Rita's and her eyes were so bad that she could no longer drive. He drove along the bluff to get to his mother's, passing the collapsed bridge that used to connect to Arkansas. The dock at the bottom of the bluff was filled with empty factories and shipping companies. Litchfield had withdrawn into itself since the bridge's collapse, becoming a knit-picky cesspool of behind-closed-doors degenerates. There was a long row of Victorian homes that sat on the high end of the bluff that were designated as a historic district, The Victorian Bluff. Lyall worked on these homes to make a small living. A painter by trade, he judged the work he'd done as he passed some of the houses on Victorian Bluff. He was critical of his work, because it kept him valuable to a town that actively believed that he was after everyone's wives. Painting was how he kept his mother fed because social security couldn't pay for much. Still, he couldn't function with townsfolk chattering on behind his back.

His mother came out in her white summer dress with the wide-brimmed hat and a tassel tied around her neck. Her curled grey hair was nestled into a bun. She carried a rosary and a

prayer pamphlet, resting both on the dash as she buckled in. A thin crooked smile crawled across her face as she slowly turned to face him.

“Go on,” Lyall said. “Who’d you pick this time?”

“Lyall,” she said, “I’m merely trying to get you involved with people again.”

“People of the opposite sex.”

She nodded.

“Why are you trying to get me hooked up with married people?”

“Their marriages are already falling apart, and my boy is a better man than all the others in this town.”

“That’s flattering, but you’ve got to realize that you’re giving me a reputation. People think that I’m commissioning you to seek out married women. That’s bad for business, Mom.”

“Father Baron tells me that Mrs. Schwartz is married more to the title than her husband,” she said and chuckled. “He recommends counseling. I say to hell with that. End the relationship. Happen upon another man, who happens to be my son. Marriages end all the time. You know that.”

“Yes, I suppose I do,” he said. He started for the church. “Don’t you think I might not be ready to date again? Fresh wounds need time to heal, Mom.”

“When a dog dies, the way you stop that hurting is to get a new dog. I’m not saying that Mrs. Schwartz is a new dog, I’d hate to compare anyone to a dog, but she could function the same.”

“How’re you getting this information?”

“Father Baron tells me about parishioner’s confessions all the time. We’re that close.”

“Isn’t that some kind of illegal?”

“Not if the diocese doesn’t find out.”

“Well, it must make the Pope cry at night.”

“What?”

“Isn’t that how the Pope works.”

“Are you saying the old man in the frock is clairvoyant?”

“I’m saying what you and Father Baron do is unwholesome. Someone will find out.”

They pulled up to St. Rita’s. His mother patted his shoulder and said thanks for driving.

Lyall watched her walk up the steps to make sure she got up okay. She hobbled more than walked recently, but her independence was important, even if that was an act as small as allowing her to struggle up the stairs. Father Baron came out to the top step and waited for her. Lyall waved and Father Baron reciprocated. Father Baron gave a smile to Lyall’s mother that showed off his rosy cheeks. He took her by the hand, and she wrapped her arm around his. The way that they moved as one through the doors of the church, it reminded Lyall of the way he used to walk with his ex-wife in the first years of their marriage. The image was unsettling. Lyall shifted into gear and the truck gave off a loud cluck before they made off down the road. Lyall tried to drive away inconspicuously but stamped the gas. The truck let off a furious screech and a plume of smoke.

He dropped the groceries off at his apartment and tried not to think of the image of his mother with the priest. It was impossible. He’d have to pick his Mom up in an hour, but he couldn’t be certain that there was a prayer service or some other kind of service. Watching tv, reading, or exercising didn’t help. For that hour, he thought of nothing but the prospect that his Mom was sleeping with a priest.

Lyall picked up his Mom at the appointed time. Father Baron helped her down the stairs and both were all smiles. No one else came out of the church. Father Baron helped her into the truck and Lyall sped off. His Mom gave him a curious look.

“What’s that about?” She asked.

“We’re headed home, that’s all. Don’t you want to go home?”

“I do, but you’re acting peculiar.”

“I’m not too keen on Father Baron,” he said. “Man’s a bad influence on you, helping you scheme to apply married women to me. It’s a bad look!”

His mother nodded and said, “I disagree. But he’s good for me, at least. Litchfield will survive my meddling. What I can’t understand is why they take it out on you? You’ve never agreed to any of the dates that I’ve set up.”

Lyall watched through the rearview mirror Father Baron at the church steps, hands clasped behind his flowing vestments in waiting. Requesting to be dropped off at least twenty minutes early before mass, Lyall took their relationship to be jovial. His mother often talked of how Lyall's Father and Father Baron had been best friends through childhood. The two had co-ownership of a skiff for fishing on Saturday mornings. When he was three, his father took the skiff down the river and didn't come back. Authorities said that the current must've carried him downriver, but his mother wanted to know where and how far down? She'd meant the bottom of the river.

The best way to diffuse a tense drive with his mother was to take a stroll at the Victorian Bluff. His Mom enjoyed peeking at her son's work. Lyall pulled over at the bluff’s parking lot and let his Mom out. The Victorian estates boasted sprawling green lawns. From their balconies, owners could gaze from their seclusion to the river and watch the rusted cargo ships go by. A far

cry from the gallant antiquity of the riverboats which painted the water with a cloud of coal-fueled smoke. The street was populated with light poles made to look like they ran on gas. When the magnolia trees bloomed in the spring, visitors from all over the state would come in admiration. Lyall thought that all this was kind of veneration for a time when the South called itself independent.

They walked to the Wilhelm estate, where Lyall had done his most recent work. The Wilhelm estate had paid him a hefty sum to restore the façade of the house and instructed him to paint by hand as if a sprayer could mask rustic charm. Lyall charged extra for the perceived exertion of hand painting the ancient house. The appeal was lost on him. The owners requested a bright flamingo pink that drew upon the vibrant colors of the French Quarter. Lyall and his Mom stood in front of the Wilhelm estate and she commented on how good of a facelift he'd given it. The face of the building reminded him of his mother's. The texture of the wood seemed to sag, its grain crinkle. Though the house looked far off from the street, he could still make out its age behind the cosmetic touch. But for some reason, the place looked forlorn. Maybe it was the distance? The wrought iron fence between him and the house and all the lawn before it. Was there a fence between himself and his Mom? He should've noticed sooner that his Mom was with the priest in more than a plutonic sense. They were always close but looking at the house made him feel that she was the house now. Far off, he could see the age of the home, but its character lay deeper.

“Your father and I used to own one of these,” she said. Her sunken brown eyes outlined by the brass of her glasses trailed off in the direction of the Wilhelm estate. “You were too young to remember, but it was the first house.”

“We owned a mansion?”

“Oh, honey, no,” she said. “Ours was small. It was a Victorian with a lovely porch. Railing had floral patterns and the roof, it was made of porcelain, and there was a wonderful crown molding in the living room. You should’ve seen the fireplace.”

“You’ve never told me about this,” he said.

“What good would it have done to tell you about it before?”

“What good is it telling me now?”

She removed her hat and held the rim between the tips of her fingers in a kind of reverence to the memory. Lyall could tell by the way her mouth flat-lined that she was thinking of his Father.

“I don’t mean that you have to stop,” he said. “If you want to talk, go ahead and talk.”

She put a hand to her chin as though to think. “Town knocked it over to make way for condos. I’d have taken you to see it otherwise.” She looked around the street. A couple, about mid-forties, was walking towards them. As they came closer, the couple seemed to recognize Lyall and his mother. The two bumped shoulders and clasped each other’s hands as they zoomed by. Lyall noticed that everyone walking on the street was actively avoiding them. “I guess we’re not popular.”

“You see what I mean? This is how people have been treating me.”

His Mom shrugged and hobbled down the street. Lyall followed. A gust of river-cooled air washed over them. Lyall’s mother spread her arms wide to receive it. The Mississippi stank to high heaven, its romantic identity masked the reality of its dead-fish smell, which Lyall had associated with his Father. But the smell floated between his Mom and himself. The pair soon found themselves at another Victorian. The left flank of the home had a turret jutting out with a pointed top like a fantasy castle. A flat baby-blue paint had been slathered across its boards.

Lyall was close enough to the home to notice the uneven brush strokes, the streaking. Unlike the fantastic estates, this house sat close to the street and forewent the need to have a gaudy wrought iron fence guarding the perimeter. The porch made a bigger impression as it slouched forth from the house, roof dipping. Pure white railing with a petite fleur de Lis in the center of each baluster.

“Got to say, I’m not a fan,” Lyall said. Where Lyall hadn’t managed to get his hands-on work, he was quick to belittle. He didn’t mean the house, but he couldn’t understand where this resentment was welling up from. His Mom picked up on this and produced a hard sigh.

“That’s a good example,” she said and pointed at the home Lyall was scrutinizing. “Your father was an electrician who worked on the docks, but he did side jobs on the Victorians too. He didn’t feel safe till he’d torn into every wall in our house and ripped all the old wire out implanting the new stuff. Put in a great deal of himself into that house. There was this classy gas stove. Wouldn’t have it. Swore it’d burn down the whole house based on age.”

“Dad sounds paranoid.”

“He was for sure, but honey, he meant well for the time that he was with me.” His mother's grip on the hat tightened. “I worked the canning factory. Machines weren’t plentiful in Litchfield for a long time. This place lags. People liked watching local produce canned fresh before their eyes. It didn’t pay much, but there wasn’t a job that paid well back then. When your father went down the river, I had to sell the Victorian.”

A boy with dirty exposed knees ran across the porch. Knees bent, he lunged forward like he was playing hopscotch by himself. The child landed shoulder first on the floorboards. A tall man came out of the door searching for the source of the noise. The man, most likely the boy's Father, picked the boy up by the arm and brushed his shoulder of the dust. The Father took the

boy by his hands. The boy locked his dirty knees as if he were about to jump clear through the roof. He gave a mighty leap and found himself hovering above the porch, legs dangling in the air. The boy got a wide grin on his face like he was flying. His Father held him aloft and swung the child from side to side. Lyall saw a boy who couldn't know how much a Father effected his motions or the absence of one.

Lyall's Mom turned away from the house and set the hat on her head. There was a quickness about her step, one that slowed when she hit the next property line.

Lyall had often wondered what it would've been like to have both parents. He'd only ever seen one photo of his father. A man sat close to a wheelbarrow overflowing with cow pies tweaking a toothpick through misaligned teeth. The face was flushed with patches of jet-black facial hair that varied in thickness. He was well-built and had overalls on. This was his father. Lyall tried to conjure him up from the picture as flesh but the image would rupture. He couldn't conceive of a Father off the photograph.

Lyall nudged his Mom. "What's got you upset, Mom?" he asked.

She sighed. "I'm still married to your Daddy in my heart."

"Dad's dead."

"I know, but I'm still hung up on him," she said. "You put a lot of time into your first marriage, especially since it wasn't a bad marriage. I've been trying to convince myself that I can't love him anymore."

"Is that why you've been *seeing* Father Baron?"

She nodded. "Your Dad's not coming back."

His mother reached down into her purse and pulled out a pen and paper.

“I want you to call Mrs. Schwartz,” she said and jotted down a few numbers. “You need to move on too.”

“Don’t you write that,” he said. “I don’t care to date right now.”

“Schwartz is a real winner. I guarantee it.”

Lyall looked at the paper, then to his mother.

He walked across the street and down the embankment under the shadow of what remained of the bridge. Three rusting columns rose from the water, the remains of the collapsed bridge. His mother called after him, but he kept his sights on the Arkansas shoreline, and watched the trees bend to the force of the wind that rushed over the landscape. This bridge had been toppled by a meager earthquake in much the same way that his marriage had toppled. It was a fight over having children. His ex-wife didn’t want any, but Lyall did. He held the need to make up for a fatherless childhood, but hearing his Mom’s voice calling after him, he thought that his reason to be a Father did a disservice to her. But it was this earthquake that ruined the relationship with his ex-wife. Yet the trees, the townspeople, and the town remained untouched. Lyall wondered if he’d been left behind in some way, and his mother’s attempts to get him dates was to keep him grounded.

His mother staggered down the embankment to meet him. “What is the matter with you, child?” she said, half out of breath.

“I don’t know,” he said. “You keep trying to pawn me, like some...some deranged wingman. I can’t say that I’m ready to date again. I can’t date married women though. Please stop with them.”

Lyall hadn't felt the need to be close to a woman since he found his ex-wife cheating on him. The fresh scent of divorce lingered worse than the dead-fish smell of the Mississippi. This was the best way that he could rationalize the feeling. A smell.

“At least I make you look good,” she said and sat beside him. “They’re enticed by your charm, well the charm I give you. You come across as a handy gentleman. A good guy, strong and dependable. Schwartz says, ‘Lou-Ann he’s your, son, he can’t be that good’. By this, she’s being a cheeky prude. She smiles, but it’s like how a dog grits its teeth when you’ve slapped its tail. ‘What’s that supposed to mean,’ I say, ‘My soul is the cleanest it’s ever been. I’m the ghost of Christianly goodness floating about the place and from up here’--I reached my hand *way* up for this part—I see you struggling.’”

“Dear god,” Lyall said, blushing. “My mother’s a monster.”

“Schwartz is red in the face by this point too, says, ‘You’ve been on all the married ladies of late. There are single women in town. Call them. Don’t mix me up in your shenanigans.’ She looks at me like I’ve come in a straitjacket. ‘You feel like you’ve got a grasp on my dealings then,’ I say, ‘Got the word floating around town. But let me tell you, those aren’t my words. I’m selling good stock.’ The woman shakes her head, says, ‘No, no, Lou-Ann we’re done’. ‘Done,’ I say, ‘You’ll be missing out on a good a gracious man. A hard worker. Better than your man. I’ve heard how your man’s been stepping out on you. That’s what Litchfield men do, but my boy’s different. Lyall is loyal. He doesn’t look great right now. Give him time and the boy will look handsome again. Needs a good woman to look handsome for.’”

“You think I’m not handsome?”

“Well, you don’t *not* look like shit,” she said. “Schwartz says, ‘He ain’t shit,’ and I say, ‘Prove it!’”

Lyall blinked. "I don't understand, you got me a date on a bet?"

"That's about the gist," she said. Lyall felt her eyes running through him, searching him. "You've got your father's looks."

"Did dad look like shit too?"

"Always. There's a lot going for you when I mention the painting. Your kind of celebrity for your work on these homes."

"My job is in much the same line between make-up artist and doctor," he said. "I've got a patient or client, what have you, and they've got acne. I apply tonic, inject life into the skin, but that's surface level. You'd say the Wilhelm estate looks nice, wouldn't you?"

"Sure would."

"Let me tell you about its insides. I've got to go from the front to back and all the dark corners. I can honestly say that the front is as good as it gets. From beginning to middle, there's a sense that you're walking through stages of decay. On the surface, all's well, cause that's what they want people to see. When you get to its heart you notice that what you thought was beautiful on the outside is a sham. The back of the house is the worst part, but people won't take notice of the walls up in the back and the thick row of trees. Breaks your heart."

His Mom walked across the street and up to the wrought iron fence. She wrapped her hands around the bars and asked, "Are they all like that?"

"Every single one."

Silence descended as the wind rustled through the magnolias. His mother let her hair down and Lyall watched it unfurl past her shoulders. She leaned back on her elbows and looked down the river. There was something far off in her eyes, an object Lyall couldn't perceive.

"How did you know when your marriage was over?" she asked.

“When the front door had a note on it telling me not to come in,” he said. Lyall picked up a rock and tossed it into the Mississippi. “There were signs before that. Markers on the road.”

She looked at him and lowered her eyes. “Such as?”

Lyall gave it a good long thought and said, “There are the things you do or don't say to each other. It takes both. There's a pit in you that comes and goes, but eventually, it sits in your stomach and stays. That's where the things that you don't say go. They fill you up and they weigh you down till it gets too heavy and you fall apart.”

His mother put a hand to her stomach. “Haven't kissed or the like,” she said. “That's what you're on about?”

“No,” he said. “I tried not to think about it, but the man's a priest. That's scandalous.”

“More scandalous than a mother soliciting married women on behalf of her son? Bless your heart, child I'm always taking care of you. God forbid the man takes care of me.”

“Priestly affairs are newsworthy,” Lyall said. “Don't need camera's hounding you. You've seen how people look at us. Imagine the publicity.”

She pulled her hand away from him.

“Baron's a good man,” she said, “a damn good man. We've been talking. He's going to leave the vocation for me.”

“What on earth for,” he asked.

“Vocations have changed,” she said with a smile. “Besides he's the best parts your father left behind. He doesn't need to go out on the river to find what he's looking for.”

Lyall folded his hands together and sat cross-legged. The stink of the river seemed to get stronger now as the wind carried it directly up his nostrils. It lingered till he worked the odor and eventually became nose blind to it. Lyall leaned back against the embankment.

“Okay,” he said, and let his arms down at his side.

Lyall's mother laid the slip of paper with Mrs. Schwartz's phone number on his chest.

Lyall took it up between his fingers, studied it for a moment, and said, “In my own time.”

The wind kicked up and swept the number out of his hand. The pair watched it twirl and loop towards the water. It landed like a feather atop the water, saturated, and sank. Lyall thought about Litchfield, what they might whisper about his mother, about him. The disappointment of Mrs. Schwartz when she wouldn't get that call from him. Lyall took all these troubles and sent them down the river.

The Beer and Ice Cream Combo

Bernard Sable would've left the restaurant today if not for the snowstorm. The cars rolled by in caution. The light pole outside the restaurant, which his father crashed the family Toyota into, still lay like a corpse in the parking lot. His father's left arm and leg were broken in the wreck and the car totaled. Bernard's parents lived across the street from the restaurant. A glance out the window confirmed that his father was on the living room couch, across the street, flipping through channels with his one good arm. His parents lived across from the restaurant they owned. Bernard leaned against the counter with a mildew stained rag in his hand and a wire brush in the other. He wanted to drag his father to his workstation, rig a hook that could dangle down from the ceiling to keep him upright, hand him the wire brush, and tell him to get to work. His father had been stupid, racing down the icy road. Bernard picked up his phone to dial his father. He dialed Shelby's number instead. The tone rang until her voice told him that she was unavailable.

Shelby was supposed to be on shift with him. He shoved the phone in his pocket and went to work cleaning the two tables that were used an hour earlier. The lunch rush was two out of town customers, neither were talkative. They were so one note that when they paid their checks and left, there was no mess to clean. The sign in the window flashed on and off: Best Food in Town. Beer and Ice Cream Bar Combo! The restaurant didn't have a formal name. The locals knew it as the Sable's restaurant.

The bell above the front door rang. A couple around Bernard's age walked in. The man was in a brand-new pea coat and beige corduroy pants. His hair was shaved on both sides of his head with the top left overgrown and combed over. The woman was blonde wearing sunglasses with a tilted fedora. She wore a leather jacket and a flannel button-down underneath with jeans

that looked like they could strangle the circulation of an entire body. They glanced around the restaurant and waved in Bernard's direction.

Bernard faked a smile and said, "Welcome, take a seat anywhere."

"Snow's coming down," the man said. "Happens a lot around here?"

Bernard shook his head, took some menus and silverware, and set them on the table.

"Drinks," he said.

"Beers," the man said. "What do you have on draft?"

"Draft," he said as if the word were alien. He imagined both of his customers gathered around a wooden barrel on tap overflowing their ironic plastic goblets while celebrating in a modern-day mead hall. They were probably the kind of people who still shouted *libations*. "We don't do draft here. All beer is bottled. Unless you want PBR. That shit's so bad that they canned it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the can is there for your protection rather than preservation."

"Locals like it?"

"They swallow it," he said, "cheapest stuff we've got. You'll be able to tell."

"Sounds like fun," the man said, snapping his fingers. "Two of those, each."

Two each? Bernard glanced outside with the snow mounting on the street, then back at the man. A wide grin crawled across the man's face showing off his bleached teeth. Bernard turned to the woman. She faced straight ahead with her sunglasses still on.

Bernard grunted in affirmation and walked to the kitchen cooler. He wasn't in a rush to serve them. Bernard often had trouble communicating with people his age, but there he could tell that there was more motivation in them than a meal and some drinks. The area was brimming

with the elderly or middle-aged. There was one elementary school and high school for the area. People from villages, farm kids, and straight-up loners lumped together in the space. Bernard and Shelby were two of the few children who existed in their village of no more than twenty-five buildings.

Bernard grabbed the PBR and leaned against the stove near the kitchen's serving porthole to listen to the couple. Bernard couldn't assign a region to their voices. Their voices were sterile. The couple could've blown in from anywhere.

"What a quirky place," the woman said.

"The bar is the same place they serve ice cream," the man said. "Fucking brilliant!"

"Alan," the woman said, "don't you think you were a little too obvious?"

"It's fine, Marcy," Alan said. "I'm sure our waiter is a nice guy. We'll win him over with charm."

"We didn't even get his name. Did you see that smile you flashed him? And, what's with snapping your fingers? You think you're cool?"

"Of course, I do," Alan said. "Look at this coat. Let me tell you, I've got pizzazz. Sandusky's a long way off and we both know that the road isn't traversable. This isn't a bad place to be stuck though. We're marooned in a place that can feed us and shell out beer."

There was the crux Bernard was looking for. A free pass for a place to sleep.

"I don't think he'll go for it," Marcy said.

"What makes you say that?"

"Didn't you notice how he looked at us?"

"I'm sure we look strange to him. He won't be happy about it, but if he's a decent person he'll let us stay."

“You sound full of yourself,” Marcy said. “He’s taking a while with the beer.”

Bernard resisted the urge to burst from the kitchen at that moment with beers in hand. He checked to see if Shelby had called or even texted because he could’ve used the help. Neither was the case. Bernard dialed his mother. The phone rang and she picked up.

“How’s it going over there, bud?” his mother asked. “Looks like you’ve got a couple of characters keeping you company.”

Bernard moved to the very back of the kitchen near the storage locker and in a hushed voice said, “Are you watching from the living room window?”

“Heavens no,” she said. “I’m at the peephole of the front door. I wouldn’t be so obvious. The restaurant is mostly windows for a face. No one needs to see me creeping from across the street, that’d defeat the purpose of creeping.”

“Listen,” he said, bring a hand over the phone, “this couple’s looking for a place to stay for the night and they think that they can be in the restaurant.”

“Well, they can be.”

Bernard blinked. “But we have a spare bedroom. That’s the whole reason I phoned.”

“That’s Shelby’s room,” she said.

“Shelby doesn’t live with us.”

“That’s her room. Remember when she used to come to a sleepover and you two would stay up watching late-night talk shows?” Shelby and her mother lived two houses down from Bernard, which made him the closest child in proximity to Shelby. Bernard believed that there was a natural gravity between children that brought Shelby and him together, but the more apparent reason was a stick thrown through his bedroom window. He could still see Shelby, five-years-old, in the grey hoodie, and wearing bright yellow rain boots in the snow.

“Is Shelby in that bedroom, right now?”

“Of course not, isn’t she with you? She should be on shift with you.”

“You can see strangers from the house, but you can’t see that Shelby isn’t here?”

“I’m selectively nosy.”

“Let these people use her room.”

“Has she called you?” his mother asked.

“No,” he said, “I’m not sure what’s going on. I’m not used to being here by myself.”

“She’ll come round.”

Bernard shook his head and said, “I don’t know if we can be the same again.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It means she kissed me while I was drunk.”

“Honey, it can’t be,” his mother said.

“I don’t know what we’ll be by the end of this.”

“This shift?”

“Sure, the shift. Let’s go with that.”

Bernard heard the couple laugh obnoxiously in the dining room.

“Are you sure these customers can’t just use the spare room?”

“Out of the question,” his mother said. “They can stay in the restaurant as long as you’ve emptied the register for the day.”

“I’ll do that soon.”

“I can’t even tell what kind of people they are from here.”

“I think they’re hipsters.”

“Oh no, no, we can’t have that. Hipsters are worse than rats.”

“I guess I could stay the night with them,” Bernard said. “Make sure they don’t run amuck in here.”

“That’s the spirit,” she said. “It’ll be a fun sleepover. You’ll see. Besides, you need to hang out with more people your age. You can’t keep hanging out with old people.”

“Like you.”

There was a pause.

“Yes, like me,” his mother said and hung up.

Bernard shoved the phone in his pocket. The couple out in the dining room had been waiting a while and he needed an excuse for his long absence. He grabbed two pots and clanged them together in a haphazard way. He threw the pots to the floor, opened a stove door, and slammed it shut again. All this was loud enough so that the couple could hear. If he was going to put up with the couple all night, he’d at least have a little fun with them.

Bernard grabbed the beers and brought them out to the table.

Shelby worked the dining room with Bernard in the days before college. They were both twenty and worked at the restaurant since graduating high school. Bernard was obligated by blood to help the family business. His parents didn't need the help, but Shelby wouldn't stay away. Cleaning was a breeze with two people. The two sat in a booth together and chatted. Bernard made coffee and threw a few scoops of the in-house ice cream in a bowl for Shelby. He halved four strawberries and dropped them over the ice cream. Shelby’s favorite. Bernard picked up ice cream making from his father and experimented with the flavors. Blueberry mint. Dark chocolate and marshmallow. Beer and ice cream. Strawberry-infused ice cream.

“Normal people call that strawberry flavored ice cream,” Shelby said, spooning a heap of the ice cream into her mouth. Her brown hair was pulled up into a messy bun. She wore little makeup except for the blue eyeliner. This drew other's eyes to hers so that she held their attention. Bernard looked in her direction, but never directly at her.

“I'm not trying to reinvent the wheel,” Bernard said, holding his coffee in between his hands. “The title's too commonplace. Strawberry Icecream could use a renaissance.”

“Starting with the name?” she asked. Her eyes fixed on his, even in his periphery Bernard could spot this.

“Sure, that's the point of rebranding. Think of the word 'bad'. Now replace it with 'unsatisfactory'. If I call something bad, this job for instance, then that's the dominant assignment to the job. The job is bad.”

Shelby munched on a strawberry and nodded.

“If I said that the job is unsatisfactory, there's a light tone to the word. Respectful. Critiquing. There's no automatic write off that comes with saying bad.”

“I get it,” Shelby said, wagging the spoon in his direction. “This conversation is unsatisfactory. Don't belittle what you've got.”

“The job's no good here,” Bernard said and quickly downed half the drink. “In general, it's no good here. College is the classic remedy for the situation.”

“Does it get you to satisfactory?” she asked.

“I hope so.”

Shelby investigated her bowl. The ice cream in front of her was melting. Her shoulders slumped. “I was thinking,” she said toward her bowl. “What if I moved on?”

“Whatever you want,” he said, sipping his coffee.

“The Mulligan’s have the old Chevy I’ve been eyeing.”

“It might be good for you too,” Bernard said. “We’ve been here so long that I don’t know what I am without this place.” He noticed that she looked out of place. “You could come with me,” Bernard heard himself say.

Shelby’s eyes went wide. “To Columbus?”

“I could even drive. What are you staying for?”

Shelby stared at him, motionless. Bernard looked outside into the night wondering where he’d concocted such a scheme. Where did it well up from? He looked back at Shelby. The ice cream he’d worked hard to churn and impress with was melting at an alarming rate. Handmade quality didn’t last outside of the refrigerated display case.

“I get the feeling you wouldn’t want to go,” he said. Bernard downed the rest of his coffee. “I mean, your mom is still here and my parents like you. It would be hard losing them. They’d lose a good worker. Nobody gives you guff.”

“You do,” she said. “I listen to it every day. We’ve had almost this same conversation. I put up with it and the weird things you do to ice cream. Why do you think I do that?”

“You’re my best friend,” he said “I’ve listened to the same peevs you’ve had with your mom for years and it’s tiring but I listen because you need me. I’m in that position three nights out of the week. Not including when we’re here.”

“I just don’t get what you’re not seeing here,” she said and leaned in towards him.

Bernard wrung his hands and said, “The restaurant isn’t taking us anywhere. At some point, it’ll just be us and the elderly. Then what? They die and what am I left with?”

“Me,” she said. Shelby leaned back in the booth. “It’s always been you and me.”

The two sat in silence. The ice cream in Shelby's bowl had completely melted, leaving strawberry floating in the soupy mix.

"Was the ice cream any good?" he asked.

"Congrats," she said. Bernard met her eyes and lost himself in them. "You distilled the strawberry essence but didn't get at the *strawberry*."

"The judge's verdict is reached?"

"It is," she said and pushed the bowl away. "You're found guilty of ruining a good thing."

Two o'clock in the morning rolled around and Bernard had lost track of how many PBRs he'd fed Alan. Bernard kept supplying them. The initial beers Bernard brought to the table were all consumed by Alan's unquenchable thirst. Bernard wasn't sure when to stop feeding him drink, so he made an activity out of cooking for the couple. Bernard pointed out regional delicacies on the menu. Gouda with a runny egg on top. Spaghetti noodles drenched in chili seasoned with cinnamon and topped with a heaping mound of cheddar cheese. He'd managed to convince Alan that scrod was a fish he'd never had, but who'd never had cod before? Bernard told him that they came straight from the Ohio River and that they are caught fresh each day; they came from a fish farm in Illinois. Marcy wasn't an adventurous eater. She ordered a corned beef sandwich topped with sauerkraut and a side of fries. Marcy didn't drink and became quick friends with Bernard. It was hard for Bernard not to notice that Marcy was attractive and therefore hard to give Alan proper attention.

The accommodations Bernard had put together for the overnight stay were a booth for each person with a blanket provided courtesy of the house. He'd walked across the street to his

parent's house to find the stack of blankets inside the door. Bernard had yelled thank you but heard nothing back. Bernard learned more about his guests. Alan and Marcy had driven in from Nashville. Alan was close to Bernard in age. Alan was an apprentice carpenter making a merger living under a master carpenter. The pea coat he showed off to Bernard was uncharacteristic of his wardrobe. Alan's clothes came from thrift stores. Where else would one find corduroy pants?

Marcy worked as a realtor for a company in Nashville. She was getting a cheap deal on an exuberant rental house her work owned, an unconventional arrangement that she'd declined to share the details of. She was the breadwinner and Alan were fine by that. Bernard wondered if Alan was even capable of taking care of himself.

"Have you ever done a beer float before," Alan asked. His words were beginning to stumble out his mouth. He was laying on the floor of the restaurant looking up at the ceiling, a white sheet draped over him. Bernard felt like he was speaking to a corpse.

"Floating a beer down the river?" Bernard asked, sitting in the booth beside Alan. Marcy sat across. He glanced at Marcy who was giving Alan a snicker. This was the first time all night that Bernard had seen her smile. "I've done that before. The Tuscarawas river is miles away from here, but once I—"

"No," Alan said and popped his head out from underneath the sheet. "I mean, like a root beer float, but beer."

"You don't need any more hun," Marcy said. She came off the booth bench and sat beside Alan on the floor and ran her fingers through his jelled hair.

"Oh, but I do. Who could deny himself a beer float?"

They didn't answer Alan. Marcy kept stroking his hair and he slowly fell to sleep. Bernard thought of Shelby again. He was on the roundabout of the mind circling an image of

Shelby in perpetuity. He imagined what it might be like to fall asleep beside her now. What it would be like to doze off in drunken bliss.

“Is he always so chatty,” Bernard asked Marcy.

“Yeah,” she said, sitting back down in the booth. “He's got a real flair for himself.” She bit her lip. “Thanks for letting us stay over. We meant to impose.”

“It's fine. I've had fun. Not many people my age around here. I'm mostly stuck with my parents.”

“Get many strangers in your life?” she asked, giving off a quick smirk.

“People like you and your boyfriend are a rare sight.” Bernard looked outside. The snow had stopped falling hours ago but over a foot of snow had fallen in a relatively short amount of time. The road was invisible, and everything was connected by the snow now. “Visitors don't come up the highway. Travelers normally take US-36 up towards New Philadelphia. They like being close to the Tuscarawas River. Prettier drive. In these hills, you've got villages like this one smeared here and there. What possessed the two of you to take this route?”

“No GPS.”

“No phone GPS?”

“Left them at home and didn't look back,” she said. “They're a distraction from each other and besides there are signs along the way.”

“But you still got lost,” Bernard said in a dead-pan way.

She nodded.

“Your sense of direction must be worse than low. It must not exist at all.”

“It doesn't matter as long as I'm spending time with Alan.”

Bernard pulled out his phone and opened the application with the map. "I can get you where you're going. You're headed to Sandusky, correct?" He used an application on his phone to map out the way they needed to go. He handed the phone over to Marcy, who thumbed over it.

"Thanks," she said, "that'll be a good help." Her eyes motioned back and forth scanning the screen.

"I can get you a pen and paper since you're weirdly not into electronics right now."

"No need," she replied. "Who's this Shelby person?"

Bernard swiped the phone away from her. "A bit nosey there."

"You've been looking at the phone off and on all night," she said. She leaned back in her seat and eyed him from across the table. Bernard was sure that this was an attempt to pry him open. Look at what's inside, but why not? What could Marcy do? She was a passerby. Like everyone under the age of forty, she and Alan would leave for a new destination.

"She's my best friend," he said, "and things are weird now."

"Such as?"

"Shelby kissed me while I was drunk and ran off."

"So, she used the opportunity to get a quick peck in before you sobered up?" Marcy placed her elbows on the table and folded her hands. She carried a villainous look on her face.

"No, there's more," he said. "She took me back to my dorm room and got into bed with me. We didn't do anything more intimate, just held each other. Maybe she thought I'd forget?"

"Have you been trying to confront her?"

"Confront is the wrong word. I'd say talk."

"Does it upset you, what she did? Are you mad at her?"

“No, I’m confused. If she had feelings, why didn’t she say so? She’s comfortable around me. We tell each other everything.”

“It’s easier to be honest with yourself when you believe that you’re the only one who will remember what happens. So, you can’t get her out of your head then?”

How could he? Shelby had a room in his parent's house for most of his life. She was at the diner, school, and visited in Columbus often. Bernard put both hands on his head. Marcy was sitting beside him. She threw an arm around him.

“So young,” she said and patted his shoulder.

“You’re thirty. You don’t get to say that yet.”

“Maybe not, but I know a little something about this.”

“Go on.”

“Before I was with Alan, there were other guys who wanted to be with me, but they didn’t haunt me. I met Alan on a job for one of my rental properties. He’d come into work with a low-cut V-neck and jean shorts looking like he was lost but he could make me laugh hard. He’s adorable. He asked me out. He thinks he’s got swagger, but the boy can’t be trusted to get dressed. I bought that pea coat for him. He thinks it adds to his whole outfit, but it’s the crown jewel.”

“How does that pertain to this?”

“I’d never been invested in someone like that before. He got me the fedora. I hadn’t met someone with this kind of earnest. He’s the only man I’ve ever bothered to buy a present for. When we’re together we’re happy and it’s constant. I’m happy to be stuck in the blizzard with this goofball. This was his plan after all.” Marcy motioned to Alan, who’d pulled the sheet back over his head in his sleep. “Fact is, he haunts me.”

Bernard thought of himself in this context. Haunted. The image of Shelby in the snow, in the diner, and his arms. She touched all the facets of his life, but he wasn't sure if he was haunted by her. He homed in on the night he'd felt her nuzzled into his arms and the kiss that followed. Friend or lover, he'd needed to reach out to her. Tell her that it was alright, that he needed her around. Not to leave. A flutter of dread crossed his mind. What if she'd been saying, she couldn't be around?

"I'm still not sure," he said, in a low voice.

"We could always test that," she said and leaned in towards him.

She came close enough to him that the tips of their noses were touching. The brim of her fedora pressed his hair backward. Bernard pulled back and glanced at the corpse-like Alan motionless on the floor.

"What are you doing," he said, struggling to pull himself away. "You just got done telling me how smitten you are and now this?"

"No offense, but you don't mean anything to me in a romantic sense," she said and ran a finger across his chin as if to pull him towards her. Bernard felt his face run hot. "You strike me as someone who hasn't kissed many girls."

"I haven't kissed any."

"Well, that's news to me. Are you upset that your first time was with Shelby or that you were drunk?"

"Why are you asking me if I'm upset?"

"You're allowed to be. You were vulnerable with your friend and it sounds like she was taking advantage of a situation where you weren't fully present. It doesn't matter if she has feelings about it, what matters is how *you* feel."

“I’m not upset. I’m worried that we’re different now and she’ll leave.”

“Then how do you feel about me?”

“Creeped out.”

Marcy backed away and gave him a thumbs-up. Before a week ago, he would’ve jumped at the chance to be pulled in by a woman like Marcy. He couldn’t take the bait though. No muscle could compel him forward. Their eyes met. When he considered her deep blue eyes all he could see were Shelby’s staring back at him. He could recall the sensation of her boney shoulder crammed under his arm. The care with which she laid him on his side against his dorm room bed one limb at a time. She’d outstretched his arms and nuzzled between them. Her warmth resonated in him as she took his hand in hers, wrapping his arms around her. In Marcy’s eyes, he saw Shelby, her blue eyeliner drew him in and didn’t let go.

Blood on the Raccoon Roof

My parents say, living by the water is second nature, we're Sicilian. We're Norwegian. They don't know. Online ancestry's useful and I'll never tell them. I walk to the bay window of their lakeside house. Ten years ago, we were more Mediterranean than the bland gesture of Spaghetti Tuesdays. A hundred years ago, we were Norwegian and probably ate Lutefisk. I tell my fiancée Caroline all this as I plop onto the built-in bench of the bay window. We're in the living room. She sits next to me and our fingers interlock. The naked skin of her finger where a ring would be catches my attention. Caroline and I don't care, but my parents keep eyeing that finger, along with her belly, and the width of her hips. Caroline's not pregnant. We don't have sex, although she'd like to. I'm not ready. We've been engaged for three months, and this is her first experience with my parents. Sharing Caroline with them is the same as handing them my heart.

I tell Caroline that I was a shut-in who connected with people via screens, which she knows, but she doesn't know why I don't speak to my parents or why I keep them from her. I say, high schoolers have the luxury of picking what they don't like, I guess, and they didn't like me. They wanted to pry it out of me to get to the meat of me. I didn't anticipate them becoming physical. Their wide toothy smiles should've tipped me off. Nestled in my head, I kept to myself too well. I didn't see them coming. One bully put an arm around my neck and clamped down on my windpipe. It was hard to scream—I tried—the other two grabbed my legs. The one with the vice grip dropped my head on the vinyl floor. I was rolled into a cage meant for drums; this was in the band room. They interrogated and taunted me and turned the lights out. My senses were the texture of tv static from a concussion.

“Why haven’t you told me about this before?” Caroline says, looking concerned. “What does that have to do with your parents?”

My parents weren’t understanding, both insisting that I stand up for myself, and I asked that they call the principle. The boys were popular, and if I’d squealed to school authorities it’d be worse on my end social. I was already a distant child, but total isolation from the rest of the high school community would’ve rocked me harder than the vinyl floor. My parents blamed me for how the bullies treated me, that if I was more sociable people would treat me kinder. Dad said I was the quite type that projected a serial killer aura. Mom agreed. I say, “They’re like the bullies. They think they know something about me, how to fix me, but they make life harder. I think they’ll try to ruin you.”

“I’m stronger than that, you know. I’m steel.”

“They’re suspicious about your naked finger.”

“People can be engaged without a ring. What do they think otherwise, I’m pregnant?”

“Yeah, or they could think we’re poor.”

“We are poor. Let them be that way, I wanted to meet them, and this is just for today. We’ll be home tomorrow.”

“I’m holding onto that thought,” I say and look out the window again. The lake is lined with mansions like towering sentinels. The lake’s dark blue tint ripples with a breaking wave from a luxury boat. The wake of the boat cuts the water, pattering against the shore of my parent’s property. The wake and I have washed up here together. I say, “I don’t express myself very well. I forget to say things, not on purpose.”

“You’re not good at sharing.”

“You still want to be with me, right?”

“I love what I've seen,” she says and takes my hand. “It's annoying, but I'm banking on the rest of you being just as good.”

“That’s a big leap of faith. I’ll get better soon, I promise.”

“You better,” she says, her eyes darting towards the kitchen where my father is scrambling to a chiming timer with oversized mittens on his hands.

“It’s my fault they don’t know you.”

“They keep staring.”

“They’re like cats. I’m their territory and a new cat’s playing with their toy.”

“Meow,” Caroline says and digs her nails into my shoulder, which hurts. “Mine!”

“What's that, now,” my father asks. “Meow?” I hear the oven door shut and my father comes out of the kitchen wearing a stiff apron printed with sailboats over his sleeveless undershirt and gym shorts. He's been running today and wouldn't have worn his workout clothes if he knew Caroline was coming. I didn't explain why I was coming over, just that I was. Dad's holding a breakfast casserole between mittens. The living room fills with jalapeño and egg smell. The top layer is diced tomatoes and grated cheese. I miss their food. My cooking is garbage.

“Did I hear an animal?” he asks. He looks at Caroline and sets the casserole down. Dad's upper lip glistens in the sunlight of the bay window. His mustache cream is oily and little beads of it dot his upturned mustache curls. Put a top hat on him and he'd be the buffest dandy in the land.

“That was me,” she says. “We were joking around.”

“About what?” Dad takes the mittens off and places them parallel to the casserole dish.

“Territorial people,” I say.

Dad shrugs. “Territorial, eh? We've been getting raccoons lately. Those fuckers are invasive noisy critters. At 3:30 AM, we hear them skritch-scratching the roof. I've got a bow and arrow ready to go ‘cause, well, you know how I feel about guns, Deacon?”

“Poor sportsmanship.”

“Hell, yes,” my dad says. “Bow and arrow, you pull back—that pull’s your power—that’s you.” Dad glances at Caroline. “What or who do you work for?”

“I—” Caroline began.

“She’s a realtor,” I say. She looks at me like I’m lying to a judge. She *was* a realtor. I’m putting a cadaver of the former Caroline on their table of discussion today.

Mother walks in and asks, “What’s your appraisal of our little property?” Mom’s gaze falls directly on Caroline’s midriff. Mom smiles in a genial way and lifts a cup of coffee to her lips.

“Expensive and not little,” Caroline says, coughs, summoning her business voice, and crosses her arms around her stomach. “Your place could be a million-dollar property with the right updates. New appliances. An updated kitchen with the white granite countertops. All these things brighten up the whole room.”

“So, there’s value here,” Mom says, and waves a finger in our direction, being careful to point towards the floor. She thinks she’s being vague with the gesture. She’s in her blue-spotted morning gown wrapped tightly around her waist. It gives her the appearance of floating when she moves towards my Dad. Money’s uplifting, I guess. Mom’s got loads of that. She’s got a thick portfolio. My Dad cups Mom’s waist too eagerly, because he likes *thick* portfolios. He’s said so before and I squirm because of the way his moistened mustache sprawls when smiles.

“We’re going to go out on the boat this afternoon,” Mom says, “you’re both welcome to come.”

“I’ve never been on a boat,” Caroline says. “I barely swim.”

“We’ve got life jackets, dear. You won’t sink while we’re around.”

“Sound good to you?” Caroline asks, her face beaming.

“When did you get a boat?” I ask.

“When we bought the house,” Mom says, “we had some money left over from selling the old house and we thought, why not? We’re on a lake. We’re lake people now, practically fish, so get a boat. Nothing too fancy. Better than a pontoon boat but not one of those leisure types either. It’s an off-brand pro fisherman’s boat.”

“Runs quiet,” dad says. “Purrs even. It’s electric. All you hear is the roar of the wake you’re making. It’s dreamy.”

“So, expensive?”

“Nothing fancy,” Mom says.

“Lovely,” Caroline says, “as a realtor I’m very interested in *all* forms of property.” She’s annoyed and grins in my direction.

“You’d like to see the boat, then?” I ask.

“Oh, *yes*,” Caroline says, “let see that boat!”

We carpooled together. My parents are wearing their flashiest bathing suits. My father’s in hot pink thigh-high shorts. Mother’s in a Marilyn Monroe style lace over her bikini. They’re nineteen-fifties Hollywood. Caroline and I are modern eras. I’m in flipflops, a white undershirt, and swim trunks passed my knees. Caroline’s in a Foo Fighters t-shirt and running shorts. The

marina boats bob on subtle wakes from water traffic. They clunk against the pier. Their noise gives voice to a throbbing that's started in my head.

“What’s with the shirt,” Dad asks Caroline. He’s been holding in the question for the last two miles. He wants to know why she’s not in a bikini.

“I don’t like the way lifejackets rub against my skin,” Caroline says, rubbing the shoulder my mother had touched. “Leaves a rash.” She looks at me and I know she’s uncomfortable.

“Deacon,” Mom says, “you need one of these?” She has two lifejackets and holds one to me. I take it for preservation against the situation I’ve put us in.

I hold out my hand to Caroline and she pulls away. My parents don’t notice. Their focus is down the pier and they’re steps ahead of us.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered.

“I don’t like this. Why do we care what your parents think?”

“I need them to like you,” I say and put the jacket on. “You need status. Work’s very important to them. The *kind* of work too. Lineman’s a shit job and they don’t say that I’m shit, but they think it. They’re stuck with me, but you’re coming from the outside.”

“That's not fair to me.” Caroline runs her fingers through her hair and rests her palm on her forehead. “It's some shit.”

“It is.”

“But you won’t say anything.”

“I’ll say something.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

“This doesn’t happen at my expense, Deacon. *I’m* not the problem.” She walks after my parents down the pier.

My flip-flops slap against the pier. I’m at a quick pace and I come up beside Caroline. She won’t look at me.

My parents stop at a red speed boat with beige leather seats and a center console for alcohol. Dad hops aboard and positions himself into the captain’s seat next to the chrome throttles. The leather is the temperature of a hotplate. We spread towels over the leather. Dad asks me to tie an innertube to the stern. He turns the ignition. The boat sputters life. I unmoor the boat from the pier and we’re off.

We pass the line of bright orange buoys that outline the harbor. Dad stops the boat and asks, “Who’s up first on the inner tube?” No one moved to be the first on the inner tube. “This isn’t a pleasure cruise. I tied that thing to the roof of the car. We’re using it.”

“I’ll drive the boat,” Mom says.

“Isn’t this Dad’s toy?” I ask.

“No, it’s mine. That’s why it’s hotrod red, my favorite color. Same color as the birthday cake from last year.”

“I wasn’t there.”

“I know,” she says, taking her hair out of its pins. “Your brother and sister were there. They visit.”

“So, they tell me,” I say and grab the lifejacket. I understand that it won’t defend me against my parents, but there’s some comfort in holding the cushy shoulder pads.

“You’ve seen Maurice and Elly?” Dad asks. He’s halfway in the water and now he’s unsure where to sit. “When were you going to see us? Caroline shows up—” Dad swallows his

upper lip with the harsh criticism. His face is as red as the boat. Dad takes up the inner tube and tosses it overboard. He holds a hand out to Caroline. "You should come with me."

"Are you sure?" Caroline asks.

"Sure," he says. She got on the inner tube. "You can hit the throttle whenever."

Mom adjusts her sunglasses and the rearview mirror. Caroline and Dad are in her sights. Both grip the handles on the inner tube. Caroline looks surprised, because she's on the water with my father or that she's on the water at all. Mom gently pushes the throttle forward. The front end of the boat tips skyward. Dad and Caroline trail in the distance. The boat swerves and the innertube shoots over the wake. Caroline and Dad's bodies float and descend with each wake. Mom takes hard turns.

"Maybe," I say, over the sound of the water, "slow it up?"

"Why?" Mom asks

"Caroline's not a water sports enthusiast."

"I'm not letting up. Your Father into getting thrashed and I get him silly with laughter every time I throw him overboard."

"You'll toss Caroline before Dad takes a dive."

"So?"

"What fun is that for Dad?"

"He gets to spend time with his to-be daughter-in-law. He'll enjoy himself." She looks in the rearview mirror. "Caroline's having a good time. She's got a strong face. Grits her teeth when I turn, watch." She throws the wheel to the left. We do a turn that sends me out of my seat and onto the floor. On my tumble, Caroline is laughing. She's smiling. She looks at my dad and they're natural. Dad faceplants on the innertube. His glasses splash into the water, but he

couldn't care less because his mustache is messed up. He's molding with one hand while the other is on his face trying to save the mustache's form. Caroline loves it.

"Your father needs a break," Mom says. I roll onto my belly and pivot to the front of the boat. Sunglasses are twirling in mom's free hand while her eyes take up the rearview mirror, locked on me. I think this is the position she needs me to be in, on the floor, lordling over me. The boat stalls out and comes to a stop. "Your father and I would appreciate it if you *and* Caroline came over more. We haven't talked about it, but he'll see my side."

"Don't know. He seemed miffed."

"We're a unit. Counts for something." Mom spun the wheel towards the shallows and gingerly pushed the throttle forward. The boat set off at a slow pace, almost gliding. "Are you and Caroline having sex?"

I gasp, Mom's not usually this forward. Neither are. They're the kind of people who take the long way home for the scenery, they apply this in conversation. "We're not having sex," I say.

"Hm, and how're your finances?"

"We live in a studio. We're comfortable."

"You're not old fashioned about waiting to live together?"

"Suppose not, but why's that a bother?"

"You and Caroline are going to be partners, financial partners, and a studio apartment doesn't signal ease to me, in terms of budget."

"We're fine Mom."

"*We* aren't fine," she says, motioning between us. "Don't avoid us. How can we help you if you're in a jam? You're still a lineman, right?"

I nod.

“Dangerous business working, electricity. I understand there’s training, apprentice work, but accidents happen. Do you have an emergency budget?”

“We’ve got savings.”

“Perfect, except savings isn't an emergency. Deacon get fried on the line. Where's workman's comp? Oh, it doesn't cover everything. Months pass. Is your savings going to cut it? Can Caroline's job support the both of you?”

“We'd be fine, Mom. You and Dad don't need to worry.”

“All we do is worry,” she says, finally looking in my direction. “You're distant. Are you this way with Caroline?”

“No.”

“But you don't have sex?”

“We don't.”

“Kids your age in the twenty-first century are all about premarital sex. Men have a boyish need to fuck, which doesn't make them men, it keeps them boys. You and Caroline haven't *connected* yet. Understand me, dear, sex occurs outside of thrusting bodies. It's in here. It's important to get that out of the way *before* marriage.”

Mom punches the throttle and swerves. The innertube veers towards the shallows. Tree limbs reach out of the water like craggy arms and dad snags against one. I hear a crunch; Dad hits the water and skids. Dad comes up thrashing like a baby in a bathtub, screaming. Mom steers the boat, she overshoots, and Caroline becomes the person closest to Dad. She tugs at him from the innertube, gets a firm grip on his slippery upper arm, and pulls him close to a handlebar. Dad latches on, hoisting himself upon the innertube, lays back, and lets his left foot drag in the water.

His left leg has a piece of debris sticking out of it. The lake water running off the puncture cascades blood. On a nearby terrace, a party of wealthy people are gawking at the scene from what looks like a modern-day castle. They practically drop their wine glasses at the sound of my father's agonized cries. I'm the only one who notices their stares. Phones come out their pockets and the faint sound of cameras enters the air as naturally as chirping.

I reel in Caroline and Dad. Caroline helps to hoist Dad into the boat. He's on the floor clutching the branch that protrudes from his leg. We take one of the towels off the seat and use it as a tourniquet.

"Don't pull it out," Mom says, cradling his head in her lap, "you'll make it worse."

"Why'd we go so close to shore," Dad asks behind his gritting teeth.

"I was distracted." Mom glares at me.

We're in my parent's bedroom watching a news anchor on Fox News explain why SJWs are ruining the army. Dad's eating it up along with the gas station fried chicken we purchased on the way home from the hospital. There's a depression in his leg where the tree limb was, wrapped tight in dressings. He's in the king-sized bed getting grease and crispy bits of fried chicken skin onto the linens. Mom's glaring at the mess and I can already tell that she's resigned herself to one of the spare rooms for the night. Caroline hasn't spoken to me since she got off the boat. She and my Mom keep flashing each other knowing looks whenever Dad agrees with the TV. It's 10:30. I'm propping my head upon the arm of a chair with a head under my chin and feeling the weight of sleep on my eyelids. Each time I close my eyes I feel I've missed something and that it might be crucial. Everyone's adjusted slightly, maybe closer together? I know that time has passed because the anchor on TV is different.

“Why don’t you head to bed?” Caroline asks me.

“I’m afraid I’ll miss something.”

“We had all our excitement earlier today,” Dad says, laying a drumstick on his belly. He attempts to pat Caroline on the back like she’s always been his buddy. “Your mother’s crazed boating couldn’t fling this lady off the innertube. Those were some sharp turns, babe.”

Mom pats Dad’s good leg and gives an unconvincing smile. Dad frowns, places his bronzed hand over hers, and squeezes tight. I’ve never seen my Dad make an affectionate overture that didn’t saunter happily into the lewd. His mustache glistens with grease when he says, “You got me, babe. That’s one way to keep me in check.”

Mom grins. “I should stab you with nature more often.”

“Spices up the hoity-toity lake life. That and raccoons. Oh, damnit, I’m in no condition to shoot those fuckers.”

“I can do just as well.” Mom flexes and grabs her bicep. Caroline giggles. I curl up in the chair. I want to be by myself. I go to the bedroom without saying goodnight and Caroline rushes out into the hall to meet me.

“What’s the problem?” she asks.

“Nothing,” I say, my arms dangle at my sides in defeat and I’m not sure why. “You’re in a better mood.”

“Your parents don’t seem bad. Pretending to be a realtor again, it’s weird, lying to your parents is weird.”

“Then don’t,” I say. “You’re getting along nicely.”

“Because they’re not bad people.”

“I moved away because of them. I don’t see them because they’re just like those kids from high school.”

“Are you going to continue to let that keep you from having a relationship with them?” Caroline frowns and puts her hands to her waist. She stamps on the floor like she is squashing all the terrible things she could say to me, that I’m being unreasonable. I turn to walk to the bedroom my parents lent us for the stay. If she makes a motion to stop me, I don’t see it. I hear her produce a big sigh, and when I look back, she’s gone.

I’m pinned to a wall, imprisoned in a sleek steel wind tunnel. This is a lucid dream; I know because the powerful wind hitting my face doesn’t pull at my skin. The turbine is opposite me spinning out of control and screeching like an airplane on a runway. To my left is a mirror crowded around by silhouettes of people. A gilded rope in a thick braid licks at the air in front of me. The silhouettes desire that I grab the rope and climb—it was my way out—despite them never saying so; they don’t have mouths. Behind the turbine, they say without speaking, is the way out. I take hold of the gilded rope and plant my feet on the floor to get some traction, but the floor must be coated in oil because my feet slide out from under me. I’m dangling by the rope with the muscles in my arms tearing away and aching for relief, ready to be ripped out their sockets. I’m desperate not to be pinned to the wall again. That thought is the worst idea running through my head, because I may not come back from the wall. I cling to the rope with my teeth just as my arms give out. They flap like the rope with the wind. My skull is ready to be ripped from my head, but my teeth are locked in a vice grip that no one can pry open. There is a creaking noise I think is coming from the rope, but it registers like an afterthought with the second pair of ears I feel are outside.

I sit up and the covers of the bed are sprawled out. A breeze follows up the ridge of my spine and licks my ear. The air is on. There's a creaking over my head that moves into a dull skittering sound like fingers on a keyboard. I reach to the other side of the bed to wake Caroline. She's not there. I'm not sure that she came to bed, though the bedroom door is ajar. She must've come in and left. The digital clock says its 3:30 AM. I step out into the hallway and catch a glimpse of my mother headed down the stairs. I let her steps drift out of earshot before I follow. The skittering sound I hear on the roof has become fervent scratching and I remember my dad talking about raccoons. I peer out all the windows looking for my mother. When I get to the bay window that faces the lake, I see Caroline standing barefoot on the back lawn. She's gazing up. I put on some shoes and head outside.

My mother is there. I close the door behind me and the two of them notice me. Caroline looks at me and points to the roof. I walk beside her and let my arm brush against hers. She doesn't pull away immediately. She's tolerating my presence because she loves me and I want to apologize, but my mother is there standing beside a bundle of arrows like spilled twigs in the dark. I see the hunched silhouettes of raccoons skulk across the moonlit roof. I look to my Mother and Caroline, and I feel silly that we're outside in pajamas standing in the glistening predawn dew until I realize no one is watching. No one here is focused on the other, just me. The raccoons are everything.

“Every night,” Mom says, reaching down for an arrow, “raccoons claw at the roof.”

“They don't care that we're here?” Caroline asks.

“They're too busy trying to fuck in my house too care.”

“Mom,” I say because I somehow believe this to be inappropriate. Not what Mother said. I mean the situation, but I don't understand why. I look around thinking someone will see. I'm met with the quiet of the night.

“It's true,” Mom says. She grabs the arrow by its feathered end and runs the shaft of the arrow along the bowstring. The motion is practiced, and I find myself impressed. The movement is likening to a master cellist working her instrument. Her biceps and triceps bulge as she pulls back on the string. She holds a readied position for the moment of release. There is a soft twang that issues from the bow when the arrow flies. A raccoon begins tumbling down the shingles. It thuds against the wet grass, it doesn't move, and the others don't seem to care. They continue to claw at shingles.

“They're never fazed,” Mom says. “I get a lot of target practice some nights, not that I enjoy it. It's a community service. They should add it to the HOA fee. Murder X amount of raccoons per month or you're out.” Mom chuckles. Caroline smiles. Mom pushes the bow towards Caroline. Caroline is skeptical at first but takes it up. “Your father's right, Deacon. It's your power that kills the raccoon, but it's the arrow that closes the distance. That's the connection.”

“I've never fired one of these,” Caroline says, looking it over and plucking the string.

“There's a lot of practice that goes into it, sure, but the raccoons are patient for the arrow,” Mom says. “Deacon, you'll get a shot too.”

“I'm not going to be able to hit it,” I say.

“Not with that attitude,” Mom says. “Caroline, go like this.”

Mom poses as she did when she fired the arrow. She stands still as a statue, then glances at Caroline. Caroline tries to copy my Mom and is weirdly successful. The way her mind and

body connect to make the posture's got me hot with envy, but maybe it's the soul in it or the smile she shoots my Mom and the one Mom shoots back. There's an instant liking there I've never received.

Caroline hands me the bow and says, "You try."

"Deacon," Mom says, continuing to pose. "You've got this. Just copy me."

I adjust and their faces turn as they've just seen someone vomit.

"What?" I ask.

"It's fine," Caroline says.

"Right," Mom says. She comes towards me and affixes my back at an angle and my pulls my arm and I can feel the force of the string trying to pull my arm forward. "That's all you are holding it in place."

"Reminds me of powerlines," I say. "Sometimes you can give them a good flick and they spring around."

"Sounds unsafe."

"Well, the line's usually dead. I wouldn't fuck with a live wire. That'd be like sticking several forks in a socket."

"As a realtor, I know a thing or two about live wires in homes and I couldn't possibly recommend a client put a fork in a socket," Caroline says this with a straight face and stares at me. This is a friendly reminder that she still loves me, that she's still mad, and hates that I asked her to lie. I want to tell her to stop but not in front of my Mom. I'm embarrassed and grind my teeth like it's going to pulverize the feeling.

Mom looks between the two of us sensing the tension. "Right," she says, "how about we try an arrow? Deacon wants an arrow?"

I give her a wary nod.

“Great,” she says and picks up an arrow. There’s a notch in the arrow and Mom guides my hand back till I feel the feathered tip against my cheek. It tickles my cheek in the slightest evening wind. Excitement hits like electricity when I see Caroline looking at me. My Mom and I are getting along. I’m not fighting her when she shows me how to shoot when she adjusts my arm, head, shoulder, and the arch of my back. I draw the arrow closer till the feathers sit flush against my cheek. I need to keep something close to me, something of my power. Mom tells me how to aim and I do my best to keep the raccoon in my sights. For once, I let the teaching guide me. I place my thumb holding the bow over the raccoon, steady my breathing, and focus on the space in between breaths. I let go. The arrow takes a sharp dip towards the ground, but it doesn’t feel as though I’ve failed when Mom giggles and Caroline claps.

“Nice try,” Mom says as she gingerly removes the bow from my hands. She picks up an arrow and brings Caroline the bow. Mom shows Caroline how to shoot, the same as me. She mimics my Mom’s motions and I hear the thunk of an arrow imbed in the chest of a raccoon. As the dying raccoon tumbles and trails blood on the shingles, Caroline and Mom stand close. Mom shakes Caroline’s shoulder and laughs like she would’ve when I was younger. The raccoon falls before us, twitches and groans till it deflates with its last breath. Mom yanks the arrow out of the raccoon and hands it to Caroline like it’s a souvenir before killing the last raccoon, the one that could’ve been mine had I listened. Caroline and Mom are looking at the glistening blood trail shingles. These are lines they made together, lines I can’t cross. I wonder if I’m a bystander at an initiation, one I excluded myself from.

Mom gives me another shot. I miss again. I huff and wring my hands, frustrated with myself. Mom plucks the arrow from the earth, cleans the tip, and hands it back to me. She tells

me that the raccoon isn't going anywhere, and I sense that neither Caroline nor Mom are leaving till the raccoon is dead. I pull the bowstring back and my tendon is as taut as the line, the synthetic feather on the arrow is light and airy. I hold my breath, releasing the arrow in between the beats of my heart and hear a reciprocating thunk when I inhale. There is cheering until the raccoon topples over the shingles and lodges into the gutter.

"I'll get a pole," Mom says. "Good job," she says, to both of us.

Caroline and I sit bathed in moonlight and watch Mom gingerly poke the raccoon from the gutter with the end of a painter's pole. It comes loose and faceplants in the grass with a splatter noise. Mom picks it up by the tail and shows it off like it's a TV trophy bass. She tosses it in the trash bin and waves us goodnight before going inside. She smiles my way and it's the first time in years that there was genuine joy when she looked at me.

"I'd like that," I say. Knowing I made a connection and reach out for Caroline, but she still isn't taking my hand. She lets my fingers brush up against hers. "I'm sorry, for making you play pretend," I say. "We can tell my parents the truth the morning."

"You don't care about what they'll think?"

"I've been overreacting. That's clear now. They're not ashamed of me. They'll be worried about us being poor. They'll offer to help."

"Let them, it doesn't bother me," Caroline says. "We'll get by."

"I have a feeling they gathered we've been lying."

"Am I that obvious?"

"Don't go into theatre."

"We need to be on the same page."

"I haven't been letting you in all the way, I'm sorry."

“I know,” she says, taking my hand.

“You’re nicer than me. You even get along with people better when you’re pretending to be someone else.” I kiss her forehead. We lean against each other on the cool grass, our sleepwear soaked in dew. The lake rolls softly along the bank. Caroline rolled on her side lays her head on my chest. Her hair flows over me like a tide and I am swept away.

Caroline starts talk about how when she was a realtor, the biggest thing she participated in was lying about properties. Verbiage and adjective choice were key to having potential buyers walk through the client’s door. Listings became an impressive resume of half-truths. Showing homes was no exception. Before the preliminary visits Caroline went through each room placing prefab decorations, textiles and generic pictures frames, over blemishes. Make-up to be removed at the end of the sales process. She recalls placing a bookshelf over a hole in a wall that exposed wiring. The job was like patching up bad memories. When an old floor creaks, carpet it. If the window is ancient, apply drapes. “Your parents have a newer house,” she said. “Let’s try not to put any unnecessary holes in their walls. I like them.”

“My parents or the walls?”

“Parents. Although, *as walls pertain to property, I am compelled to love them. The realtor within me bids me do so.*”

I stare at the lines of blood on the shingles. They’re caked and dull in the moonlight. I wonder when the rain will come to wash away the stains. I try to remember my mother and I talking on the boat, how making a connection isn’t physical. When I look at Caroline easily interacting with people she’s just met, being open with my parents, even while lying about her work, it all looks easier.

“I want to have sex with you.”

“You want to have sex?”

“Yeah.”

“In the yard?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I’m not having my first time with you on the lawn. It’s wet and there are bugs.”

“Not very romantic, bugs,” I said, motioning towards the house.

“We’ll do it at our place, where it’s private.”

“I suppose asking for the lawn was too much?”

She doesn’t answer. She looks back at the roof to the blood of the felled raccoons, the roof we’d made red under the full moon. I remember the bullies and the way my blood pooled on the vinyl floor of the school’s band room. The bullies had cradled me in their arms and swung me in a cage. But I’m in Caroline’s arms, wrapped in the sight of spilt blood, and could not be happier.

What the Maples Return

The ring of the front desk's bell announced the arrival of Wally Horton, would-be smalltime travel blogger. His parents loomed behind him, their eyes careened about the Lighthouse Inn and Tavern's expansive lobby. Horton was the only name on the guest book for the day. The black dome of a security camera watched over them. No one manned the counter. Wally's parents came to Eureka, California for the nearby redwoods. Wally tagged along. He was a college dropout. His parents were elated when Wally expressed an aspiration above grocery store clerk and paid for his plane ticket. All the other people he'd grown up with had left the county. Wally remained. He shook out the useless unfulfilled feeling of home, where he subsisted as an afterthought. He tried to focus on the task at hand, going about Eureka, documenting it, and acquiring some minor fame.

There was a dance floor bordered by towering three-story windows, overlooked by the expertly molded railings of the second and third floor, rails sturdy enough to hold the weight of an imaginary crowd, one that would peer down on him, waiting patiently to see what he'd do. By his feet, a roach skittered across the floor, stopped, and turned as if to say, welcome to Eureka. The roach hurried out of sight and blended into the maroon colors of the floor towards an unmanned bar. Its cabinets were lined with all the alcohol Wally could stomach. He ran his hand over the ornate floral wallpaper. The sound was like far off applause. He closed his eyes and listened for them calling his name.

“Belinda, can you believe this place,” his Father said. “It looked better online.”

“Reggie,” his Mother said. “That's what you get for not looking at reviews.” She said this in a too mean way that made Wally twitch. They'd been fighting a lot before the trip. “The beds better be out of this world or I'm checking myself into the Holiday Inn.”

“But what’s the point of going somewhere if you can’t immerse yourself in West Coast charm?”

“I can get plenty of charm at home with knick-knacks and rocking chairs.”

“You came here for trees,” Wally said. “We’ve got plenty of them at home too.”

“Redwoods are the tallest tree on Earth,” Belinda said. “Haven’t you ever wanted to feel small?”

“That’s called being a child.”

“Not the same.”

Wally felt small living on the farm with his parents. His work was unsatisfactory and left him exhausted by sundown.

A door opened behind the desk and an older gentleman planted both hands on the countertop in a wide gait. His braided beard dangled over the guest book, brushing the pages. The beaded tips of his braid clattered against one another when he said, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to keep you waiting. Most of the staff is off today. You the Hortons?”

“That’s us,” Reggie said and stepped to the front desk.

“My name’s Rory McCrory, I’ll be the one to talk to if you need anything during your stay,” he said and pointed at Wally’s satchel. “That’s your only bag?”

“Yes. Is that your real name?”

“No.”

Wally expected more of an explanation but received none. He signed his name on the registry and produced his driver’s license as proof of his being.

“You’ve got three nights. Some parameters you need to be aware of: We don’t have a laundromat in the building. There’s one a block over. Bring plenty of quarters and, uh.” Rory examined the license.

“Great,” Belinda said. “There’s no laundry.”

“Well, it’s down the road.”

“We won’t need it, dear,” Reggie said.

Belinda squinted at her husband. “You have toilets, right?”

“We have toilets,” Rory said.

“Can we check-in and be on our way?” Wally asked. “All we’re going to accomplish here is bickering.”

His parents went quiet. Rory reached out with the room key and let them know when breakfast was provided. Belinda and Reggie went upstairs to their room, but Wally lingered, saying that he wanted to look around the lobby some more. He needed space for himself.

“Are they always like that?” Rory asked. He was looking intently at Wally, but it was comforting.

Wally nodded.

“I don’t mean to be rude, but that kind of relationship makes a person go plum cold-blooded.”

Wally wasn’t put off by what Rory said, he welcomed it. “I need to decompress.”

“You could take a stroll around town or I could point you in the direction of a bar if that’s what suits you.” Wally looked in the direction of the bar attached to the lobby. “Not that one. I can’t serve without a license.”

“Then what is that for?”

“Me, mostly.”

Wally gave a slow nod.

“The redwoods are beautiful trees. Will you be seeing them as well?”

“By myself and when I want to go.”

“Good, you seem like someone who needs to be alone.”

“I just need a different scene.” Wally waved a goodbye. Rory looked up past Wally, towards the towering glass panes, overlooking the dance floor. Wally gave that same look outside of the philosophy building before dropping out. The visual of not knowing where he belonged. Wally watched as Rory's beard swung like a pendulum ticking down the days before Wally would go back to the farm.

The scent of the ocean's breath whipped around street corners with a great howl. Where the wind blew, he followed. The hope was that this would produce adventure, giving him a narrative, he could extend to the blog. That was common among the blogs he'd been researching for material. Travel, nature, and history blogs were his targets. He'd compiled a notebook filled with examinations and conclusions for how to format information. The goal was to sell the reader their own adventure lived vicariously through him.

The wind blew him to Main Street. He found a row of refurbished Victorian structures that had been turned into shops and restaurants. Wally found himself drawn towards the sourdough smell that produced a line out the door earlier. The restaurant was called Hazel's Tavern. He twitched with hunger pangs as he entered. Hazel's was packed but the bar was clear. He swiveled on his barstool and pulled out his camera making sure to get as many shots of the restaurant as he could.

“You a pro with that?” the bartender asked. She plunged a knife into an oyster, shucked it, and moved to the next oyster while making eye contact with Wally.

“I’m amateur at best,” he said, lowering the camera. He placed it on the bar and turned the screen to the bartender.

She picked up the camera and scrolled through the pictures. “I’d have to agree,” she said, squinting at one of the photos. “Nice camera for an amateur.”

“Nice shucking for a bartender.”

She drove the knife into another oyster.

“Sounds like you're from out of town.”

“Do I seem the type?”

“You’d know that bartenders in town do a lot of this.” She closed her eyes and shucked a half dozen oysters. “Few of them are as good as me.”

“How’d you manage that?”

“Trade secret,” she said and winked. “Working on an oyster farm was a big help.” She held her knife up. “You pry them off rocks with this.”

“You sound self-sufficient.”

“That’s what happens when you’re your own boss.”

“Wait, are you Hazel? This is Hazel’s Tavern.”

“I’m not Hazel.”

“You just said you were your own boss.”

“Yes, in that I choose to work here.”

“But it sounds more exciting to work on an oyster farm.” Wally pulled out a notepad and paper. “Why would you choose bartender?”

“Are you playing twenty-questions?”

“It’s for my blog.”

“Weird, but okay. I got to the point where I was the last employee at my own farm.

That’s not sustainable for my health. What’d you do for work?”

“I work my parent’s farm.”

“Is that sustainable?”

“Hardly.”

The bartender cocked her head to the side and squinted her eyes. “Explain.”

“I shouldn’t.”

“What’s stopping you?”

“My parents could walk in and I’d be talking about them.”

“They came with you?”

“I came with them.”

“Gross.”

“They’re paying.”

“They don’t give you paid vacation days for working at the farm?”

“My parents’ marriage is breaking down,” Wally said.

“They’re having affairs.

“Must be. I’m thinking they’ve got lovers. I see headlights drive up to the front of our property and wait at the end of the long driveway.”

“Heavy stuff,” she said and shook her head. She served up all the shucked oysters on a platter and put them atop the bar and she insisted they were on the house. Wally downed the

oysters in rapid succession. “Do you ever wonder if they’re actually having an affair with each other?”

“That wouldn’t explain the headlights.”

“Maybe, but don’t you think that sounds like an incredibly specific rendezvous with lovers?” She eyed him with suspicion while pouring a beer from the tap.

“I don’t know how to convince you.”

“I’d have to meet them.”

“You don’t want to do that. They’re obnoxious.”

“We’ll see.” She filled another platter. “I’ll give you some more free food if I can come.”

“Why?”

“How could I turn down an opportunity to meet this fascinating couple!”

“I’ll do you one better. What if you come around town with me? I’d like you in my blog.”

“Cool.” She took a few orders, filled them, and came back. “Can I make an observation?”

Wally said yes. “You seem a bit desperate.”

Wally hesitated to say more. But there was a concern in the bartender’s voice that he’d missed in his parent’s bickering. “I need to go now,” he said, and this felt like an admission to himself.

The bartender nodded and gave him more free oysters. He was young and hungry, so free food couldn’t be passed up. The bartender took care of other customers and Wally sifted through the pictures he’d taken of Hazel’s Tavern. He pivoted in his seat and peered through the camera lens searching for the right shot. The customers scarfed their food, talked amongst themselves, smiled, laughed, and nursed their beers. He panned around to the bar and found the bartender at work shucking the oysters with her knife, absorbed in the work she’d cultivated. He snapped a

photo. Her elbow was arched back, knife at the ready, an oyster in the other hand. She exuded intensity with narrowed eyes and her tongue between her teeth, ready for the plunge. The camera made a digital snapshot noise. The bartender froze and looked up.

“Did you just take a picture of me,” she said.

“Sorry, I should’ve asked,” he said.

“Let’s see it.”

Wally turned the camera to her.

“I look like a master,” she said.

“You look authentic.”

“I must say, I like authentic.”

The bartender thought for a moment. “I’ll be off tomorrow. Can you go solo for the rest of the day?”

“Sure can.”

“Where are you shacking up for your trip?”

“Light House Inn and Tavern.”

“Cool. I’ll swing by there in the morning,” she said. “Name’s Abigail. You can use the picture if you’d like.”

The next day, Wally checked his blog in the hotel room. There were nine views. He's posted his blog to a public website that took in amateur writers. He wrote about his meals but took special care with Hazel's Tavern. Their oyster had been fantastic. Wally had Abigail take a picture of him at the bar with a beer in hand. He added it to the blog. Wally considered adding the picture of Abigail to the blog, he'd gotten permission. Wally cherished Abigail’s intensity

and kept the moment. He made no mention of Abigail in his blog. His desperation to make his goal clouded the reality of his situation. This was not a feasible venture. It was enough for now that he had a goal.

“What’re you looking at?” Belinda asked and looked over his shoulder. Wally tried to close the website window, but his Mother had already snagged the laptop. She was reading it intently. “You need grammar help.”

“You said you’d be good about my blog,” Wally said.

“If you want to be good at writing, you’ve got to proofread your work. We did send you to school, didn’t we?”

“You’re hilarious. You know how bad the county schools are.”

“That’s right,” Reggie said, slipping out of his pajamas. These were the same pajamas that he’d walk out in, red and fuzzy. “I’m not saying that they’re terrible, but English was low on the priority list. They were always more concerned with shop classes.”

“I hated shop classes,” Wally said. “I’m bad at building and working with my hands.”

“We’ve noticed,” his parents said in unison. His parents shot each other knowing looks which sent shivers down Wally’s spine. “Regardless,” Reggie said. “We’re here to support you and you mother’s criticism *can* be valid at times.”

“Our schools were better,” Belinda said. “We want you to be happy but we’d also like you to be productive and *this* isn’t productive yet.”

“The farm’s not very productive and you still work it,” Wally said.

“We know you hate it there,” Reggie said. “It’s in your work, but Belinda’s trying to tell you that she sees the same in your blog. She’s great at picking apart things.”

“This is boring,” she said.

“See.”

“Can you pretend to not be ashamed of me?” Wally asked.

His parents looked at each other. “We’re not ashamed,” Belinda said. “We’re eager. You deserve to find a place for yourself.”

None came to mind, but Wally knew that such a place didn’t exist on the farm. His drive to succeed for himself might pass like headlights.

“It doesn’t feel that way,” Wally said.

“What interests you about the blog,” Belinda said. “That’s unclear.”

“I like building a narrative.”

“Why not tell stories?”

“I am.”

“If you are, it’s a slow burn. Have you considered fiction?”

“Lie on the blog?” Reggie asked.

“No,” Belinda said. “Literature. Wally could be a regular Tom Clancy. *That’s* narrative.”

“But I like blogs,” Wally said.

“I’ve never heard of a blog that’s made money,” Belinda said. “No offense.”

“Belinda,” Reggie shouted. They glared at one another and Wally began to feel his skin crawl. “How about you take a walk?” Reggie asked and Wally knew it to be a command.

Rory sat alone at a breakfast table wearing reading glasses and scrolled through his phone with a mug of coffee at his side. The breakfast area was deserted. Rory looked up from the phone and waved Wally over. Wally grabbed some food, set waffle batter into the waffle iron, and sat down.

“Hey, hey,” he said. “I hear you've met Abigail.”

“How'd you know?” Wally asked.

“She called ahead to say she'd be over. It's a date?”

“No, she's a guide,” he said. The timer went off and Wally retrieved his waffle. “Is it always so dead in here?”

“Are you always apart from your parents?”

“I see them enough on the farm.”

“You don't look like a farmhand,” Rory said.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Means what I say it does and what I say is you're no farmhand build.”

“Thanks.” Wally genuinely smiled, though this was no compliment.

Rory chuckled. “My wife owned the hotel.” Rory's eyes fell to the floor. “She passed a few years ago. Since then, it's been difficult to preserve the hotel. The seasons come and go, and a bit of the structure goes with it each year. Keeping ahead of the seasons was my wife's job. But the real struggle is preserving anything for myself.”

“Can't you sell? Move somewhere else?”

“Suppose so,” Rory said. He folded his hands together and set his elbows on the table and leaned into them with his forehead. Rory looked like he was in prayer. “It's hard to let go of someone, even when they're gone.”

“What if they're different? So different that its irritating?”

“My wife can't be different, she's dead, but she's in here,” Rory said and pointed to his chest. “In here she's the same. Are we talking about the same things?” Wally didn't answer. He couldn't easily divulge more than he understood, but Rory clung to his wife in a way that his

parents might still cling to each other. Was it hard to let go, even if there was no love in the marriage? He was used to the emotional barriers in his parents' household. They were thick enough to cling to. "Where is that girl?" he asked and took a swig of coffee.

The lobby door's bell chimed. Rory set the coffee down and made his way to the lobby and returned with Abigail. "Ah," he said. "Right on queue!"

Wally and Abigail went back to Main Street. The air was thick with clouds and the wind had picked up significantly. A storm was on its way. Abigail got him access to the inner workings of the stores and restaurants. Kitchen cooks with old recipes, basements and storage rooms with nineteenth-century portraits, piles of rotary telephones, and mining equipment from the gold rush. With each new secret, Abigail unveiled came a new world to exploit for notoriety. Wally imagined all the new readers who'd flock to his blog enticed by the many oddities he had to share.

"You alright?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said and rubbed his eyes, "I need a break, that's all."

"Isn't this vacation for you?" she said.

"It's more work than I thought," he said, cupping his forehead in his hands. "Lots to process. Lots to filter through."

"We can stop for the day." Abigail grabbed him by the hand and sat him down on a bench facing the direction of the boardwalk. Wally could see the fishing boats coming and going. Abigail sat beside him. He tried to imagine her on the deck of a boat, reel or net in hand, hauling in a large catch. He thought of her in overalls, sleeves rolled up, her powerful arms exposed.

"What's an oyster farm like?"

“Cold,” she said. “Mud all day, every day. I’d wade through frigid water in a wet suit and feel around at the bottom.”

“Working on a regular farm is different. There’s a lot of sowing, weeding, and pesticide spreading. Sounds like oysters sprung up for you.”

“Hardly, water’s like soil. Your average lagoon must have the right temperature, a slow current, and excellent particulate to encourage oyster growth and reproduction. I graduated with a degree in biology. Oysters were my jam, but I had to be realistic.”

Behind them was a cemetery and when Wally careened his head, he saw that his parents were among the graves. He tapped Abigail on the shoulder and pointed in his parent’s direction. Abigail swung around and noticed the older couple moving about the graves. She asked if they were his parents, to which he nodded. Wally watched how his father struggled to weave through the graves with his left leg lagging.

“That’s what he does at home,” Wally said. “There’s a few counties back home where he looks for Hortons to add to the family plot. He thinks we should all stay together.”

“That doesn’t sound like what a person does when they’re having an affair. You don’t bring the wife you’re cheating on to cemeteries.”

“He’s complicated.”

“This is our chance to go talk to them.”

“No.”

“Yes. If not now, when?”

She nodded and folded her hands in her lap. Thunder rolled, and the pair looked out across the water. Wally saw rain cascading in the distance. Dark clouds preceded its arrival and crept towards the shore at a steady pace. Pictures of home flared up, of sunlight piercing the

horizon, a morning of watching through the second-story window. His mother's nightgown trailing like a cape. She returned from under the maple leaves and up the driveway darting her attention in all directions, wary. Wally thought she looked like a stranger and wondered if, somewhere beyond the maples, a part of her had left. Wally might be the same.

“We should go talk to them.”

“What’s changed your mind?”

Wally didn’t say. He got up from the bench and darted towards his parents. They saw him coming from afar and both waved. Abigail ran up beside Wally and told him that he didn’t need to confront his parents now. Wally couldn’t explain in the right way how he’d felt his parent’s life was out of order, that fixing themselves was more important than fixing him. Reggie and Belinda were confused when he showed up with Abigail by his side.

“Who’s this?” Belinda asked.

“My backup,” Wally said. “What are you both doing at night? I see you two leave the house, go passed the maples along the driveway, and headlights ride on by. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know what you mean?” Reggie asked. Both his parents exchanged concerned glances that morphed into frustrations. “We’re not cheating on each other.”

“Dear,” Belinda said. “You’re dreaming if you think we’re cheating.”

“How?”

Reggie and Belinda held each other’s hands. “We’re swingers,” Reggie said. “We have to meet our partners late at night so the other people in the county don’t get wise to our dealings. Belinda and I fight, yes, but we’re not cheating.”

“But you’re both so different now,” Wally said. “I was sure it had to do with your marriage.”

“Of course, it has to do with our marriage,” Belinda said. “We’d been having these *urges* and it’d been hurting our relationship for years before we started this. We’d hide it from you as often as we could.”

“This isn’t about you, Wally,” Reggie said. “We’re doing what we can for ourselves. You need to do the same.”

Morning came. The rain pelted the windows of Abigail’s cramped car. He’d hoped his last day in town would be filled with sun. He’d also hoped his second blog post wasn’t all over the spectrum of topics. Wally still refused to put her into the blog, but the post seemed to run about with her friends, with her connections, with her favorite spots, her secrets, and Wally was riding her wake. The view from Abigail’s car was spectacular. The ocean was at their side. The fastest route to Redwood Park was a slim four-lane road that went straight through the bay. A merger barrier separated the cars from the water. Abigail said it might overflow and render the road unusable for the rest of the day. The long way back was fine with Wally. He didn’t want to face his parents. He couldn’t tell if he was being selfish by prying into their lives. He hadn’t intentionally put himself there, at the farm, alone, and in the dark. He took pictures of the ocean smashing against the barriers and thought about how it would be easy to be swept away.

Going north, the landscape wound around steep hills that snaked along the coastline. Redwoods were all around Wally now, even without being in the heart of the park itself. Their foliage lined the hills in a lush green. The red hue of their trunks were veins in the hillside. Lagoons dotted the landscape below and Wally could spot the occasional canoe rental shack set beside them.

The redwoods enveloped the area and the cover of the trees softened the rain against the car. Visibility was high, and Wally took pictures again. He shot aimlessly into the forest and ended up on Abigail. She looked forward, unblinking. They hadn't spoken much during the ride and he was beginning to miss the sound of her voice. Abigail was reliable, someone to cling to. Wally didn't want to be carried.

They went to the visitor's center where a park ranger pulled out a map, pointed to each trail, explained what was there. Wally gravitated towards a meadow where elk grazed. The park ranger insisted that the pair shouldn't enter the meadow. There are signs, he said, and I'll let you know now, the elk are territorial, so don't approach. The two agreed and were off.

The trailhead was flush with redwoods higher than any tree Wally had ever seen. The pair stood under their umbrellas listening to the rain patter.

"Ready?" Abigail asked.

"Hell yes," he said and almost darted into the forest. The rugged terrain was exactly what he'd wanted, a wild landscape where he could be without his parents. The ferns grew like weeds and covered the forest floor in a bright green that seemed to shimmer in the rain. Wally touched the bark of a tree. One caught his eye. Its trunk bulged out of the ground at an irregular angle. It seemed to twist up into the heavens and its base was the width of a small car. He shoved the camera in Abigail's chest excitedly and told her to take a picture. He set the umbrella down and gave the tree a bear hug. Wally leaned shoulder up against the tree and posed again.

A gust of wind blasted through the trees. A large branch crashed down in front of Wally, separating him from Abigail.

"Holy shit," she said. "Wally? Wally, you good?"

Wally looked up from where the branch had fallen. It bent to the forces of the wind, crackled as it bowed, loud and crisp. The tree dwarfed him. He felt out of place like he was the only part of the forest that didn't belong. Abigail came around the branch.

“You look okay. Are you okay?”

He nodded and walked up the trail again, leaving his umbrella behind.

“We should go back,” Abigail called out.

“You can,” he said. “I’m staying.”

“It’s not safe.”

Wally felt Abigail grab at his arm and tug him in the direction of the car. “You’re not going to drag me through the woods with trees coming down on us.”

“You don’t have to come.”

“Why so melodramatic?”

“You’ve already done more than I asked.” Wally pulled away from Abigail and continued. The thought of failing himself was more terrifying than failing his parents. He couldn’t fathom the blog not doing well. It had to. Escape was on his mind, from the farm, and his parents. He might end up like his parents and duck under the maples at night, and become completely different in their eyes, like they had to him.

Abigail kept pace beside him.

“Is this about your parents?”

“What isn’t?”

“Why’re you so insecure about them?”

“I want them to be supportive,” Wally said. The sound of a tree crashing down echoed in the distance. They looked at one another. “I can’t move on if they’re not behind me.”

“Move on from what?”

“This stage. This waiting room? I’m not going anywhere, Abigail.”

“You’re going through the forest. You’re coming to the car.”

“Stop. You didn’t even talk to my parents the other day and that’s what you wanted.”

“I didn’t think we’d actually talk to them. I hoped the drama wasn’t real. It would’ve been more fun if it wasn’t real. Now it’s just sad.”

Wally pressed on and Abigail let out a deep sigh of contempt, calling Wally a fucking child.

The tree line opened into a valley. Wally walked to the meadow below, his clothes heavy with rain. He removed them and went barefoot into the meadow. He ignored the signs, wading through the golden grasses, and watched them move like the sea under the influence of the storm. He resisted the wind that beat against him. He was unbending. Not far off, a group of elk eyed him, their nostrils bellowing hot plumes of breath in the cold. He was out of breath. Wally began to shake from the cold and held himself tight. He dipped below the grasses where the wind didn’t bite as hard. His toes sank into the mud and he smiled, sitting in his choice.

He heard Abigail call out to him. Wally raised a hand above the grass and waved. Before long, he heard Abigail’s footsteps coming towards him. The rain faded. He looked up to see her looming over him with his shoes in her hands. She dropped the shoes by his side.

“Pleased with yourself?” She asked with a stern look on her face.

Wally looked around. “Yeah, pretty pleased.”

Abigail looked in the direction of the elk. “They’re getting closer.”

“I’m sorry, I dragged you out here.”

“We can talk about it in the car,” she said more frantic this time. “The elk are quite large this close.”

Wally stood up. The elk were a throng of antlers moving slowly towards him as though a mob were driving him out. There was an exhilaration in not moving from his spot in the grass, even as Abigail’s voice gained in volume and horror. Abigail grabbed Wally under his arms and began to drag him away. The elk were startled by the sudden move, backing away from the woman. Wally thrashed a bit and Abigail yelled at him for being a buffoon. She was incredibly strong, something that Wally attributed to her shucking and lifting pints of beer all day. He didn’t want to consider that he might be weak.

“Why’d you do that?” he asked, getting his bearing. She’d dragged him all the way back to the tree line.

Abigail, out of breath, hunched over and heaved her breath. “You make dumb decisions like blogging, or elk related aggravation, and expect to be okay. You’re conceded.” She ran her hands through her and gritted her teeth in a gnawing fashion. “I thought this’d be fun, but it’s all shit.”

“Hey,” Wally said. “I’m sorry. I mean it. We can go.”

“Leaving wasn’t an option at this point. If the elk got any closer, I would’ve left you there. It’s no wonder your parents are worried about you. The way you acted in the field’s not normal Wally.”

“You don’t have to rub it in.”

“Life’s that bad on the farm you’d risk getting gored?”

“I don’t matter there.”

“No one matter anywhere, Wally.”

The rain fell sideways with the increased wind and the sound of redwoods toppling were like that of giant's feet, terrifying in the magnitude of their sound.

The two headed back to the head of the trail and got into Abigail's car. Tonight, would be Wally's last in Eureka and his day was in shambles. He admitted to himself that the blog and the success it promised were based on a delusion. He'd be back with his parents soon. He shuddered, but not from the cold. Wally decided it was time to leave, not the town, he bore an attraction to Eureka that he couldn't overcome, but the farm and his parents. If he wasn't to matter anywhere, he'd matter for himself. The maples would never give him back.

The Place Beneath

I waited for the visions to come. I laid a hand on the bunker's outer wall and shut my eyes. I wasn't bathed in images. There was darkness, and far off, I could see a dot of light. The visions I desired, the ones that would tell me what this bunker was. Divining had been like this for months. The images were blurry if they came at all. I focused on pulling the name of the bunker towards me, but the light flickered and disappeared into the void, as did any knowledge on the bunker. The divining of any object works once, or I would've tried again. I drifted back into the present. Without my divining I lived in a fog and concocted my own certainty.

I opened my eyes. My son, Jean, stood beside a gargantuan stag. I was overcome by confusion. This stag, why was it so close to Jean? Jean stretched to pat the snout of the creature, then retracted. His hand morphed into a fist that he clutched to his chest. Lay a hand on the deer's snout, I wanted to say. Jean had been fond of animals; he loved deer over the other animals of the forest. I couldn't move, fearing the scene would end. The stag bent low as if to bow in reverence to my son. Jean took a hasty step back, the stag's head shot up, alert. My son moved further away, and the stag retreated into the dense foliage of the Eastern Woods. Jean noticed that I'd exited my divining trance. He blushed a rose red color and he kicked at the ferns that littered the forest floor. I returned to my work, the bunker. We were looking for one among trees that grew in rows. This wasn't that bunker, but after days of travel, I was willing to forgo the detail of the trees. "This is it," I said. "This is the Place Beneath."

Jean frowned and the color in his face changed from rose to bloodshot. He was young, recently turned thirteen, and he didn't know much, but he'd known how I looked when I was lying. "How do you know?" Jean asked. "You said that the trees would grow in rows. This place is wild with ferns, trees, and ivy."

“I divined it,” I said. “Same as you would.”

Jean touched the bunker and shut his eyes. His eyelids fluttered as though he were dreaming; he stood as still as the trees. His eyes opened and he removed his hand from the wall. “It’s a rotten place,” he said. “You know what they did here?”

“They survived,” I said. “That’s what the bunkers are for, but this one is more than that. It takes knowledge zealously for itself. It drinks it up. Don’t you feel it?”

“The miserable people,” he said. “They used to cast people out into the wilderness, because they were starving and needed less mouths to feed, before the forest was green and growing. You’d know that if you could divine.”

“What we divine reflects our character,” I said. “It’s unlikely that I’d share that vision with you. I never obtain memories. I get names and functions. Who did you see this time?”

Jean shuffled his feet beneath the ferns and stared off in the direction of rustling. A man cradling a bolt-action rifle stepped lively among the ferns. It was Ferris, our protection, and the community’s lead enforcer. Jean’s eyes darted between Ferris and myself. Jean was timid as a deer around the man. He whispered to me, “I saw a woman, wearing an apron, and she was thrown out. The air smells like sulfur and tastes like ash.”

“That’s the past,” I said. I took my son by the shoulders and peered into his glassy eyes.

Jean plugged his nose with his fingers. “The smell burns. It’s making my eyes water.”

“It’s not real. Let that memory be. You must learn to separate yourself from what was. The past can make you sick in the head.”

“We’re here because I can’t get ahold of myself, aren’t we?”

I embraced my son. He felt different from the boy I’d held before pilgrimage. That is the rite of those who can divine, pilgrimage. We enter our teens and journey into the old world

where we receive great knowledge. I divined a way to generate electricity from flowing water. My Father divined guns. Jean divined something he couldn't share, something he lived with long after receiving it. I squeezed him and held his head to my chest. I ran my fingers through his hair like when he was younger, and I could carry his weight. I wanted to see him free and smiling. But his face was stony, and when I cupped his cheek it was cold to the touch.

"It's not that simple, dad," he said. I let him go. "This place can't take memory."

"No," I said. "It's inside the bunker. I know it. I saw it. It will draw out what's got your mind sick, the same way we draw venom from a wound. The difference is we want to put the venom in a vile. I need to know what makes it venomous, the community depends on it."

"Who are you trying to convince? You can't fool me."

"Huxley," Ferris said. "What's this about the bunker being rotten?" Ferris plucked a rose the foliage, examined its red and yellow hues, and pressed it into his journal. This was what he did when I needed to speak to Jean privately, he would collect things, with an ear bent in our direction. He moved about the Eastern Woods like he'd been a part of it all his life, like this was merely a homecoming. He was getting to be in his mid-fifties, but his body was still resilient as in his younger days. He cradled a bolt-action rifle like a precious newborn. He nudged Jean with the butt of the rifle. "Did I hear that right? Jean said its rotten?"

Jean inched away from Ferris. "Right."

"No," I said. "This is the Place Beneath."

"He's lying," Jean said. "He's afraid of being useless."

"Are you senses failing you, Huxley?" Ferris asked.

"I'm as capable as ever," I said. I glared at Jean. "The community has a right to the knowledge in Jean. We're where we need to be." I forced open the rusted door of the bunker. It

led to an empty room with a hatch in the floor. I pried it open. Stale air wafted passed me. All I could see was the top of a staircase. Beyond was darkness. I pulled a lantern from our supplies, lit it, and began down the staircase. I looked back at Jean, who stood at the mouth of the hatch, hands clasped, timid as a deer.

Ferris stood behind him and patted his head. “Go on, I’ve got your back.” Jean waved him off and began down the stairs. Ferris shut the hatch behind us.

“Just a precaution,” Ferris said. Only his feet were visible to me in the lantern light. “Don’t want anyone following us down here.”

“You think we were tailed?” Jean asked. I couldn’t see him above the neck, but I felt his distrust radiating.

“I wouldn’t put it past the Hill People to come down into the Eastern Woods. Don’t forget, the woods belonged to them before your Grandfather divined guns and we secured it for ourselves. Conflict creates grudges. Grudges come with violent aspirations.”

“I’m sure. Father, I don’t want to be here.”

“This place will make you better,” I said. “Don’t you trust your father?”

If my son had made a motion of affirmation, I’d missed it in the dark.

The Place Beneath was cavernous and snaking; its elongated halls were lined with coiling pipes and drooping lighting fixtures. The corridors connected to residents’ quarters, which were filled with barren bunkbeds and what remained of sheets spread over the floors. I picked up a sheet and ran the thin cotton fabric in between my fingers. I felt for the past, but it eluded me. I rummaged through a nightstand and found books that crumpled like dried leaves. Further, into the Place Beneath, we entered a dining hall with benches at each table. The floor was tiled in

faded white squares that blended to the adjoining kitchen. The kitchen's enormity dwarfed what we were capable of fabricating in our homes.

Ferris rummaged through cupboards, retrieving what canned goods remained, and stuffing his satchel with utensils. He drew a lantern from his supplies, lit it, put the can to his nose, and studied the writing.

“What have you got?” Jean asked.

“Don’t know,” Ferris said. He squinted his eyes. “Can’t read it.”

“You can’t read?” Jean said and snatched the tin can from Ferris.

“Not that language. Can you read it?”

“Don’t need to, I’ve got my special mind, remember,” Jean said. He juggled the can from one hand to the other. His eyelids shut. Jean divined for a full minute before coming up for air.

“This can’s carrots.”

“What else did you get besides carrots?” Ferris asked.

“A cook. A ton of cooks. They wore white buttoned-down shirts with funny hats that curled at the top like the heads on cauliflowers. They used to dart up and down the aisles,” Jean said, mimicking what it was like. He took dusty pans from their hooks and clanged them on the stovetops. He righted up-turned pots and turned a faucet. “That’s all the woman did.”

“The cook was a woman?”

“The person I connected with.”

“Like a soul?”

“Like a ghost. Not spooky. She was like a sliver of glass. See-through.”

“Just like a ghost.”

“Yep.”

“What’d that ghost say?”

“She was talking about a mortgage, whatever that is. She didn’t have to deal with it anymore and was glad.”

“Mortgage,” Ferris said, letting the word settle in his mouth. “Sounds ominous.”

“She’s worried though.”

“What about?”

“Her kids. They can’t stay here if she doesn’t work, but the food is running out. She knows because she’s the one who keeps track of what’s left. She has ledgers, a fake one, and a real one.” Jean darted to a cabinet and shoved its contents over the floor. “It was here, the real one. She had to hide it. She and her kids will be put *outside* otherwise. They’re expendable.”

“What’s *outside*? Hill People?”

“She doesn’t know. She stares at the empty pot she put on the stove.” Jean gently beat the pot against the stovetop. Something in him was hungry. “She wants to fill it with comfort, but she can’t. There’s no food for comfort. Not for her.” Jean placed the tin can of carrots into Ferris’ palm and walked away.

Ferris placed the can of carrots in his satchel. He scribbled in his journal, then rushed to find another can. He placed one in front of Jean. “What else can you see?”

Ferris tossed a skillet in my direction. I caught it.

“What do you get from that?” Ferris asked.

“Nothing. It’s empty.”

“You’re not even trying. Jean closed his eyes and got a whole memory. Close your eyes. Come on, humor me.”

I shut my eyes.

“What do you see?”

“Empty,” I said. “There’s nothing in here.” Jean had his arms crossed in judgment.

“I don’t know about that,” Ferris said. “It feels like everything is everywhere, and all at once, when I’m around the two of you. That pan has a tale to tell.” He must’ve been overcome by the snaking underground. He and I were born by the river, as was my son. We’re River People. Ferris is the reason why the Hill People don’t exist in the Eastern Woods. He led the charge against them, but I couldn’t see that violence in him as he dug through the garbage of the old world. He collected a pile of junk on the counter and motioned to Jean. “Plenty here for you,” he said. “Plenty of stories.”

“Let him be,” I said. “He can’t handle what he sees. We’ll need to make camp soon. It’s late. We should recollect ourselves in one of the nearby dormitories.”

“We’ve barely looked around,” Ferris said. “I’ll explore myself if I have to.”

“I’d advise against that.”

“He’ll be fine,” Jean said.

“I’ll be a good boy, Huxley,” Ferris said. “I won’t wander too far.”

“Distance isn’t my concern. These structures aren’t stable.”

“I won’t get crushed,” he said and patted his bicep. “I’m sturdy.” He snatched up the lantern and his light faded into the dark. “I’ll catch up with you two later.”

Jean said, “He’s not safe.”

“You’re correct in that,” I said. “He’s got a complete disregard for himself. The Place Beneath’s got him in its clutches.”

“That’s not what I mean. Ferris is bad, Father.”

“He’s our protection.”

“He’s insurance. Why would the community send its lead enforcer with us?”

“He’s proficient in killing Hill People.”

Jean moved closer to me, glanced about the room, and whispered, “Not just hill people.”

Jean told me about the killing of a gunsmith. The gunsmith, last sighted outside the Eastern Wood during the full moon, stalked at the edge of the tree line. Jean snuck out of the house to play in the woods and noticed the gunsmith. Jean followed along the low brush. The gunsmith spun as if he knew that he’d been followed. Ferris appeared in a beam of moonlight, a hatchet in hand, and swept the side of the gunsmith’s leg with it. The gunsmith dropped face-first into a stump and screamed. Ferris asked, gone to join the savages? The gunsmith spoke to the dirt, I want to go beyond the river. Ferris replied, you’re out of bounds. The hatchet was planted in the spine of the gunsmith. We can’t give ourselves to the Hill People, Ferris said. Swinging again, he split the gunsmith’s skull. Imagine if they got guns out of you. You wouldn’t have been able to handle them. Jean described the crack of the skull as the snapping of a twig.

Jean kept this a secret for months before going on pilgrimage. The community members weren’t allowed into the Eastern Woods, but it wasn’t punishable by death. We’d thought the gunsmith got lost or had been killed by Hill People. Jean had no reason to lie. Not to me. This was murder.

We made camp. Ferris found us situated in a dormitory near the dining hall. Jean slept on a bunkbed. I slept beside him and watched Ferris doze off. Sleep claimed me, but it was shallow and uneasy.

It was the third day of our stay in the Place Beneath, that we came across a collapsed corridor. We searched a series of dormitories when we reached a space with a green grass-like flooring that flaked off beneath our feet. Some of it was stained in white creating a rectangular boundary on the floor.

“Grass?” Ferris asked.

“Never seen this stuff before,” Jean said. “What do you think it is, Father?”

I touched the surface.

“Nothing special that’s what,” I said. “Fake grass. I’ve seen this in another bunker.”

“Huxley, I don’t mean to rush,” Ferris said, “but what exactly are we looking for?”

“A special place,” I said. “I don’t think that the residents’ quarters, or their dining room, are ripe for loosing or transferring knowledge.”

Ferris squatted down, resting the butt of his rifle as a crutch. He picked the fake grass, crumpled it between his fingers, and smiled. “I’d say this is special,” he said. “Decomposition’s a definer here. Maybe it breaks down knowledge too? Why not try?”

Jean still had his hands folded.

“Go ahead,” I said. “It’ll be alright.”

Jean sat cross-legged as his palm touched the floor, eyes closed. A few minutes passed. Jean’s breath was shallow. His hand shot up.

“This room was used for soccer,” Jean said. “People used to play games here.”

“Feel any different?” I asked.

“A little happier. That was a nice memory. The cook from before was playing with her kids.”

“So, not what we’re looking for,” Ferris said and eyed us both over the shoulder as he exited the room.

“They were playing soccer,” Jean said. He smiled. It was the effects of the memory. The happiness he felt was transposed onto him.

“What’s soccer?” I asked.

“You have two teams and kick a ball around trying to score in each other’s goal,” he said and pointed to rusted metal posts. “Looked like fun.” Jean’s face turned sullen. My child was not the same. His visions started and I felt my Father’s voice coming out of my mouth. Instructions on divining. Proper navigation of the smaller ruins required a sure foot and a nimble spirit, two things that, at ten, my son had already exemplified in tree climbing and the daring with which he goaded wild animals. Being short made him ideal for crawling into tight spaces. Now, my son rose from the floor and walked with a hunch he seemed to have acquired from someone much older. He glanced over his shoulder and I shot him a smile, but he didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“Ferris,” he said. “He’s no good.”

“Hush, boy,” I said and wrung my hands. “He’ll hear. He’s always listening.”

“I don’t care,” Jean whispered. “Someone has to call him out, that’s you.”

“Me?”

“You’re the priest of the River People. Tell everyone you divined what he did.”

“I never divined on a person. That’s a rare occurrence, besides you’ve made it plain that I can’t divine.”

“That’s our secret.”

We went out into the hallway. Ferris lingered in the hall, not far from where we were. He stood before a large metal door; his lantern light fixed on a gigantic half unlatched deadbolt.

“This look special enough?” Ferris asked.

“It’s strange,” I said. “If it can be opened the rest of the way we can certainly try it.”

“Say no more.”

Ferris gripped the deadbolt by the end with both hands. It moaned, until he had unlatched it fully. He swung the door open with ease.

“This one's a loud child,” Ferris said and walked into the room.

“I don’t want to go in,” Jean said.

“We’re here for you.”

“No.”

“Listen to me,” I said. “I can’t help the way you are. But I’ll be damned if I let what you see consume you. You’ll lose whatever it is and place it onto me. I’ll take your sickness.” I turned and slipped passed the metallic door to a series of panels with knobs and buttons. I ran my hand over each button, knob, and fixture but the visions didn’t come. I was left in the dark. There were wires crisscrossed from floor to ceiling. Various meters and gauges were on the walls.

“Looks like loads of potential here,” Ferris said.

“We’ll camp here,” I said.

“Here?” my son asked.

“Get comfortable with this space. I won’t force you to interact with it yet. That kind of progress lies in you, but your cure could be here. It’s up to you to accept that.”

I dreamed that I occupied a solid white plane without borders. Beside me was the outline of a person. We spoke of generalities such as weather and our favorite foods. There was a turn, not physically, as if a drop-in temperature before torrential rain. Rot spread in this being,

wriggling like tendrils around where the heart should've been. It asked me about my father. What kind of a person comes back from pilgrimage with the knowledge of weapons? I knew it was Jean. He reached inside his chest and grabbed the tendril. Let me help you, I said. I took his hand in mine. The rot race through his chest, through his arm, and into my fingertips. I woke, sweat-drenched, surveying my surroundings. There was a figure in the dim lantern light. I scrambled to my feet, kicking the lantern. The lantern oil rushed over the floor and the flame followed its trail. I recognized Ferris, writing in his journal, the flower he'd pressed into it slipped out. It ignited. Ferris and I scrambled to snuff the flames with our blankets. We succeeded, but barely. He picked the lantern up and refilled it with fresh oil. Jean was asleep. Had I bumped into him and divined in my sleep? Divined while unconscious? I thought myself a useless priest. The one time I could divine Jean and it was a dream. I cradled my head in my hands. Through the cracks of my fingers, I watched the flame of the lantern lick the air.

“Good morning, to you too, Huxley,” Ferris said. “Or, evening? I assume you don't always wake and start fires? Bad dream?”

I nodded.

“I couldn't sleep either.”

I sat down, dropped my hands into my lap, and attempted to relax.

“Want to talk?”

“There's only one thing to talk about,” I said and glanced at my son.

Jean stirred in his sleep and rolled over, facing away.

“We're friends, correct?”

“Of course,” Ferris said. “Why do you ask?”

“There’s a thought that’s been festering since my waking.” I held the question in my heart. I said, “What kind of person divines guns?”

Ferris tilted his head in confusion. “Got issues with your dad?”

“No,” I said. “We go on pilgrimage and come back with knowledge, but do I influence what I come back with? What reaches out to me with such clarity that I divined electricity through damming the river? Jean is attuned to memory. I am attuned to function. What does that say about us?”

Ferris leaned in towards the flame till its light sat beneath his chin. “I can’t speak for your Father, because I didn’t know him, not really, but guns bring security.”

“The opposite could also be true,” I said.

“Yes, Huxley, the opposite could be true. You remember when the Hill People had control of the woods above? You were young, too young for pilgrimage, but your father had been taking you on his outings. I was almost a man at seventeen, and I liked to go over to my neighbors’, because the couple had a dog. I loved animals. They owned a collie that laid down with its tail in its mouth. Weird little shit thought that was normal. Loved that dog. Loved to walk him, or play with him when the couple let me, and I’d run him down by the river.”

“I remember, you used to go by my house on those walks. I’d watch out the window.”

“You’ll remember, then, when the Hill People came out of the Eastern Woods, murdered my neighbors, and more families than I care to count. They killed the collie,” he said, his voice quivering. “Gutted it from belly to sternum. Strung up its organs. Had the Hill People been dealt with earlier; I might not have joined the party that took the Eastern Woods. I learned to use a gun. Violence comes naturally through anger and the fear of arrows. We haven’t seen them in

years. I'm certain the Hill People haven't forgiven us for taking the forest and the lives occupying it. The feeling is mutual."

"We've got to get Jean better," I said. "He's more attuned than me. My visions are so murky. Jean sees with the clarity of a magnifying glass. When he's in these visions it's like he's there. He says they're like ghosts, but I know he could pinch them. He can't be a priest. What he sees swallows him."

"Huxley, calm down, we just need what he knows," Ferris said, and it sounded like the community spoke through him. "Hope depends on what he's learned."

"And how many more times will he be called upon for his ability?"

"That's not up to me."

"You've more say on that than you let on. You're one of the heads of the community. You can convince the others that Jean's unfit as my replacement."

Ferris sighed and ran his hand across his face. "The community can't make progress without a priest to guide it into the future. Everything I need from you is up here," he said and poked my head. Jean stirred again, his chest rose and fell with a heave. The lantern's fire reflected in the pit of Ferris's eye when he glanced at Jean. "So, he's sick with knowledge," Ferris said. "There could be worse things."

"This *is* the worst thing," Jean said. He rose and loomed over Ferris, hot with contempt. The bags under Jean's eyes were heavy and purple. "I wish I could let you see what I've seen, but I'm scared that you'd use it."

"You don't have that choice," Ferris said. Ferris motioned between himself and Jean. "Your father is passed his prime."

"Not true," I said.

“Jean gives it away every time you talk like you know what’s happening. I’ve got ears too. It’s not dark enough here that I can’t detect a lie or scheming.”

I wrung my hands. “We’ve a chance to solve our problems right here, Jean.”

Jean turned in my direction. Ferris’s rifle was on the floor. I rushed to acquire it. I clutched it to my chest, when Ferris tackled me. His fist met my temple and the pain shot from one side of my head to another. I clung harder to the rifle. Ferris sat on top on me, took the lantern, and knocked its bottom against my face repeatedly. I felt a crack in my nose, then the hot blood on my lips. My grip loosened and he pried the rifle from me. Disoriented, I lay on the floor, while Jean shuffled to my side. He held my face in his hands and cried, calling for me.

“Get up, Jean,” Ferris said. “You do what I say, understand?”

Jean nodded.

“Great. Now, I need you to divine the panel or pipes or knobs. I don’t care. But we need that knowledge you got out of you and into Huxley. His divining is going, sure, but the way I see it, he’s the most qualified person to get your sick. It’s not like there’s another priest around.

“And if it doesn’t work, I’ll just touch the next thing and the next thing and the next?”

Jean’s bottom lip quivered, and his eyes began to glisten. “I can’t keep that up.”

“If that’s what it takes.”

My son glanced over at the panel, then at me. I was still recovering from the blows to the head. I heard the bolt of the rifle being cocked. “Don’t hurt him,” Jean said. He stared at his hands, shook his head, and walked to the panel. His palm hovered over the buttons and knobs. Jean glanced over his shoulder at me. I tried to let my heart shape my bravest face for my son’s sake.

Jean became still with his palm resting on a random series of buttons. Many minutes passed. I regained enough composure to sit against the wall cradling my head against my knees, resisting the urge to charge at Ferris, his gun still trained on me. Jean was slipping away in the Place Beneath. The Place Beneath held a current that drew him down and sucked into its muddy bottom.

“He’s been in there too long,” I said and tried to stand. I slumped back to the floor with a thud.

“Don’t be hasty, Huxley,” Ferris said. “Let him work.”

“He’s drowning.”

“You’re hysterical, or concussed. You’re in no shape to help him. Let this take its course. He’d come up if he needed to. He’s just getting it all out of his system.”

I crawled towards Jean. I didn’t think Ferris would let me, but I saw his face, the pathetic way he looked at me. I didn’t have to divine him to know how little he thought I was capable of. I grabbed Jean’s ankle. Divining works but once. This is what I knew, and I also knew that my son needs me. When I shut my eyes, I was overwhelmed by a clear vision. A metallic cylinder called a missile with a conehead flying, carrying something called a payload towards what was a great city. I saw multitudes of people scattered, crying, and desperate. They clung to each other. An alarm blared at the missile’s approach. The missile ignited above in a blinding flash. People boiled, then evaporated in an uncalculatable moment. They were shadows tattooed to the irradiated pavement. I knew how to make this weapon, its propulsion, all the facets of its existence.

I came to with Jean's ankle still in hand. He looked down on me and his tears rained over my head. I couldn't tell if he cried for himself or his Father. He knelt and wrapped his arms around my neck, placing my head into his lap.

"It's over," I said to Ferris. My son, his tired red eyes called out to me. I whispered, "I saw it too." I struggled to stand, but I managed. Jean clung to my waist. I told him to hop on my back, which he denied. "It's okay." I squatted beside him, his weight fell over me, my old body cracked and popped. I managed to scoop up the lantern.

"We're done then?" Ferris said. "Just like that?"

"We're done for good. The knowledge is gone."

"Don't play me, Huxley," he said. "You just whispered to Jean." His hand tightened on the shaft of the rifle and a finger came to the trigger.

"I felt the knowledge rush from Jean and into this place, it ruptured and dissolved into nothing. Whatever he learned, the Place Beneath destroyed."

"Bullshit." Ferris cradled the rifle in his hands. "You know what Jean knows."

"I don't."

Ferris fired into one of the consoles and cocked the bolt. "You do. Can't keep this to yourself. You've got a duty to the community, to me. I've got to keep us safe. I'm standing between us and the Hill People." He pointed the rifle to the center of my chest. His finger hovered over the trigger. "I want it to end. I want them gone. Their atrocities hack at my dreams and it ends with what you know. It must. What's so terrible that you can't share it? What's worse than the Hill People? The monsters, they'll gut Jean, everyone. They'll do it to everyone, and it'll be your fault. Can you live with that? I don't think I can."

“Ferris,” I said and adjusted to Jean’s weight. “We’re leaving. You can come back to the river and be satisfied with your lot or you can execute us here and have to explain to the community why one of their leaders couldn’t protect their most valuable assets.”

“I don’t want to shoot, Huxley.” Ferris’s hand went back and forth between trigger and the strap, till the rifle fell towards his feet. He slung the strap around his shoulder.

I looked at my son. Our eyes met. We saw the other was exhausted. We went out into the hall listening to the echo of our steps. The Place Beneath spread in an endless slithering way. We must’ve gone in circles. I cursed the people who came before us, the architects of this labyrinth, this world. We trudged along till we located the staircase. I tried to remember the weight I bore before. The small frame of a child fixed on my shoulders, light and airy. I let that thought carry me up the stairs, distract me from the weight of the person he had become.

Before long, we were out from underground. The mid-afternoon sun greeted us through the gaps of the forest canopy. I rested my son against a tree and sat beside him. Ferris came up and turned immediately for home at a quick pace.

Jean rested his head on my shoulder.

I had a vision of a deer in the distance looking in our direction. A strong stag with ornate horns that indicated his age, his wisdom. A courageous little boy ran up to that stag. The stag, unflinching, bowed to the boy, and his long snout was petted. This delightful child jumped atop the beast, wrapping its arms around the neck so as not to fall. I lost sight of them as they were swallowed by the brush and became indistinguishable from the trees. Jean looked up at me, his nose running, and I knew we’d shared that vision.

“Sometimes, now, I think I’m rotten,” Jean said.

“No,” I said, and put my arm around him. “What you saw doesn’t make you rotten. Although, it was horrifying. You were right to keep it from us. But you won’t let it ruin you.”

“I still see it,” Jean pointed at his head, “up here.”

“But it’s in me too. We’ll have to deal with it together. That’s the way forward, I think.”

We sat for a moment and the sound of Ferris’s footsteps faded into the distance. I put my arm around my son and hugged him.

“I can carry you a little while longer,” I said.

Jean nodded and jumped on my back.

We set out for home. My shoulders began to tire, and I considered letting Jean off my back. I turned to find him sleeping. I shifted his weight and knew I could bear him for as long as he needed.