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Pastor's Son

A THESIS

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By

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Pastor's Son

A THESIS

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ABTRACT OF THESIS

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Pastor's Son is a novel that explores the confusion surrounding the death of Eric Wells, a young man killed outside of a gay club in Oklahoma City. Those closest to Eric—his family, led by his father, David, a small town Methodist minister; Bryce, a gay man and Eric's friend and coworker; and Josh, Eric's best friend while growing up, the young man who accidentally kills Eric—all struggle to understand the meaning of Eric's death, to forgive those involved, and to forgive themselves.

The media obscures and sensationalizes the events surrounding Eric's death, and the tragedy's aftermath causes David, pressured by his wife, Marta, to confront the media's noise and his church's view of homosexuality, while Bryce and his partner, Chance, confront the hypocrisy that allows Oklahoma law to protect Christians from violence but does not offer the LGBT community equal protection.

78,000 Words

Pastor's Son

by

Quinn Irwin

"Love takes off masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within."

— James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

Part I

31st of October, 2009

Eric

Eric hadn't been out much in the past few months, and he hadn't been in a club or a bar for almost a year. A dance floor and stage were on the first floor, pool tables and dart boards on the second, and long wide bars on every level, each staffed with three bartenders, in anticipation of the time, not long now, when the club would become packed, when customers would press against and jostle one another to move. But it wasn't crowded yet. Only a few small groups of people milled about, and after one walk through—he hadn't been able to sit still when he first arrived—Eric sat at the corner of

the bar downstairs and leaned against a wall, where he felt more or less, mostly less, comfortable, considering he didn't appreciate the prospect of a crowd.

From his corner, he could see the dance floor and stage, and if he swiveled in his stool, he could see the entrance to his left. When he started sipping his second whiskey sour, he watched more and more people trickle in, almost all of them in Halloween costumes: naughty nurses, pop culture divas, pirate wenches, all of whom seemed, to him, to be women until they drifted closer and farther into the club. Two men dressed, Eric guessed, as Ennis and Jack from *Brokeback Mountain* drifted past, and he realized they were women when he heard their voices; many sported three piece suits or classic Bela Lugosi vampire costumes, and others he couldn't identify to which sex they belonged. As Eric gulped his drink instead of sipping it—he was, after all, experiencing a bit of culture shock—and as the trickle of people entering the club became a deluge, he gave up trying to determine who were men and who were women and, instead, admired the elaborate costumes and the effort that must have been exerted to create them.

Even though the alcohol helped him feel a little less anxious at being surrounded by so many people, Eric wasn't moving until the show was over. He would wait until his friends, Bryce and Chance, who would perform the finale to tonight's competition, which they said would bring down the house, were sitting next to him. As though Eric's decision prompted the evening's event to begin, a tall elegant man, dressed in a white cocktail dress, stepped onto the stage and spoke into a microphone: "Guys and dolls, the show will begin in ten minutes. Our wait staff will try to keep up with your drink orders, but it might be best to go to the bar now so you won't miss any of the show. We'll flash the lights for you when they're ready."

Twenty to thirty people walked toward the bar, and Eric sat up straighter. Although most of the people ignored him, some smiled and others made passing comments while they waited for their drinks: “It’s okay. You’re among friends”; “Just out, huh? Smile, it gets easier”; “God, I remember my first time. Isn’t it great?” Eric smiled, turning red and wondering how they could tell this was his first time here. Were they such a tightknit group? He had other questions as well. Were gay men who dressed in drag called *drag queens*, or was the term only for straight men who enjoyed wearing women’s clothing? If not, what were they called? Eric had heard the term *transvestite* before. Were some of the people here transvestites instead of drag queens? Were the terms synonymous? Eric didn’t know whether there were subtle differences, and he wished Bryce and Chance were here to answer all his questions, questions he later he wouldn’t remember. But Bryce and Chance, Eric was sure, were already backstage and probably had no idea that he was here, that he had actually worked up the courage to come.

The crowd at the bar thinned, and so did the passing comments of welcome until one man, as tall as a professional basketball player and dressed as a pirate, with an eye patch and blacked-out front tooth, did more than make a passing comment. He made a pass, or so Eric thought. He clapped Eric on the shoulder while piercing him with a focused, blood-shot eye smeared with eyeliner, and said, “A newbie wench ripe for the taking.” His breath was horrible, smelling of rum and garlic, and Eric had a dim idea of what he must have looked like as he tried to lean away but bumped into his little corner, and the pirate confirmed this idea by giving him a one-armed hug.

"Sweetie, I'm so sorry," he said. He removed his patch and blinked, even though the light was dim. "It's just part of my act." He apologetically bought Eric a drink, his third, before sauntering back into the crowd, his sword swaying with each step, a ridiculous and worn tricorn hat jammed on his head.

The lights flickered, and the announcer again stepped onstage. "Please welcome our first contestant, Lady Fanny." He clapped with his gloved hands, and the crowd clapped with him. And here Eric was. At a drag queen pageant on Halloween. At The Slant, a club Eric hadn't imagined he'd ever enter. Wide-eyed, face painted as a zombie, in black and white and different shades of grey, his clothes dark as well. He tried to blend in with the dark and hoped that not many more people would notice him. They didn't. The stage drew, from Eric's estimation, over one hundred pairs of eyes almost simultaneously.

The first performer was a tall Latino in a tight sea green sequin dress with matching stilettos he could barely walk in and hair so big that it belonged in an Eighties hair band video. He sang Cher's "If I Could Turn Back Time"—a few people in the crowd groaned when the music had begun—and, as the song progressed, he grabbed his stuffed bra, hiking it up as he danced. The crowd hooted and laughed, and near the song's end, when he kneaded his face with his fingertips, suggesting a facelift, there were howls, followed by a few boos. Some in the crowd covered their mouths, shocked that Cher had received such ill treatment.

The second performer sang Queen's "Who Wants to Live Forever," a song Eric knew well. With eyes closed, Eric almost imagined Freddie Mercury singing. Almost. The guy had pipes. But Eric had trouble looking at him. The masculine but high voice

did not match the man's appearance—straight red hair, skin a milky white and dotted with freckles, a feminine face, at a distance a stunningly beautiful woman in a tasteful red dress, so beautiful that, if Eric hadn't known better, he would have been intimidated by that beauty and mumbled and stuttered if she—were she actually a woman—approached Eric.

After the song ended, a woman whose beauty did intimidate him sat beside him: Lisa, a coworker. "Damn, I missed the beginning, didn't I?" Lisa asked.

"Just the first two acts," Eric said.

When Eric had met Lisa on his first day on the job, he felt like a junior high kid, all hands and feet and pimples, and had said, almost inaudibly while barely able to maintain eye contact, "Nice to meet you." He had felt as though he had entered one of his teenage fantasies, one in which he had met an intelligent, gorgeous blonde bookworm who seemed indifferent to her own beauty and tried to hide it—her hair pulled back, wearing large glasses that slid down her nose and little makeup—which only made her more attractive to Eric. If that hadn't been enough, she had already worked at the library for three years and was, unquestionably, Eric's superior. The trifecta: a little older, intelligent, and beautiful. But the fantasy ended there. Eric lacked the confidence to speak with her intelligently, so he avoided her.

Tonight, though, Lisa wasn't only beautiful, she was stunning, with her hair down, her face made up and without glasses. Curiously, though, while she appeared more mature and sophisticated, her dress hadn't followed suit. She wore jeans, a T-shirt, and tennis shoes.

"What are you drinking?" Lisa asked.

"Whiskey sour."

Lisa grimaced and looked away, but her eyes returned to him. "What?" she asked.

Eric had always made it a point not to stare at work, but he now found it difficult not to after a couple of drinks. "You're not wearing a costume," Eric said, which he hoped explained why his eyes had lingered.

"Sure, I am." She lifted her arms, titled her head, and looked in such a way that asked, Just guess.

Lisa waited for Eric to say or ask something, and when he didn't, having no clue what she was driving at, she lowered her arms, turned away, and caught a bartender's attention. Louder than necessary she yelled, "Sex on the beach." She turned back to Eric. "Seriously? Nothing?"

"What?" Eric said.

The third contestant performed a comedic sketch, centered on all the preparation it took for a man to look like a woman. How he had jabbed himself in the eye with eyeliner. How, if not careful, a man could end up looking more like a raccoon than a woman after all the makeup was applied—and the man's face did remind Eric of the critter. After that, he concentrated on hair removal. He said that he had chemical burns on his legs, chest, and parts of his upper back, none of which Eric could see from his seat, and had ruined one razor ridding himself of the bushes under his arms. After miming trimming the hedges, he belted a Wookie battle cry while pretending to hold up a mirror. He joked about hiding his thing—"No small task, mind you," he said—and he was sure, after he freed it from its tape backstage later that night, that his hair removal would be complete.

Eric laughed and clapped his hands for the first time, and Lisa turned to him and slapped him on thigh, laughing, too. He stopped hugging the wall, finally settled into his stool and looked around again—the crowd had grown to twice its size since the show had begun—to get his bearings straight. To think, Yeah, this is Oklahoma City; this place has probably been here for years, maybe as long as I've been alive. But he had never known about it. Never had imagined it. He breathed more easily in the clouds of cigarette and clove smoke that made his lungs feel heavy and his nostrils burn, despite the dozens of different colognes and perfumes. The weight on his chest and the lump in his throat had diminished since he walked in, and now, with alcohol in his system, he didn't mind that so many people surrounded him.

Even though his shoulders and neck relaxed as he looked around—Yes, that really is a man dressed in leather chaps, part of his bare ass exposed for everyone to see—he half-expected his mother to walk through the door and drag him out of the bar by his ear, as she had when she had caught him at seven, in the family den, playing doctor with Alyssa, a girl of the same age, who'd lived on the same block as Eric and who was his high school sweetheart until he left for college. Back in the den all those years ago, Eric's mother had dragged him through the length of the house to his father's study, where his father had preached about the sins of the flesh and quoted the Bible, flipping its pages before finishing a verse, his fingers knowing where to go next, with a consciousness seemingly separate from his mind, what Eric now knew might have been muscle memory. He kept flipping those pages and reading them aloud until Eric's mother left the room. His father then set the Bible down, removed his reading glasses, and told Eric that what he had done was perfectly natural for a boy his age, that curiosity itself was natural.

But curiosity in some things could get him into trouble, and he had just found some. Harmless for now. But trouble later.

Eric knew that his parents were not going to walk through the door to save him from himself, and he knew that he did not need saving from this. This was curiosity. And it was harmless, a way of getting to know his friend, Bryce, a little better. A way of getting out of his cramped apartment and away from his books for one night, even though he loved them but didn't like crowds. No longer a child, Eric could not ask his father the questions he had—he wouldn't have the answers anyway—and if Eric ever told him that he had been in a gay club, The Slant no less, a gay club known throughout the state, he doubted that his father would view the experience as perfectly natural. After all, his parents were back home in Beaver's Walk, a backwards town of four thousand people in the Oklahoma Panhandle, where body piercings and tattoos sometimes made a splash in the town gossip—never mind gay men and lesbians—and where his parents, at this very moment, were probably handing out the last bags of Halloween candy that Eric's mother had assembled, and taped to those bags, if everything was still the same at home, were little scraps of paper with bits of scripture scrawled on them, an extra Halloween treat Eric's parents had included for as long he could remember.

But maybe he was wrong. Maybe, Eric thought, while sipping his fourth whiskey sour. Maybe his father would shrug and say, "Everyone's equal in the eyes of the Lord." Maybe he would get a lecture while his mother was in the room. But maybe, once she left, his father would ask, "So what the Sam Hill was that like?" After thinking about it, Eric had no idea how his father, minister or not, viewed homosexuality. He had never said a word about it in any of his sermons. In fact, Eric was not sure how his father

viewed much of the world.

"You really aren't much of a talker are you, Eric?" Lisa asked. "Here I thought you were simply all business at work, nose to the grindstone, but, no, you really are quiet."

Eric didn't want to admit that she was right—when it came to her. He wanted her to know that there was a different reason, only the one he'd give her certainly wouldn't be the truth. "How can anyone talk over all this music?" Eric asked.

"Good point."

Joshua

The Halloween party had started early at Nick's place, close to four in the afternoon, and now, after drinking for a few hours, the party was in full swing. One of the starting pitchers, Nick, a number of the other starters—there was Barry, the starting catcher; Devon, the shortstop; and Roberto and Santiago, the left and right fielders, respectively—and their girlfriends played quarters on a scarred wood table in the dining room. A mix of country, hip hop, and Latino music had been roaring since the beginning of the party, and as the players drank more, the music had changed more and more often.

And here was Santiago, again, walking to the stereo to change the music.

"Hey, Sweet T," Josh called over the music. He was leaning against a wall next to the stereo, beer in hand and dressed in his Oklahoma State Cowboy baseball uniform, and had been watching the game of quarters for a while, intermittently eye-balling Charlene, who was sitting behind Nick and sipping a wine cooler. She was one of Nick's distant cousins, a freshman enamored of college ballplayers, and she had been staring back at Josh. Both Josh and she had noticed one another rolling their eyes whenever Santiago plugged his iPod in to the stereo. "Why don't you lay off that stuff? Those cornets and cucaracha calls are giving me a headache."

Josh winked at Charlene, thinking she was exactly the type of woman he needed tonight, young and naïve, with blonde hair, even blonder than his; tall, he guessed, at about five-foot eight inches, but still a good six inches shorter than he and in good shape. Her red tube-top showed off her thin yet defined tanned shoulders and exposed a glimpse of cleavage; earlier, when she walked to the kitchen to grab another drink, Josh had

admired the way she looked in tight Levi's and heels.

Santiago bent down to plug in his iPod and said, "Face it, Flying J, your girly ears can't handle musica muy machista." He smiled at Josh, and Josh knew he was supposed to banter back, especially for calling him Flying J, a nickname he earned for flying out more often than not when he struck the ball. Santiago's nickname had begun as "Tiago," simmered to "T," and finally culminated into "Sweet T" after everyone knew how effortlessly he swung the bat. But Josh, usually ornery and mouthy, couldn't think of a comeback. His eyes kept sliding to Charlene.

Still bent over the stereo, Santiago tugged at Josh's sleeve and looked up at him. "Maybe you're right, J. Because you keep looking at her like that and you're going to get into trouble." He nodded, and Josh imagined Santiago shaking chicken bones and seeing the future. "Yes, J, this music is muy caliente."

"Are you kidding me?" Josh asked, still staring at Charlene, and smiled.

After setting his iPod back into the cradle, Santiago stood and clapped Josh on the shoulder. "Hey, what do I know about the power of my country's music? I'm just a Dominican with eleven brothers and sisters. And what music do you think all of us were made to?" Josh shrugged and watched Santiago look back and forth between him and Charlene. "Okay, J. But I'm not warning you when she walks in this time."

Ten minutes later, Charlene straddled Josh in a dark corner on the couch in the living room, and Josh was rounding second base when the expected occurred. There was Amy, Josh's on-again off-again girlfriend, all one hundred pounds of her, and even though, on a good day, she stood close to five feet tall, she still seemed to loom over him. She yelled, "You asshole," and Charlene slid off him. Amy punched at Josh's face, but he

slapped her fists away easily, briefly amazed at the speed with which his hand let go of Charlene's breast. That didn't, however, deter Amy who, after missing Josh, took an open-handed swipe at Charlene, barely missing her because Josh, on his feet at this point, picked her up and hauled her away to the front door so that they could speak. Once Josh set her down, Amy left just as quickly as she had come, without saying one more word. Josh was about to follow her when Nick caught his attention.

"What the hell are you doing?" Nick yelled. He didn't wait for an answer. Instead, he launched a beer bottle at Josh's head, a throw Josh gauged to be somewhere around seventy-five miles per hour. Josh watched it zing by and heard it break against the wall. Josh thought about closing the distance and teaching Nick a lesson—Nick was a twig, and Josh could have pounded him—but Josh wasn't sure he could reach Nick before he could throw another bottle—there was ample ammunition within Nick's reach—and Josh had the feeling Nick had intentionally missed. Twig or not, Nick had one hell of an arm, much better than Josh's.

Josh grabbed a Mickey's Big Mouth beer from the table and glanced at everyone. The ballplayers and their dates and girlfriends looked shocked and disgusted, except Nick and Santiago, one angry, the other sad. On his way out the door, Josh heard Santiago say, "You knew Baby A was coming, J. Don't be mad at us."

For fifteen or twenty minutes Josh sat on his ten-year-old pickup's tailgate, sipping his Mickey's Big Mouth underneath a streetlight. He felt out of place and a little lonely, but he didn't know where else to go. Here he was on Halloween night, dressed in his baseball uniform, which was against the rules, his badge of popularity and accomplishment. And yet it didn't do him a bit of good. He was in the street, drinking

alone, while his teammates, most of them starters, were still inside the house, carrying on—he heard their laughter from across the front yard, probably poking fun at him. He heard Nick ask, as though he still couldn't believe it, "What the hell was Josh thinking?" through an open window from which cigar smoke drifted out into the autumn air. Someone inside turned up the stereo's volume, drowning out Nick's voice and the crowd's laughter. Santiago's cornets blared.

Josh hopped off the tailgate, took a long swallow from his beer, and looked up at the stars, the sky full dark, and tried to think of something besides how he had been caught again. He thought about the stars and about how not nearly as many stars were visible here in the middle of Stillwater as were at home in Beaver's Walk, whether he stood in the middle of town or on the outskirts. He missed his home, even though it was so much smaller than Stillwater. He was still sometimes lonely when he visited home, but it was a loneliness of a different type. Here, there were people everywhere, people right across the lawn and inside who knew him. But few people lived in Beaver's Walk, and for some reason he didn't understand, he didn't get too lonely there, in that great emptiness on the high plains in the middle of the Panhandle. Just knowing someone was near, even if he were a mile or more away from the nearest person, fishing in a remote pond or hunting in the small hours of morning, was enough. But here, surrounded by so many more people, he felt lonelier. He wondered whether the stars had something to do with it. Here he saw few stars but many people, and at home he saw many stars and few people, which caused him to feel, somehow, more comfortable. It didn't make any sense to him. That was just the way it was.

The front door opened and Matt, the third string catcher and Josh's roommate, let

the storm door shut with a bang. His hands were full. He carried two six packs of Mickey's. Matt also wore his uniform. He walked across the lawn and tossed Josh a beer.

"So," Matt said, "I guess you and Amy are done for good now, huh?"

"Maybe," Josh said. He finished off his beer, tossed it into his pickup's bed, and twisted off the cap of the next. "But I doubt it."

Josh noticed some paint curling and flaking near the right rear wheel well, bent down, and picked at it. "Is Nick still pissed?" Josh asked.

"Seems to be all right," Matt said. "I don't think he cared that you were feeling up Charlene. Hell, she was just sitting on Sweet T's lap, probably still is, and he hadn't said a word about it. Yet."

"Where the heck were you anyway?" Josh asked.

"Hey, don't blame this on me. I was on top of Teresa, and no yelling or bottles breaking was gonna make me stop."

"What? You two back together now?"

"Naw, just long enough for that." Matt put a hand on Josh's shoulder. "Teresa and me seriously don't get along. Maybe that's why the sex is so good, but you and Amy, shit, you two got a good thing going. Why do you keep screwing it up?"

"I don't know." But Josh knew. He enjoyed the attention. He liked being wanted, and if a woman wanted him, why not give himself to her? What harm could it cause if Amy never found out? But she had, for the fifth time since their sophomore year in high school, the last few times in the past few months. It wasn't all about what women wanted from him. No, at times he was simply a horny bastard, and he knew it. She's probably done with me now, Josh thought.

"Maybe you should figure that out," Matt said. He put the tailgate up. "Well, I don't know about you, but I feel done here. Want to see what Shane's party's like? Maybe you could let off some steam there."

"Not really." Shane, the starting shortstop, always hosted the biggest parties, and students who attended them were an odd mixture: football and basketball players, wrestlers, students who had played sports in high school but weren't good enough at the college level to compete, and a lot of women. Eventually, fights broke out—either because of drunken athletic arguments about which sport was toughest or about women—and the cops were called. "I'm in the mood for a little quiet. At home we used to cruise the dirt roads and drink. I think I'd rather drive and listen to the radio."

"I'll hang with you for a while, I guess," Matt said.

David

David manned the grill on the patio, turning over a burger so slowly and gingerly that it slid in between the grill's rods and landed on the propane burner. When the burger's grease threw a flame a foot high, smoke wafted up David's nose, and he sneezed violently, unable to cover his mouth in time.

"Why don't you let me take that?" Burt said more than asked, pointing at the spatula in David's hand. "I don't want mine covered in your snot or at the bottom of the grill."

"Thanks," David said as he handed it to Burt. "I'm glad I threw on a couple extra."

"And bless you, Dave. I didn't mean to be rude."

Burt flipped over two burgers with ease. Flames leapt and meat sizzled, the burner set too high, David noticed, now that he his eyes didn't burn from so much smoke. As Burt adjusted the flame, David admired that a man with so much bulk in the middle but such skinny arms and shoulders—from certain angles he appeared both slim and fat—could be so deft. Burt side-stepped, shifting his weight from foot to foot, and flipped the rest of the burgers, each flip taking not more than two seconds, and he added a slice of cheddar to each one as quickly as a short-order cook during lunch rush. Now the flames, instead of engulfing the burgers, licked them. Maybe Burt had chosen the wrong line of work, David thought. Maybe he'd be happier running a bar and grill instead of a radio station.

"So how's your boy doing?" David asked. "Talk to him yet?"

Burt poked at the grill with the spatula and said, “Well, I took your advice, and Leslie and I prayed about it and talked it over, and we decided you were right. We called him Monday and told him. Best just to get it over with like you said.”

“And?”

Burt turned around, smiled, said, “You know, Josh surprised me,” and turned back to the grill. “He took it really well, and get this. He thanked me for telling him so early so he could make other plans and look for work elsewhere. But it made me feel guilty, too.” He scraped a piece of charred burger from the grill and flicked it into the fire. “I mean, we tell our kids that if they study hard and get a degree that they’ll have jobs waiting for them, but shit-fire—excuse me, Rev—the economy’s so bad a man can’t hire his own son like he promised. Not full-time anyway. And for peanuts. It just doesn’t seem right.”

“I’m sorry,” David said and put a hand on Burt’s shoulder. “I really am.”

The cheese on the burgers bubbled, and Burt scooped them up, setting them on the grill’s top rack. He closed the lid, wiped his hands on his jeans, and turned around.

“How are Eric and Levi?” Burt asked.

“Eric’s working hard. He said that he couldn’t believe being a librarian could make him lose weight. He’s lost ten pounds since he started, walking around so much and shelving books and re-organizing the humanities section. He hasn’t said so, but I think he misses school now that he’s graduated. He’s sounded a little lonely the past few phone calls. Just something in his voice Marta noticed.”

“Yeah, adjusting’s tough. From college to real life. Boy, I barely remember.” Burt shook his head. “But at least he’s got steady work.”

"Thank God for that. And don't worry. Josh will, too. These things have a way of working themselves out for the best if we have a little faith."

"What about Levi?"

"The usual." And the usual was a disappointment. Levi, Eric's older brother by two years, was a bright young man who worked as a bartender in Dallas after flunking out of Southern Methodist University because he drank too much. He rarely called home and rarely returned calls, probably feeling guilty that he hadn't followed in David's footsteps by becoming a Methodist minister as he had initially planned to do ever since he was nine-years-old.

"Like you've always said, maybe he's a late-bloomer." Burt grabbed a platter and held it out to David. "You mind holding this? I think it's time to feed this hungry lot."

"Absolutely." David took it. "Thanks." David sneezed again and shivered. "God bless these damn Oklahoma allergies."

Bryce

Bryce, backstage, stared into a lighted vanity, smearing foundation on his cheeks and neck, feeling as though he were varnishing furniture that still needed sanding, when Chance appeared behind him in the mirror and said, “You really should have shaved first.” Chance smiled, his laugh lines creasing and showing his age. Almost forty. And sensitive about it when Bryce mentioned throwing him a party.

“I just did, smart ass. For the second time today.” Before Chance could move, Bryce coated Chance’s nose with foundation.

Chance hugged Bryce from behind, kissed his neck, and tousled his hair. “My big bear with permanent five o’clock shadow. I’m so proud of you, going onstage in drag for the first time. Nervous?”

“I’ve been onstage before.”

“Not like this.”

The foundation isn’t working, Bryce thought. I’m going to be the ugliest guy up there tonight. He reached for more, ready to dab at his face again, but Chance put his hand on Bryce’s wrist.

“That’s not your only tool, hon,” Chance said.

“Isn’t this what you do? God knows I’ve watched you plenty of times.”

“Different face. You want me to do it?”

“What the hell. I don’t know what I’m doing anyway.”

After Bryce closed his eyes and hung his head, he felt Chance’s hands on his shoulders. “Lean back and chin up. Good. Now, swivel in your chair and look at me.”

Bryce did and saw, all at once, the supposed cliché and stereotype Chance was and loved—the most patient and yet bitchy gay man he'd ever known, a cosmetologist great at his job who worked harder than anyone he had met—twelve hour days were the norm—and who knew how to improve anyone's looks in minutes. He also saw the man Chance wasn't: a man's man, Bryce's usual type before meeting him. But as Bryce had discovered in his early teens, you can't control who you fell in love with. Chance was short and skinny, with blue eyes, a petite and slender nose that turned up, and a small pouty mouth. He looked great in drag. Well, if you liked women. And he wasn't a cliché, as some thought, even some of his customers. But Bryce knew that anyone who wasn't gay probably viewed him that way, especially here, in the middle of Oklahoma City.

"Now, just listen to Allie," Chance said. "And breathe. Haven't you been listening? How can anyone be so tense when she's singing?"

"All I've heard are my pores screaming. God, the size of them."

Chance put a hand flat to his chest and faked wiping away a tear. "Oh, it's the first time I've heard you complain about your pores. The straightest gay man ever is finally growing up." As Chance's hand slid down his chest and hung at his side, his face contracted and his eyes narrowed. "I don't like you being self-conscious. It's not you. Shut it, close your eyes again, listen, and let me do my thing."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I said to shut it."

If Chance had talked to him like this on any other occasion and if they had been alone, Bryce knew he would have lost his temper. He'd yell—talking worse to Chance than Chance had to him—and would probably make him cry. Bryce would have regretted

that, felt terrible, apologized, comforted Chance, and apologized again, and Chance would be genuinely hurt, but he'd milk it, and Bryce would point this out, and so on. Makeup and hair, though, were Chance's profession, and he sometimes talked to his customers in the same manner. Yes, just let it go and listen. Relax.

The last thirty seconds were all Bryce caught, but Chance was right. Allie's voice, clear and powerful, soothed him, her bravery infectious: she was the only drag to sing instead of lip-sync, her nerves, like her voice, unshakeable, and her conviction reminded many that, although they were here to entertain and pretend, their shared culture was not an act. Once she let go of the final note and the music faded, he heard other noises in the large dressing room. Raul recited his lines, whispering to himself, and grew quiet. Bryce heard buttons snap and zippers zip, lips popping after puckering, the shush of hairspray and perfume, and the click of high heels on both sides of him, two pairs coming closer, one from the stage and the other from deeper in the room. Both stopped in front of him. As much as Bryce wanted to open his eyes, he didn't—Chance was applying eye shadow.

"You know, he's kind of a cute ogre now. Before, well, just an ogre." Bryce recognized the Mexican accent and the slight fake lisp affected to get into character. Raul reminded him of a tall version of John Leguizamo.

"One more word, Raul, and I'll dropkick you back across the border," Bryce said.

"I'll latch onto your leg like a rabid chupacabra, white boy."

"Yeah, yeah. Go make them bust a gut, Raul."

Bryce heard Raul take two steps and say, "Nice yodeling, Allie."

A raspy voice replied, "Alex, now that I'm backstage." Lower, he said, "Stop for a moment and let him open his eyes."

Bryce felt two more brush strokes. “Okay, open them,” Chance said.

Bent down in front of Bryce was Alex, almost nose to nose with him, and it was only at this distance, or possibly from a foot farther away, that Bryce could tell Alex was a man, his stubble hard to miss. “If I can do it, you can do it,” Alex said. “My first time onstage, I squeaked. I could barely make a sound. But you’ve done this. Just not in drag. Have fun with it.”

“Jesus, Alex, your voice sounds awful,” Chance said. “Are you going to be able to sing in the finale?”

Alex straightened, and Bryce smelled his perfume, something reminiscent of cotton candy with something spicier underneath. “Yeah, it just needs a little lemon and honey, some tea, some rest. I shouldn’t sing Queen. Too high for a smoker.”

As Alex walked away, Bryce said, “Thanks, Allie. Appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome, and it’s Alex, dammit.”

The others congratulated Alex, and Bryce closed his eyes, not so much because he had to, but because it calmed him. As Chance finished his work, he spoke, much as he would to his customers, softly, as though in confidence. “So I ventured out into the club and peeked around, and guess who made it out tonight? I bet you won’t, so I’ll just tell you. Eric. He’s so cute. So nervous. You can tell from a distance. He didn’t see me or anything. He finally made it out of that cramped little apartment. Isn’t that great? I know he said he wanted to come, but I didn’t think he would as shy as he is. So who do you think we should introduce him to? Who would be good for him? Raul’s too crass, Scott’s too quiet, too much like Eric, and Drew, God Drew wouldn’t, well, maybe he would, but Tim, now he—”

"You know I don't think he's gay," Bryce said. "But introduce him to all of them. Poor kid seems lonely."

"Oh, what do you know? Your gaydar doesn't kick in until your ass is goosed."

"Maybe it doesn't, but I still don't think he's gay. You ever notice how he stares at Lisa at work?"

"Oh, please. Everyone stares at Lisa. I sometimes stop and stare. She's fantastic."

"Fine. Don't believe me."

"I don't." Chance lifted Bryce's chin, and Bryce opened his eyes, watching Chance study his face as though he were trying to find a flaw. "That'll work. Now you just need your wig done."

Eric

A drink or two—Eric had stopped counting—and more than a few acts later, he began to understand the dynamic of the performances. Even though he didn't understand some of the jokes and had never heard some of the songs, each performer seemed to fit into one of two general categories. Either they poked fun at themselves and other gays, or they took themselves and each other seriously. In either case, they were applauded and appreciated. They accepted each other. Without question, it seemed.

But what was this "they"? Eric wondered. Wasn't he a part of the crowd? Shouldn't he think of them as "we"? He was here. And even though he wasn't participating in the show, wasn't he still a part of it? Eric wondered, *Is not being gay enough reason to think in terms of "me" versus "them"?* He was unsure, until a voice over the P.A. system announced, "And now our finale. Introducing Olivia Newton-John and John Travolta." And there his friends were.

Bryce and Chance stepped out from opposite ends of the stage, and the music to "You're the One That I Want" began. In a blonde wig and dressed in tight black leather Capri pants with a matching halter and high heels, Bryce appeared to be exactly what he was, a tall athletic man dressed as a woman. Wide shoulders. Legs unshaven. A dark, hairy stomach. Too much makeup to cover the shadows of his face. A stuffed bra that made his broad chest look more like torpedoes than breasts. Chance, from across the stage, appeared small and feminine in comparison—high cheekbones, a light brow, and a rounded forehead—even though he wore a heavy leather jacket, his black hair slicked back.

When Eric saw them, he thought he understood what he had been trying to tell himself—that his thinking of "me" and "them" had nothing to do with the fact that the others in the room were gay. His friends were right there, spotlighted, and he thought of them in terms of "we." "They"—the crowd—had nothing to do with himself or his friends, except for the room in which they shared. "They" could be straight, and he still would think of them as "they." It had nothing to do with sexuality, Eric realized, and he felt even more at ease—drunk but glad he wasn't generalizing, a thought, he was sure that his father would share, whether or not he agreed with where Eric had chosen to spend Halloween night. Not judging others was what his father had hammered into him while growing up any time he had made fun of or insulted anyone.

As Bryce and Chance danced toward one another across the stage—Chance's singing a little off-key and Bryce's falsetto reminiscent of John Cleese in a Monty Python episode—others stepped onstage. The people behind Bryce appeared to be women. They sounded like women, anyway. And behind Chance were men, and Eric thought he recognized a couple of them from the earlier performances, now dressed as T-Birds. To Eric, the men sounded like men, the women like women, except for Bryce who sang like neither, hamming it up, every movement of his body exaggerated; even his wig bounced higher and swayed more as the song continued, as though it had come to life and was conscious of its part to play. This continued through "You're the One That I Want" and right into "We Go Together," during which Eric enjoyed the pageant the most, familiar with the gender roles and with *Grease*, a film Eric's mother had watched countless times at home. For a moment, he felt at home, until, with the women standing in a line beside Bryce on stage left, and with the men standing in a line beside Chance on the right, the

kissing began. Until the women kissed one another, and so did the men. And so did Bryce and Chance, for a long time, much longer than anyone else, the performers stopping and smiling and clapping for them. It was the first time Eric had seen them give one another anything besides a quick smack on the lips.

The crowd roared.

Lisa picked up her purse from the bar and slung it over her shoulder. “Tell Bryce and Chance hi for me, okay?” she said.

“Leaving already?” Eric asked.

“I can’t keep up with the conversation.”

“Sorry, Lisa,” Eric said. Drunkenly, he confessed, “You make me nervous.” Before he could react—and even if he had had the time he more than likely wouldn’t have moved even though she did intimidate him—she gave him a peck on the cheek. “So what’s your costume?”

“Maybe you’ll find out next year.” Lisa’s eyes swept the club and circled back to Eric. “Or maybe not.” She took two steps away, but walked back. “Do you want to get a drink somewhere quieter?”

“I promised Bryce and Chance I’d meet them after the show.”

Lisa laughed. “Right. Okay.” She shook her head. “See you Monday, Eric.”

Joshua

Josh and Matt cruised for close to an hour around Lake Carl Blackwell, eventually making their way to Lake McMurtry, listening to the radio and drinking beer and trying to remember where they were the first time they heard whatever song happened to be playing on the radio. In order to play the game, though, they had to keep changing stations. Matt listened to rock, and almost all of his memories were attached to Oklahoma City and the suburbs; Josh, however, listened to country and all his memories were attached to Beaver's Walk, the surrounding dirt and gravel roads, and the very truck they were in. They talked about how they had lost their virginity, stories they had heard before, and about their sexual conquests afterward, the songs and the women who, at the time, meant the most to them. They drove and drove and talked and talked, slopping drops of beer on themselves and on the truck's bench seat until, eventually, they had to take a leak.

Both doors creaked open and they slammed them shut after getting out, staggering to the sloping edge of a ditch, a commercial blaring from the truck's speakers. In mid-stream, Matt said, "You know, I'm never going to wear a baseball uniform in fall again."

"I know," Josh said.

Josh certainly knew; in fact, Josh had been the one to suggest wearing their uniforms off campus when they didn't have a game, against the rules or not. It was their senior year, and neither Josh nor Matt had ever started regularly. Now that they were on their way out, with only one more season left, they had talked about how they already missed baseball. It was easy to miss, since they hardly ever took the field, only late in a

game when the team was already winning or losing handily. They knew that this year would be no different, although they were seniors, because there were plenty of talented sophomores and juniors who hit and fielded better than they did, but scholarships at a large school were aplenty. Besides, seniors were valued for their maturity and leadership, even if their potential didn't pan out. After the upcoming season, if they wore a uniform again in the fall, it wouldn't be for baseball. No, it would be for softball, a slow pitch game mostly composed of middle-aged and overweight coworkers.

Josh knew that Matt still didn't know where he'd end up working, but Josh's path was set. Or so he thought just four days ago. His father had already talked old Jed Thompson, the radio station owner back in Josh's hometown, into hiring him after he graduated with his degree in mass communications. Josh hadn't known what he'd do there—probably shit work until he had proven himself, and he hadn't thought there'd be much to do at such a small station even if he proved that he knew what he was doing. But he wouldn't have cared. He just wanted to be close to home and close to his family. Now he didn't know what he was going to do and where he would end up. Jobs were scarce in his hometown, scarce everywhere, so he had heard.

As Josh pissed, he studied the ditch's slope and the low flat plain beyond that led to a small brick farmhouse. The terrain reminded Josh of *the mound*, not the mound of a baseball diamond, but the mound on top of the storm cellar in his backyard at home, covered with grass, except for the door and the place on top where he had worn away a patch of dirt, as he practiced pitching when he was a boy, pretending it was a major league pitcher's mound. Until he was sixteen, when he finally earned his driver's license, he usually practiced alone, winding up on top of the cellar and firing a baseball at the

brick chicken coop, which he had drawn the strike zone with white chalk. It was the only chicken coop made of brick he had ever seen—as though the original builder had thought that brick offered chickens more shelter, as though a tornado wouldn't suck the birds right out of the windows, which were missing a number of panes of glass. He practiced there more or less every day for eight years, to the agitation of the hens and rooster, which his mother pointed out to him just as agitatedly, his father's joints too sore to play with him when he was home. His father helped him practice some, maybe once a week at best, but he spent most of daylight at the station.

Claire, his older sister by ten years, wasn't much help either, although she was willing to whenever Josh wanted to play. She tried to catch Josh's throws, but she would always flinch from the ball no matter how softly he lobbed it to her. When he wanted to practice fielding grounders, he begged her to hit a ball in his direction, but she hardly ever struck the ball. But that wasn't her fault. She lacked the coordination and the sight. He couldn't remember the particulars, but he knew that during childbirth, she hadn't received enough oxygen and had been disabled. It would have been nice if she could have helped him practice. In all honesty, however, Josh asked her to play more for her sake than his, because she was cooped up in the country and unable to live away from home, probably ever. She loved attention, and playing with a ball with her brother—who, to her, was a genius, athletically and intellectually, even though Josh knew, even then, that he was above average in one area yet far from gifted, and below average in the other, who threw the ball to his sister underhanded—delighted and thrilled her. Josh, no matter how much he loved his sister and father, however, felt as though he had been cheated, and he wondered what kind of player he'd be now if he had had a little more help.

Josh shook himself and zipped up. “Have you thought that if you had just practiced more that things would’ve been different?”

“Man, Josh,” Matt said. “If I had practiced more, you would’ve just seen me piss out tiny baseballs.” He pulled his pants down a little more, half-squatting. “Here, wanna see me dump some catcher’s gear?”

Josh guffawed, kicked a stone from the gravel road into a ditch, and grabbed them each another Mickey’s. He put the tailgate down, sat, and drank. “This is what we used to do back home,” Josh said. “We’d find a quiet road. Easy enough out there. Just drink and listen to music. Make out.”

Matt sat down next to Josh. “Not me. If I wasn’t on the field, I’d be at the mall, and I’d make out at the movies.”

“It was a lot easier to get away with things there. Take a girl out on a country road, a freshman or a sophomore, and Amy wouldn’t be any the wiser.” Josh laughed. “Well, at least for a few days. Until word got around, but I could always convince her it was just gossip. You know, some little girl lying about being with the baseball star. Shit, I never got caught in the act there, that’s for sure.”

Matt spat into the ditch. “Watch out. Drunken confession fixing to come outta left field.”

“It ain’t complicated. Amy’s always wanted to get away from Beaver’s Walk. Always. I’ve always known I’d go back if baseball didn’t work out. And it hasn’t.” Josh didn’t mention that the job he thought had been waiting on him hadn’t worked out either. And maybe, Josh began to realize, that was why he had been fooling around with Charlene—to give Amy an easy out. To get her to realize that she needed to move on

without him. To find a life beyond small town Oklahoma.

"So instead of talking about it, you dick around?" Matt said, perceptively, a trait Josh admired.

"I'm going to be the asshole no matter what, so what's the difference?"

"I don't know, man. That's pretty cold."

Because the music was so loud and because he was a bit lost in himself, Josh didn't notice a man walking through the field and climbing up the ditch until he heard the crunch of gravel. The man clicked on a flashlight and shined it into Josh's eyes.

"Boys, why don't you turn that music down?" the man said.

Josh jumped off the tailgate, and the man shined his light at Matt and at the bed of the truck. A little nervous but wanting to be polite, Josh did as he was asked and turned down the radio and walked back to the rear of the truck. "I'm sorry, sir. Thought we were far enough away that we wouldn't bother you," Josh said.

"There's been robberies around here in the past," the man said, "so I'm careful." He flashed his light back and forth. "You boys don't really look the part, but you never know."

Josh's eyes were becoming used to the difference in light and he noticed the man, with a weathered face and gray hair, was probably in his sixties. He held a shotgun and wore dark overalls. Josh also noticed that Matt hadn't moved a muscle. "No, sir," Josh said. "We haven't taken anything from anybody."

"All the same, son, I already called the sheriff. Looks like from all those beer bottles"—he again shined his flashlight on the bed—"you shouldn't be driving. So let's just stay put."

"For drinking on a dirt road?" Josh said. "Come on, Matt. Let's go."

"I think we should listen to him," Matt said.

"He isn't going to do anything because we didn't do anything to him," Josh said—both for Matt and the man. "Get up." When Matt didn't move, Josh turned his back to the man, grabbed Matt by the shoulders, jerked him up and pushed him in the direction of the passenger door. Josh walked around the back of the truck, for a moment thinking he should have gone around the front to put the truck between him and the gun, but the man hadn't even bothered to raise it, and Josh wasn't even sure that, had the man raised it, he would have cared.

"I really think you should stay," the man said. "A ticket's a whole lot better than killing yourselves on the road."

"Appreciate it," Josh said. He hopped in his truck and leaned out the door. "Take care."

Josh closed his door and eased into the accelerator, not wanting to spray the man with dirt and gravel. But after a little ways, he gunned it and looked into his rearview mirror. The man still stood there, but after a moment Josh saw his flashlight indistinctly swinging back and forth through the dust and dark, down the ditch, and out of sight.

"Enough country for tonight," Matt said. "I'm done." He changed radio stations. "And I don't mean just the damn music either. That old ass had a gun, didn't you see the size of that thing?"

"Yeah, it didn't look any bigger than a 20-gauge to me," Josh said, although he couldn't have been sure in the dark. "Haven't you been around firearms before?"

"A couple of times," Matt said. "But, shit, I never looked at one the way I just

did."

"Well, now you got a story you can tell tonight." Josh rolled through a stop sign—he always believed traffic signs were mere suggestions when driving in the country—and hung a left. "That's if we're not stopped. Better head back to the highway. A cop'll have an easy time spotting us out here."

"I've got no problem keeping you company. You've had a rough time. But I've had all the excitement I can stand."

Josh laughed. "I thought all catchers were calm. You grew up in Del City, right?"

"Yeah."

"Is that on the east or west side of I-35?"

"East, you know that."

Josh smacked the steering wheel. "All you guys east of 35 are a little squeamish."

"Don't give me that tough western Oklahoma talk again. I just want a little civilization right now, that's all."

"Fine. What're you thinking?"

"The Lair," Matt said.

"Hey, I like a little T and A just like every other man, but I've told you before and I'll say it again. I'm not paying to look at it."

"I thought it might cheer you up."

"It won't, but look. You just did what I wanted to do, and I appreciate it. So let's go where you want to go. Except to a strip club."

"I'm sick of this cow town anyway."

After a little discussion, Matt convinced Josh to go to Oklahoma City. Josh had

argued at first, not wanting to drive out of town, but Matt insisted that getting away from Stillwater might be what Josh needed. Josh agreed, although he wasn't a fan of any city and didn't really think it would put him in a better mood, with the understanding that Matt drive. Josh drove to Patchin Hall, their dorm, one of the few that allowed alcohol, where they packed a change of clothes and grabbed another six pack. Once Matt's car was loaded, Josh walked to his truck and grabbed his bat from behind the seat.

As Josh got in the car, Matt asked, "What's that for?"

"Just part of my costume. What's a ballplayer without his bat?"

"When was the last time you had a hit?"

"Oh, shut it. You aren't much better."

The drive, except for the radio, was quiet. Josh and Matt had spent so much time together in the past few years—they were the only roommates either had ever had—that the relative silence was comfortable for both of them. As they passed the lights of Guthrie, Josh leaned the seat back as far as it would go, placed his hat over his eyes, and twisted his bat in his hands, wishing he had taken baseball a little more seriously.

Because Josh had spent so much time practicing alone as a child, he sometimes grew bored of tossing a ball in the air and smacking it. It wasn't much of a challenge to hit the ball and send it flying where he wanted, so he developed a few tricks, as any boy, who had too much time on his hands growing up in the country would do. He taught himself to twirl his bat and toss it up in the air, end over end, and to catch it as though it were a baton. After a few months, he could do this rather well and moved on to controlling his swing. Under an old oak, Josh would take practice swings. He'd choke the bat, placing his hands a third of the way up its length, get into his batter's stance, bring

his shoulders back, begin the swinging motion with his hips, and flick his wrists. But here he stopped, and this was the trick. He wouldn't allow his hips to follow through; his shoulders, forearms, and biceps froze, and he locked his wrists. The bat, which had just had such a powerful momentum, appearing as if it would strike the oak tree with force, would barely tap the bark.

When he had been a freshman at OSU he had shown the upperclassman this trick to impress them, to try to fit in. Some were entertained, others thought it was a waste of energy, and a few invited their teammates to watch. Josh showed them a couple of more times, the chain link practice fence barely reverberating with each mock swing. Quite a crowd had gathered as Josh showed off—even his batting coach who, after Josh was done, said, "Now I know why you can't get a better hit than a double." Coach Harper took off his sunglasses. "That damn hitch of yours needs to be gotten rid of, son. Get rid of it, and you might be looking at twenty-five homers per season. Don't and you'll never feel a bat strike the ball so that you'll know it's a homer before it even leaves the infield. I wondered what the problem was. We got work to do."

But Josh's swing never cleared up completely, no matter how much Coach Harper worked with him. Because he had spent so much time throwing fastballs at the chicken coop, his muscles and tendons couldn't adjust to a curve or a slider. He had two pitches: a fast and a breaking. He did, however, field well but he had to admit that he was a one-dimensional player. He knew he wouldn't even make it in the minors.

The *thunk, thunk* of the tires across the interstate's slabs of concrete caused Josh to drift into sleep, the sound reminding him of tapping a baseball with his bat and trying to keep it in the air before he inevitably missed, losing his concentration to the dream of

being the baseball star he'd now never be, and it hit the ground.

David

With a pipe clenched between his teeth, David walked across the living room into the parlor, carrying two plastic wine glasses filled with cabernet. Marta, David's wife, preferred bottled wine—Heck, who didn't? David thought—but she had learned to make do and accept a Methodist reverend's salary. Which wasn't much. It never had been, even when attendance boomed, not like these days when church members were moving out of town to find work.

Marta and Leslie, Burt's wife, were straddling a piano bench and discussing which songs the choir would sing next week. Amazed that they were comfortable in the same position for so long, David hesitated a few feet away before handing them their requests and stopped and stared. Both women were in their late-forties, David and Burt a bit older, but the girls had so far carried their age with much more grace; both were still slim and almost the same height, Marta a little shorter but seeming to have more authority because of the steaks of gray in her short brown hair, her hawkish nose that made her more handsome than pretty, and her reading glasses. Leslie seemed a bit younger with her long blonde hair, small features, and heavier makeup. If David had just met them, he probably would have mistaken them for sisters—one a little bookish, the other considered the pretty one of the family—by the way they spoke to one another: playful, intimate, a light touch here and there for emphasis and empathy and sympathy, a playful swipe when either was sarcastic.

David and Burt, however, hadn't held up so well after accumulated years of long hours of sitting on their duffs, Burt at the radio station and David at church. Both were

overweight, Burt more so than David, and both had aged more quickly, probably because of the pipes they smoked and the bourbon they sipped.

"Well, if you don't like that one," Leslie said, "how about 'This Is My Father's World'?" Annoyed, from what David could tell, Leslie tucked a lock of hair behind an ear.

"No," Marta said, "I'm getting sick of Babcock. How about Wesley's 'Love Divine, All Loves Excelling'?" She licked a thumb and index finger and flipped pages.

Taking the book from Marta, Leslie said, "It's not even Thanksgiving yet."

"Oh, it'll get us in the mood for Advent." Marta removed her reading glasses, pinched her nose, and put them back on. "Times have been tough. Let's sing something hopeful."

"But almost a full month before Advent begins?"

David enjoyed their arguments, and even if he wanted to interrupt them, he knew better than to offer his advice unless specifically asked, and even then he felt as though he had to be careful. If not, they'd both tell him how wrong he was. Their familiarity with hymns made him appear downright ignorant. But if he said something during a moment of silence before their argument had been settled, when it seemed they were at an impasse but could no longer say anything to one another, he could sometimes slip in a request. Sometimes it worked, but sometimes his advice and ignorance united them, not so much in opposition to him but simply to find a better alternative—together—to what David had suggested.

"Rev," said Burt, who was sitting on the brick hearth in front of the fireplace across the room from the women, "are you eyeballing my pretty wife?"

"No way," David said. "I'm more democratic than that. I'm appreciating both of them."

Leslie's eyes bulged until Marta placed a hand on Leslie's arm and said, "He's being ambiguous on purpose."

"Oh, let me have my fun."

"I swear," Burt said, "he gets you every time."

"He meant he appreciates our work, doesn't he?" Leslie sighed. "One of these days I'll figure out your sense of humor before getting embarrassed."

Amused with himself, David pulled a book of matches from his front shirt pocket and lit a match.

"Hold it right there, mister," Marta said. "You do this every single time we have a get-together. Do you really think that I'm ever not going to notice?"

David smiled. He knew Marta found the smell of pipe tobacco nostalgic—her father had smoked until a decade ago, when his doctor ordered him to quit after a minor heart attack—and Marta had chosen the particular tobacco that nestled, packed and tight, in his pipe's bowl. Many times, when it was cold outside and when David was lost in thought, Marta said nothing when David lit his pipe in his study while writing a sermon.

"Go on," Marta said and shooed him away. "You know the rules."

Raising his arms, David spoke to the ceiling, "She has spoken." He turned around and said to Burt, "Looks like we're freezing outside. Again."

With a grunt, Burt slowly stood, one hand on the brick hearth to help himself get up. Burt no longer moved well, his bony knees having trouble supporting years of needless weight. David guessed, by the way he moved, that Burt's hip was bothering

him—bursitis—as it usually did when the weather changed abruptly. Burt limped across the room and grabbed his coat, and David followed him.

"Need a refresher?" David asked.

Burt nodded. "Why not?" After gulping the little left in the tumbler, he handed it to David. "Tastes better than aspirin and warmer than my coat."

Outside, Burt leaned against a faux pillar, and David paced leisurely, passing by the front storm door several times. Every time he passed, David peeked at Marta and Leslie, and he eventually stopped in front of the door, the porch light reflecting off the glass showing David's face, middle-aged, with laugh lines, a face he sometimes barely recognized, unlike his wife's, whose face his memory morphed instantly, without thought, into the girl he fell in love with when he in his early-twenties. But he appeared almost a stranger to himself compared to what he looked like when he was young.

"It's too bad Anthony and Stephen couldn't stick around longer tonight," David said. Anthony and Stephen were young men in their early thirties, active in the church, both married and with children close to the same age.

"Kids," Burt said. "They mentioned having to get up early and go to a wrestling tournament."

"And before they know it, their kids will be out of the house, and they'll be over here late wondering where all their time has gone. They'll pat their bellies." David smacked his. "They'll wonder how they've gotten so fat, and they'll think it'd just happened."

"Didn't take me so long after I got married."

"I'm glad my wife doesn't cook like yours. I'd be massive by now."

"Whoa-ho. Thanks a lot there, buddy." Burt placed his hands on his stomach, and there they both were, David and Burt, holding their stomachs, cupping them as though the size of their bellies measured their experience, their strengths and weaknesses, wins and losses, their accomplishments and what was still left undone. After all, David thought, they weren't old, not even close. But the talk of children and of other parents who still had children at home made David feel old, and the weight around his middle didn't help. He expected Burt felt the same.

Both David and Burt jumped when the storm door banged open and Leslie said, "It's time to go" with one hand on the door handle, the other on a hip, as though to dare Burt to argue with her, Marta behind her looking concerned.

"What's the rush?" Burt asked.

"Amy just called me. She said that Joshua's on another bender, and he won't pick up his cell. She mentioned, through some tears, mind you, not coming over for Thanksgiving. I couldn't make out why. But she wanted to let us know that she's almost sure he's driving drunk."

Burt handed David his drink. "I guess he didn't take the news about his job as well as we thought," Burt said, handing Leslie his key ring. "I don't know what we can do from here though. We're hours away."

"You can try calling him," Leslie said, stepping out onto the porch with Marta following. "Maybe he'll answer for you. I'm going to call Amy back. I told her I would when we got home."

Marta hugged Leslie, then Burt, and thanked them for coming.

"We should have waited and told him in person like I said," Leslie told Burt. But

she looked at David when saying it, and David knew those words were for him; after all, he had advised them to tell Joshua as soon as possible.

As Leslie and Burt walked down the steps and to their car, David called after them, “Please let us know if you need anything. If there’s something we can do, just ask.”

Bryce

Bryce finally spotted Eric sitting at the end of the bar, clapped him on the shoulder, to which Eric flinched, and asked, “So what did you think?” To the bartender, he yelled, “Beer me.” Eric hadn’t yet answered. He sat there staring at something off in the distance, his blue eyes bloodshot, and Bryce could tell, even through the skeletal makeup Eric wore, that his face was oily and bloated, unnatural in appearance because Eric was so thin, not having yet put on any adult weight. Even his thin sharp nose—a woman’s nose, Bryce thought as he sat down—was slick with oil. The kid was hammered, but Bryce thought that Eric deserved the chance to cut loose. He knew that Eric hardly ever went anywhere besides work, where for the several months since he’d been hired, Eric had been methodically reorganizing the humanities section at the University of Oklahoma’s library, where Bryce and Eric worked together.

“I think I had fun,” Eric slurred, and Bryce noticed Eric’s apparent surprise at his own answer. Bryce watched Eric nod, but Eric was so drunk that he looked like a bobblehead, nodding over and over, his head titling to one side. “I really did. Especially seeing you dressed, well”—Eric barked a laugh—“just as you still are. There’s no way I could have imagined it with the way you act.”

“That’s part of the joke. Most everyone here knows that if it weren’t for Chance I’d be a total bear.” Bryce waited for Eric to ask what a bear was, but he didn’t, and Bryce, prepared to tell Eric anyway, felt a familiar soft touch on his shoulder. Turning around, Bryce smiled at Chance, who gave him a peck on the cheek and put a hand on both of Eric’s and Bryce’s shoulders.

"We were a hit," Chance said. "Everyone says it was a lot better than last year." Eric turned, and Chance smiled. "Did you like it?"

"That's what we're talking about," Bryce said. "He said he did, but he's as drunk as a sailor in port."

"You said I should cut loose," Eric said. "Those were your exact words. So I did. And you know what?" Eric grabbed Bryce's upper arm. "It made everything funnier. And, yeah, I'm drunk. I don't think I've ever been this drunk."

"Oh, I see, so it wasn't funny unless you had a lot to drink?" Bryce asked.

"That's not what I'm saying."

Bryce and Chance, after the finale and while all of the performers were congratulating each back stage, had continued their argument as to whether Eric was gay. Now, to prove a point to Chance, Bryce asked Eric a question, yelling so that he was sure Chance could hear: "So, Eric, have you met anybody? Introduced yourself to anyone? Guy or girl? Have you met anyone interesting?"

Eric set his drink down and looked around. "Too many people. Too much noise. Can't tell which is which, and I might puke anyway. Besides, I've got work and you guys and my family and my books. What else do I need?"

"Chance," Bryce said, softer, "you see?"

"Doesn't prove a thing either way," Chance said. He ran his hand through his hair, pursed his lips while lifting a finger to them, and nodded. "But I seem to remember someone getting just as drunk as Eric his first time here."

Bryce had nothing to say. He knew he had behaved in the same way his first time here.

Eric

Eric focused on what he had just said: my family and my books. Books, he thought. Books. He scolded himself silently, realizing he had forgotten that he had thirty pages left to read before finishing *Holy the Firm,* a book that both he and his father were supposed to talk about tomorrow afternoon on the phone, and now Eric knew he would be hung over in the morning, maybe into the afternoon, so hung over that he'd have trouble concentrating on the page, so hung over that, even if he finished the book, he'd say little on the phone over the pulse of a headache. Even though Eric had never suffered a bad hangover, he knew they could be debilitating. About once a month for as long as he could remember, his parents had thrown a party, and sometimes—certainly not often—his father would feel awful the next morning, and Eric remembered his father telling him that, if he ever drank, he had to remember to drink water, too. That it would be better if he didn't drink at all, but to drink water if he ever drank alcohol as though he were thirsty. Eric now knew that he'd had another and another and another, drinking because he was thirsty, only afterward realizing that he was drunk.

It was time to go, Eric decided. Time to sleep, to recover, to go back to his quiet life, of privacy and slow, deliberate, and methodical living. Eric stood, took a few lurching steps, then stood stock still, not trusting his legs. The music was loud, the smoke thick—and there were so many people, so many dim voices underneath the thumps of bass, cracks of snare, and zaps of synthesizer that he couldn't focus on any one detail. The only constants were the pain in his head and the high pitch ringing in his ears, a ring he was surprised he could hear through the music, a ring he only heard late at night while

reading in bed on the edge of sleep, fading as he slipped into dreams. He locked his knees and wobbled. As he tried to regain his balance, every sound shifted as though he were underwater, as though the entire bar—the laughter, the yelling, the bass that felt as if it were changing his heart rate, the sound of glass breaking—was barreling past as he drifted and swayed in a current. The sounds lowered to a diving whine, and the ringing in his ears began to wash out. He closed his eyes, seeing blue behind his eyelids, the color blossoming to purple, to pink and red. For a moment, he imagined Beaver Creek where he, Josh, and his father used to fish when the sun set, where as a child he learned to love the comforting sounds of crickets, whippoorwills, and the lap of water.

Bryce

Bryce, noticing that Eric was in trouble, walked to him, and reached out, thinking that one hand would steady him, but Eric closed his eyes and swayed farther as though he would topple. After dropping his drink, the glass shattering on the floor, Bryce grabbed both Eric's shoulders, and when he did, Eric's eyes slid open.

"Whoa," Bryce said, "you should sit back down."

Chance was there, too, gripping one of Eric's elbows as Bryce shifted to support Eric's other arm. They both led him the few feet back to the bar. As they did, a few people dancing close by looked in their direction and hooted and raised their drinks. Bryce turned and waved.

"It just hit me," Eric said.

"What did?" Chance said.

"Everything I drank."

"It happens," Bryce said. "But we've got ya. Everything's just fine."

Eric tilted his head, his chin resting on his right shoulder. "Sure it is. Right."

"You're all done for the night, aren't you?" Bryce asked, but he meant it as a statement, spoken as a parent talks to a child. When Eric nodded, his head lolling but beginning to steady itself, Chance said, "Wherever your car is parked, it's staying. You can't drive."

"Hell, he can't even stand." Once they were all seated, with Bryce on Eric's left and Chance on the right, Chance leaned around Eric and told Bryce, "Now it's official. He pretty much acted just like you did your first time here."

"I wasn't that bad off."

"If you say so."

Bryce ordered water for Eric and set it in front of him. "Once you drink some of that, we're taking you home. Bottom's up."

Joshua

Josh woke, feeling a smack on his leg. “Josh,” Matt said, “we’re in the city.” Josh righted his seat and looked out the passenger window. Lights lined the highway, too many of them in his opinion, skyscrapers in the distance. He never understood why people wanted to live among so many other people and so much concrete and steel.

Through a yawn, Josh asked, “So what’s the plan?”

“I was thinking of showing you what you missed out on growing up in a small town,” Matt said.

“Oh yeah,” Josh said. “What’s that?” He felt as though he were sobering, so he grabbed a beer and took a swallow. It was warm and sour, a failing of all malt liquor, Mickey’s included, when it wasn’t cold.

“You’ll see. And if you can handle it, maybe we’ll stop and get a beer before heading to Bricktown.”

“That’s good because this Mickey’s tastes like piss.”

“Don’t worry about that. There’s good beer just about every place around here.” Matt smacked the steering wheel. “Shit, I just about forgot to call my parents to let them know they'll have company.” He grabbed his phone from his console.

“Matt, I don’t mean to sound like a pansy, but I don’t want to walk in drunk the first time I stay with your folks.”

“They won’t stay up for us. Heck, I feel bad just calling. They’re probably asleep.”

“Then leave them alone. I’ll send Eric a text. We can sack out there. You

remember Eric, right? My high school teammate?"

"Heck, I forgot all about Eric. How's he doing?"

Josh pushed the phone's keys. "As far as I know the same as he was during the summer. Just fine."

Matt drove for another ten minutes and turned here and there, now off the freeway. Josh read a street sign—"Pennsylvania"—but it didn't help him find which way was north. Eric had replied a couple of minutes ago, writing that it was fine if they crashed at his place, and Josh thought about why he hadn't talked to Eric in a while. Most people, Josh assumed, would be annoyed if he had dropped by from out of town unannounced and uninvited, but not Eric—Eric always tried to take things in stride and make people feel at home. But he simply wasn't much fun anymore. He used to be a hell-raiser his first two years in college, as though he were making up for lost time as a preacher's son, but he had mellowed in the past three years, reading more and drinking less whenever Josh visited. No matter how boring Eric was becoming, though, he reminded Josh of home, and he looked forward to seeing him.

Matt turned right, onto 39th street, Josh looking out the window and watching pedestrians walk on the sidewalk and through parking lots, and as he began to wake, he noticed that some of the women were tall.

"They sure do grow the girls big in this neighborhood," Josh said.

"Not any taller than anywhere else."

"Well, what do you call those—midgets?"

Matt stopped at a red light and leaned over Josh and squinted to take a closer look. Matt laughed and straightened. "You can call them girls if you want and I bet

they'd thank you. But they aren't women."

"You mean…? No. Here?"

"That's what I mean."

"Find a parking spot. I gotta take a closer look at this. What a goddamn freak show."

Matt found a spot close to the thick of pedestrian activity in a parking lot and pulled in. Josh, annoyed that it had taken Matt five minutes to find a place, took a swig of his warm beer, forgetting its flavor had gone south, and gagged.

"Damn, this is bad," Josh said. Holding the bottle up, he looked at it as though a scorpion were inside wriggling to get out.

"Cap it then," Matt said. "The Copa is just a couple of blocks away. We'll get a drink there and then head to Bricktown."

Before Matt had thrown the car into park, Josh had already stepped out and was now reaching back inside for his bat, knocking a couple of empty beer bottles out of the way. The glass bottles clanged against the aluminum bat, a sharp sound much higher than when Josh struck a ball.

"I don't know if they'll let you in with that," Matt said.

"It's Halloween. I could carry in a chainsaw and they wouldn't say a word, I bet."

Josh walked over to Matt's door and waited as Matt rummaged in the back seat. "Damn," Matt said. He got out of the car and rubbed his arms. "Wish I had brought a jacket. It's getting cold."

"You said it was close. Aren't you used to cold snaps? We won't be out in this long." Josh looked in both directions. "Which way?"

"All right," Matt said. "Come on."

They walked through the parking lot and onto the sidewalk to where Josh could see the front of the buildings. All the windows were lit up, a stark contrast to the dark brick buildings themselves. Some of the windows showed black cats, bats, pumpkins or witches on cardboard displays—businesses Josh assumed. In other windows, people walked by, behind neon Budweiser and Coors signs. Although Josh couldn't exactly hear music, he could feel bass rumble in his chest, and he guessed that he and Matt were walking by a dance club. Josh saw the double-doors, and just as Matt and he were across from the entrance, the doors opened, light pouring out, music thundering. Three people—Josh only saw their silhouettes because of the light behind them—walked out, two of them helping the third walk. Josh and Matt swerved around them, and as they passed, Josh heard one of them say, "Hey, you're walking better now, Eric, just a little…"

Josh and Matt passed the building, and on the left was another parking lot jammed with cars, and Josh finally saw what he was curious about a few minutes ago: two grown men dressed as women—tight miniskirts, wigs, stuffed bras and all. There was no mistaking them this close. They were twenty feet away and walking toward them. Josh slowed his walk, moseyed, stopped altogether, and rested the butt of his bat with a clank on a fire hydrant.

Josh watched Matt walk a few more steps, and Matt turned around. "What are you doing?" Matt said. "Let's go. I'm cold."

"Just give me a second," Josh said. He let the bat go for a moment, and it teetered on top of the fire hydrant until he placed his hand over the handle's crown. "I'm trying to think of something funny to say."

Eric

Once out in the cold air and relative quiet, with both Bryce and Chance helping him walk, the ringing in Eric's ears grew in volume. His stomach churned from drinking so much water earlier. It was sloshing from side to side with each step, as if its contents were waves crashing against jagged cliffs, creating foam. With each step, the waves increased in strength, sending the foam higher until Eric felt sure it would climb out of his throat. "I'm going to be sick," he said. "Let go." Bryce and Chance did as they were told, and Eric leaned against the side of the building with his back to it and bent at the waist, his hands on his knees. "Oh, this is awful," he said.

"Just get it out," Chance said. "You'll feel better."

Eric emptied his stomach, vomiting so hard that he broke capillaries in his throat. He tasted the blood. He spat, leaned against the brick building, and rested his temple on a gutter that ran the height of the building. The metal's cold soothed the throbbing in his head but not the ringing in his ears. He closed his eyes, grateful that his stomach felt like his own again, and he felt a hand on his shoulder. He heard Chance ask, "Feel better?" and he nodded. Eric felt so relieved that he thought he could go to sleep there and then, or at the least as soon as he was inside Bryce's and Chance's car, but a familiar voice jolted him, a cocky holler.

"Damn, those sure are some nice legs. Why don't you pull up those skirts so I can see what you've got?"

Eric stepped away from the building and stood on his toes, craning his neck to see who had hollered. A young man, underneath a streetlight and on the sidewalk, dressed in

a baseball uniform, his chest up and out, eyeballed two men in black miniskirts who were walking toward the ballplayer. A baseball cap shadowed the man's face, only his smile visible—his smile, like his voice, familiar. Behind him stood another young man, dressed the same but without a cap, who placed a hand on his friend's shoulder and spoke into his ear.

One of the men wearing a miniskirt, the taller of the two, yelled, "Hey, fuck you, you red…" His voice trailed off as the familiar ballplayer twirled a bat he held.

"Oh, don't be shy," the ballplayer hollered, now resting his bat on his shoulder. "You can feel free to call us rednecks, long as we can you fags. Fair's fair."

The shorter miniskirted man turned around, and the taller one, after he flipped the ballplayers off, followed, both power-walking in the opposite direction, their high heels echoing off buildings' walls.

"Ah hell, I was just playing," the ballplayer called after them.

Eric recognized the young man's voice, knowing well this sentence, "I was just playing," which Josh had always offered as an excuse when they had been children, when their roughhousing almost turned serious, when they had pretended to be WWE wrestlers and Josh had inevitably become carried away with a vice-like headlock that had left Eric momentarily unable to breathe or an open-handed blow that had accidentally connected. But this man couldn't be Josh. Josh never ventured far when he visited; the only bar he liked an Irish pub a few blocks from Eric's apartment. Eric had once suggested going to Bricktown, and Josh had scoffed at the idea, claiming that a yuppie paradise had no place on the plains and that if they had to go somewhere off the beaten path, the stockyards was the place to be.

Despite his doubt, Eric wove through the parking lot, seeking a closer look to be sure the cocky and insulting man wasn't Josh. Eric, drunk and dizzy and tired, no longer trusted his senses and believed the hateful ballplayer couldn't be his Josh; instead, he must be a strange version of Josh, one with a different story, a different childhood. Eric's Josh, although sometimes crass and impolite, was still quick to apologize when he knew he had hurt someone. He couldn't be the man holding his knees, bent over and laughing, even if his laugh—a bray that had always reminded Eric of a donkey when Josh behaved in a particularly ornery manner—did sound like Josh's. But the way he moved and spoke seemed far out of context here in the middle of the city. Eric refused to believe Josh would behave this way, so he rejected the notion, even though his feet carried him forward, his arms using parked cars as crutches to steady his wobbly and weakened legs.

But when the ballplayer behind him said, "Josh, cut it out—let's go," Eric could no longer deny Josh's identity. Coincidence stopped here. There was no mistaking Josh's roommate's voice, a deep baritone, strong and clear, nor his build—a few inches shorter than Josh but thicker and wider, and with his large arms and meaty hands, he gripped Josh underneath his arm pits, picked him up, and straightened him with ease. Matt placed a hand on Josh's chest and motioned with his other hand, palm out, toward a man walking toward them, as tall as Josh and as thick as Matt: Bryce, who walked quickly toward both of them.

"Sir," Matt yelled, "he's drunk. Please ignore him."

Josh shoved Matt out of the way and laughed at Bryce, who hadn't slowed and who shouted at Josh, "What the hell are you doing? Are you lost?" Without waiting for an answer, Bryce picked up speed as though he would walk right through Josh, and once

in arm's length, shoved him.

Josh stumbled backwards, his left foot catching on a fire hydrant, and almost tripped. After he regained his balance, he threw his head back and laughed. "Do you know what you're wearing? Are you lost?" He straightened and stood right in front of Bryce, squared to him, his bat gripped with his right hand.

Eric picked up his pace, his legs still wobbly. In front of him, to his right, at the lot's edge, stood Chance, holding his cellphone, telling Bryce to back off, but it was obvious Bryce either didn't hear or was ignoring him. Bryce pointed at Josh, shaking his index finger under his nose, just inches away, as though he were scolding a puppy and threatening it with a rolled up paper, pointing to Matt and to the bat Josh held, and he motioned for them to leave, his mouth moving but his voice too low to hear.

When Eric almost reached Chance, his hand slipped on a slick red fender coated with night's early frost, and he lost his balance. Eric's shoulder slammed into the car's fender and a car alarm blared. Its high-pitched wail dug into Eric's skull, pain blooming, the ring in his ears growing in volume.

Eric barely heard Chance yell, "That's far enough. You don't want to get mixed up in this." He squeezed Eric's shoulder and yelled to Bryce, "Just walk away" and then to Eric, "I'm calling 9-1-1." He held up a finger as though to say, *Just wait a minute,* walked away from the noise, a finger plugging his right ear so he could hear.

Matt placed a hand on Josh's shoulder and spoke, and although Eric couldn't hear, he could tell that Matt spoke gently. But Josh spat something back and shrugged Matt off. Eric watched Matt's eyes widen, and Eric's widened as well when Bryce pushed Josh again, one-handed, playfully compared to the previous shove, as though he

were flirting. Again, Bryce and Josh exchanged words, but their conversation seemed like banter, as though they were athletes busting each other's balls, both smiling and ornery. For a moment, Eric expected them to shake hands, as though the aggression were a dream, a misunderstanding on Eric's part. The dream became even more focused when Bryce shoved him again, almost sending him sprawling across the pavement. When Josh twirled his bat once. When Bryce grinned and reached for Josh's testicles. When Josh dropped back into a batter's stance. When Josh choked the bat a third of the way up the grip, Eric had a dim memory of Josh showing off one of his batting tricks in high school. Doesn't all of this seem like a dream? Eric asked himself.

But the look of concentration in Josh's eyes convinced Eric that this was no dream. He would swing. Until then it had felt so surreal that Eric had thought that there was no possibility that this could be real. The ringing in his head grew louder as he started walking toward them—somewhere in the back of his mind, he heard Chance yell, "Eric, don't!"—and he tried to run without leaning on a hood or a fender or trunk, but he didn't feel he was moving quickly enough, as if the air, as in a bad dream, had turned into transparent gauze, slowing him the harder he tried to move quickly. Then, in an instant, in what felt like a blink, the world grainy and indistinct at the edges of his vision, the edges closing in, he was almost there. Now only a few feet away, Eric heard Bryce's whispered taunts—"Swing, batter, batter, swing"—and the slap of footsteps behind him. The ringing in his ears grew painful. It was almost deafening, but beyond it, just barely, he heard Chance say, again, "Don't," and Chance must have grabbed his arm from behind. Eric spun around and lost his balance, falling backwards, and he prepared for his back to hit pavement, for the air in his lungs to be driven out in a rush, and for the back of

his head to hit the pavement as well, for the pain to blossom. But he made it before Josh swung. Eric was certain of it, because he was right in between in them, right there, and as he continued to fall in between Josh and Bryce, he knew they would see him and stop fighting. So he wouldn't mind the pain. It would be worth it. He prepared for all of it, looked at the night sky, and squeezed his eyes shut. But an explosion of white light stopped his fall, lifted him, and the ringing in his ears ceased.

Joshua

The bat rang, and he barely felt it vibrate, Josh's entire body going limp and following through unintentionally. The bat slipped and sailed from his hands as he reached the end of his swing, his body finally obeying his conscious mind, and simultaneously he watched the side of a man's head slam into the fire hydrant between him and the cross-dressing blond. The bat clanged and rolled in the street, and Josh watched, in shock, as the blond knelt down beside the man Josh knew he had hit; he watched him cup the man's face in his hands and wiped away the black, gray, and white makeup, saying, "Eric, wake up" over and over.

Josh knelt down and realized who it was and cried out for help.

Another man, slim with dark hair and brown eyes knelt beside him. "I already called 9-1-1," he said.

Josh looked up to ask for help again and saw tears in Matt's eyes, and Josh realized that he was crying, too. After Josh turned his head to look again at Eric, he saw the big blond stand and was now staring down at him, and Josh knew what was coming. Josh tried to cover his face, but he wasn't fast enough. The blond's knee slammed into his mouth.

Bryce

To Bryce's surprise, the room was small. There were a couple of sinks, a row of tall stools on one side, a few chairs on the other, scuffed linoleum, bright fluorescent lights, a computer in a corner, storage cabinets everywhere, and three officers—one overweight in his late fifties, a tall and skinny officer with red cheeks who looked as though he didn't need to shave yet, and one as stout as a body builder, maybe in his mid-thirties. They gave him a cursory once-over, as though seeing a grown man cuffed and dressed as a woman were an everyday occurrence. The officer who had led him in released his elbow and grabbed a binder from the counter, leaving Bryce standing just inside the doorway. He could walk right out or run, but he was tired, his legs shaky, and he knew that he was deep inside a police station, and he knew that the officers knew that, too. Where would he go? Which led Bryce to his second surprise: because the officers were calm, Bryce's anxiety eased.

The overweight officer sitting nearest the computer—a sergeant, Bryce noticed, from the three chevrons on his sleeve—slowly stood and readjusted his belt, one without a firearm buckled to it. "All right, Talbott," he said. "What've we got?"

Talbott, the officer who had arrested Bryce, continued to write in the binder he held and spoke without looking up. "Public intox and assault." Bryce saw the officers tense. "His friend took a bat to the head"—the officers looked at him warily now—"and he subdued the suspect with the bat." The sergeant sat down.

Gesturing with his coffee mug, the young tall officer said, "Sir, you'll have to remove those high heels. For safety reasons, once we've processed you."

Bryce could usually kick his heels off, but his feet must have swelled. As he attempted to use the toe of one to pry off the heel of the other, he lost his balance. The bodybuilder grabbed Bryce's bicep. "Whoa, fella."

Sighing, Bryce thanked him.

"His feet look terrible," the tall one said. "I can tell with those shoes still on. You should rethink your shoes next year."

"Talb," the bodybuilder said, not letting go of Bryce's arm. "He's about to tip over. What's his name?"

"Bryce Haslett."

"Okay, Mr. Haslett. You should have a seat over there, but you're so tall and those chairs are so short that you'll find it's tough to sit without banging your head on the wall with cuffs on. So I'm going help you, if that's all right."

"Talb," the sergeant said, "did he give you any trouble?" The bodybuilder paused when the sergeant spoke.

"Physically, not at all, but he was mad as hell at first."

The sergeant poked at the keyboard. "No record." To Bryce, he asked, "What do you do for a living?"

"I work at OU's library."

"A librarian. Ha! Son, you're a big librarian. Just take the cuffs off, O'Connor. They'll have to come off soon enough anyway."

O'Connor, the bodybuilder, did so and pointed at one of the chairs. "Have yourself a seat. You want some coffee? I smelled you as soon as you walked through the door."

As Bryce gingerly sat, he winced and nodded. His high heels had been biting into the sides of his feet since fifteen minutes after putting them on, and the adrenaline that had so far helped him through the evening was gone.

"Sarge, we've got socks somewhere around here, don't we?" the tall officer asked. The sergeant, with a pen, pointed at a cabinet. "You a size twelve? You can't go in without shoes either."

"Eleven and a half." Bryce pulled the first heel off, and sure enough, his foot was red and swollen.

"We don't have halves," the tall officer said. He looked at Bryce's feet as Bryce pulled off the other high heel. "I think I'll grab you some thirteens. Since they don't have laces, your dogs should have plenty of room to roam."

"So Talb," the sergeant said, "he subdued a suspect, and I'm guessing you knew that before bringing him here."

"He did and there were witnesses, and they told us the same thing he did."

"Well, it's a busy night, and it's going to get busier if history's any indication. If he's helped us, if he's cooperating, if he's not lying, why's he here? You've got his info right there. We can serve him through the mail."

"That's what the officer in charge told me to do."

"Calvin, I bet." The sergeant slapped his thigh. "Well, better safe than sorry. All right then." Talbot handed the sergeant a binder, and the sergeant pulled a pair of reading glasses from his shirt pocket, signed a form, removed his glasses, and looked into Bryce's eyes. "Mr. Haslett, you just heard me say that it's busy, and I can tell you're paying attention and you don't seem to be the least bit violent right now. With as busy as it is,

there's little room, so you're going to be a guest in what's referred to as the drunk tank. You'll fit right in. So here are the rules."

After Bryce had listened to the rules and finished his coffee, which strengthened his legs, the officer, with a hand on Bryce's back, guided him down two bright hallways to a dimly lit one, at the end of which was a large black door with only a small window. O'Connor, already there, stepped in front of the window and looked through it. As Bryce neared the door, he could hear muffled singing and snores.

"It's not a dungeon," the tall officer said. "We keep the lights low so you can sleep. It'll be bright come morning. Early." Because the tall officer had been particularly nice, Bryce wished he had been in the position to read his name plate.

O'Connor turned a key in the lock and opened the door a few inches. The warbles of the man singing grew louder, but Bryce couldn't make out the words, and as the singing echoed out of the room, the smell of body odor and urine leaked out as well. Quietly, O'Connor said, "Singing them a lullaby, eh, Scurvy?" to which there was no response, only a change in pitch. To the tall officer, O'Connor said, "Almost all of them are conked out, but I don't think Scurvy's sleeping tonight. He's off-pitch, so he's still flying high."

"Hope you can sleep to bad serenading," the tall officer said. "Remember. No touching and no loud noises, and especially no banging on the door." With that, O'Connor opened the door all the way, the tall officer guided Bryce in and stepped back, and the door closed behind him.

Bryce saw only well enough to recognize shapes. A man lying down on a bench, raised his head. He whistled, low and soft, and said, "Hey, hey, baby." He sat up and

yawned, wiping at his eyes, already seeming to forget Bryce was there. The room was larger than Bryce had expected, but it was too small to hold the twenty or so men in it comfortably. Benches built into the walls, one sink, and a toilet in a corner—that was almost all the room contained, except one light bulb, in a metal enclosure, over the door, too high to reach and giving little light. Even though Bryce couldn't see well—he still couldn't distinguish color—the smells were sharp, and what had wafted outside the door a moment ago was nothing compared to what was inside: stifling body odor, the smells of sour whiskey and beer, urine, stale cigarettes and a light scent of marijuana clinging to clothes.

The man who had greeted Bryce, calling him baby, stood and leaned against the sink. "Dude, that's some awful luck," he said. "Getting busted during a costume party." He laughed and covered his mouth with his forearm to muffle the sound, but it woke up a man on the opposite side of the room, to Bryce's left. "Shit, man, who'd you piss off to have that kind of karma?"

"I'd like to know so that I could kick his ass," Bryce said.

There wasn't a place to sit, not with most of the men lying down and stretched out and sleeping, so he stood next to the door, not walking any farther into the room. Bryce leaned against the wall next to the door and brought up one leg, a posture he hoped would tell these bozos that he didn't think being here was a big deal, that he could have been anywhere—just another boring party with no one interesting to talk to. But when he lifted his leg, he lost his balance—his legs had gone queasy again—and he almost fell. "Shit," he said. He settled for leaning back while keeping both feet on the ground and crossed his arms, feeling his stuffed bra on his forearms.

"Hell, man," said the other man, awake and standing up. He was to Bryce's left and walking over, taking each step slowly and with exaggerated caution but with a hitch to his gait, as though he were a drunk John Wayne, ready for a fight. "You can't kick anyone's ass dressed like that."

"How do you think I ended up here, Einstein?" Bryce said. He removed the cotton stuffing from his bra and threw it at the man. "A souvenir for your visit."

A swath of cotton wadding landed on the man's shoulder, which he brushed off, and he was now close enough that Bryce could get a good look at him. He was a couple of inches shorter than Bryce, long and wiry, his black Lynyrd Skynyrd T-shirt hanging loosely, his faded jeans even looser than his shirt and looking as though they'd come off with one half-hearted yank. Bryce guessed he was in his late forties or early fifties, his thick stubble salted and peppered, as was his oily unkempt mullet.

"You know, you ain't as tough as you think you are," the man said.

"Austin," the man by the sink said, "you're just drunk and pissed off I woke you. Tone it down."

"Yeah, so what?" Austin yelled back. The singer, who had stopped serenading the cell a few moments before, started up again, maybe thinking that Austin's raised voice was his cue to make some music. "Shut the hell up." He walked up to Bryce, nose to nose with him. "Maybe I want a different souvenir—"

Bryce shoved him, and after he did, he realized how drunk and sleepy and skinny this Austin was; he flew back, his arms flailing, his eyes wide in disbelief, and landed horizontally in the laps of two men who had been sleeping, who were now awake and punching and yelling at Austin until he rolled off onto the floor, where he balled into the

fetal position, hollering, “He pushed me, he pushed me.”

Everyone awoke, complaining and whining and yelling, and when they caught sight of Bryce, who was in a fighter’s stance, one leg forward, the other back, both his hands in fists, they all laughed, as Bryce looked around wildly, his head on a swivel, almost wanting to laugh, too, at the thought of himself, dressed as he was, ready to fight them all.

The light brightened, and Bryce used one hand as a visor to block the bulb’s intensity, his other hand drawn, still in a fist, behind his ear. Through an intercom, a voice said, “What’s going on in there? Clamp your traps shut and don’t make us come in there.” The singer, standing in a dark corner, sang more softly, then hummed, lips parted, so that his voice still carried; bald and wearing a Radiohead T-shirt, the crooner’s bloodshot eyes bulged, dark circles under them. For the first time Bryce saw all of his cellmates clearly: there was a man dressed as a clown, another as Sherlock Holmes or Sigmund Freud (without props, which must have been confiscated, it was impossible to tell which), a Brett Micheals look-alike, and the list went on and on, and only a few of the men weren’t in costume; Austin was one of them—or perhaps he was dressed as Joe Dirt—and he was now sitting, wiping his nose and rubbing a rib where he had been kicked, his head ducked low, probably in an attempt to avoid the light and the eyes of the officer outside.

The man who had chastised Austin—the clown—cleared his throat. “Everything’s fine. No problems here. We’re good.”

“Outstanding,” the voice said. “Get along and get some sleep. Do that and you’ll be out of there in no time.” The light dimmed.

The commotion had awoken everyone, and Bryce, now that there was room on a bench, sat down in the corner opposite the crooner, leaned against the wall, and closed his eyes. He heard whispers and some shuffling beneath the hum, but he didn't bother to open his eyes once he closed them. They thought he was like everyone else. In costume and unlucky. Now feeling relatively safe, Bryce thought he might get some rest. Until he thought about Eric. He opened his eyes and forced himself not to cry—he was safe for now, but he knew that could change if anyone sensed weakness. So he became angry with himself, reliving each word he had said to Slugger and wishing he hadn't said anything. If he hadn't, Eric wouldn't have been hurt.

Marta

Marta had surprised herself. She had packed her clothes and toiletries, the bare necessities, quickly and efficiently, as though she were going to her parents' house to visit for the weekend, while David's hands shook as he wandered back and forth in the bedroom, trying to remember what he was looking for. In the driveway she had said, "No, I'll drive—I don't want to think" without force or grit and in a steady voice, when she had wanted to shout that David was a wreck, tears in his eyes, his face pinched, when he should have been her rock. An hour into their trip to Oklahoma City to be with Eric, she had switched on the radio to NPR, and when David complained, saying "I can't concentrate and pray," in a monotone voice, Marta responded, simply and with love, "I need to hear your voice. Pray out loud. It'll help us both." She hadn't lost her temper when he only prayed aloud for less than a minute or when she changed the radio to an AM station, a recording of pastor Stanley "Sprout" Zacharias, a Baptist AM radio personality out of Amarillo, Texas, who bemoaned the loss of the traditional family, his voice rising and falling, its cadence familiar, echoing David's at the pulpit when, on a rare occasion, David preached a little fire.

Sprout boomed that single mothers shouldn't be raising children alone, that two women—lesbians—shouldn't be raising them either, that a man should be in the household to avoid raising effeminate men, weak in obligation, men who would eventually divorce their wives, the cycle revolving and revolving. Although Marta disagreed with him—Spend some time with your less fortunate of the flock instead of your sponsors, Marta thought, and you'll understand why so many women divorce their

redneck alcoholic abusive husbands—the rhythm of his voice soothed her, despite his message's idiocy. Maybe because of its ignorance, Marta had felt confident, and any confidence she could muster had been more than welcome.

But now she wasn't calm or confident. She was angry. They had arrived at the hospital perhaps fifteen minutes ago and were only allowed to see Eric for a few moments, both of them too shocked to know how to respond, and for the last few minutes, both she and David had done nothing but sit and listen to a doctor explain Eric's injuries, while a nurse simultaneously explained how to fill out paperwork.

"A DNR?" Marta said, reading one of the papers. "I need to be with my son. I haven't been able to pay attention to what he's saying"—she pointed at the doctor—"and all you can think about is paperwork, and I've been signing and signing…"

Putting his arm around her, David said, "It's her job, and they're trying to do it quickly so we can see him and know what's happening."

Marta blinked at him. "I can't listen to all of you," she said. "I'll be damned if I sign this. Let me listen to him." She handed the clipboard to the nurse, a blonde with a fair complexion, her cheeks now red, who left the cramped and brightly lit conference room. The door sighed shut.

As the doctor spoke, Marta understood two key points: Eric had not regained consciousness because of pressure and swelling in his brain, swelling that may have already caused brain damage or could be causing it now. Marta knew, without the doctor telling her, that the longer it took Eric to wake, the worse it could be, and for only the second time that morning, she wondered what had happened, and through her anger and worry she could think of nothing else. Had Eric been in a car accident? A hit and run?

Did he fall? From where? When did it happen? How long had he been here? During the drive she had given these questions little attention, knowing she would not receive answers until later, so she repeated prayers and silently recited her favorite psalms.

Letting go of David's hand—she didn't remember taking it as the doctor spoke—Marta stood, thanked the doctor, shook his hand, with the hard undeniable grip of which she was proud, as sturdy as a man's.

"But what happened?" David asked, voicing the very question Marta intended to ask. "Do you know?"

The doctor put his pen inside his scrubs' front pocket. "The trauma is from a baseball bat. I don't know any more than that, not as fact. A police officer should be here, if not soon, then later in the day." Marta heard buzzing, and the doctor patted his hips, found his beeper and turned it off. "The rest of this"—he shook the paperwork as though he didn't like it himself—"can be done later. You should be with him."

David and Marta left the conference room, following the doctor down a narrow hallway, through a single door that opened into a longer and wider hall, and they held hands, looking to one another, to the doctor, and at their surroundings, disoriented and wondering in which direction they walked, Marta thinking she might not be able to find her way back, though she had already walked this path once. When they approached a set of double doors, the doctor—Marta wished he could remember his name—paused and pointed to a single door on the right. "This is a waiting room and you can nap there, get some coffee, some food—"

"I'm not waiting any longer," Marta said.

The doctor opened one of the double doors and held it open. "I wasn't suggesting

that." After they walked into the ICU, the doctor said, "Eric's in room two." Marta watched him walk to the nurse's station, and once there, he leaned over the counter and spoke, already on to the next pressing matter.

The ICU appeared oval in shape, with the nurse's station in the middle, surrounded by eight patient rooms. The rooms had long sliding glass doors, and the curtains in some of them were closed, others open. The door to Eric's room was closed and the curtains drawn, a dim light glowing beneath the curtains, and Marta's eyes followed the skirting to the next room. Though the ICU had seemed oval at first glance, the glass doors did not curve, and it dawned on her that the room was an octagon, the shape of a stop sign suggesting the obvious, that once here, patients didn't leave quickly. The curtains, however, and the dim lights at the ends of each patient's room softened the harsh angles.

Before Marta could completely register what she was doing—she had only been half aware of standing behind David and shoving him out of the way after he slid the door open and froze—she was in the room. She set her purse on the chair next to the sink, facing away from Eric, and spoke as though she had just come into town to visit Eric at his apartment, as though she were hollering at him from the kitchen while she unloaded a bag full of groceries into his refrigerator. "We're here now, hun. Everything's fine. It's just like you to make us drive so early in the morning, isn't it? But that's fine. It was a fine drive." She said this with more force than she intended, just now realizing how she had treated David and embarrassed by it, and she wondered how many times she could say *fine.*

As she spoke a few more little nothings of greeting, she washed her hands and

looked in the mirror and over her shoulder at Eric. Eric was on his back, eyes closed, the room all forced air in motion and beeps, which Marta found inhuman. With a tube in his throat and with transparent tape lightly clinging to his neck, Eric breathed with assistance, his chest expanding and contracting with each of the respirator's compressions, a sound that reminded her of a large birthday balloon being filled and emptied, only deeper and more resonant, with two quiet clicks signaling the close of each cycle. What she noticed more, however, were the bandages wrapped around Eric's head, and she fought the urge to stomp across the room and remove the bandages, with sopping and soapy hands, so she could inspect the injury and her son's head's swelling herself.

Marta, now silent, dried her hands and noticed she was attempting to keep the same rhythm as the respirator, and for a moment, even though she hadn't felt it since she was a child, her chest constricted as though she were having an asthma attack, and she smelled hay, freshly cut grass, and the pollen-laden air of full summer, what used to be her triggers. She forced herself to breathe normally, and the smells passed, replaced by the smells of antiseptic, David's spicy aftershave, sweat, and, curiously, the faint odor of whiskey.

Marta found it unusual that the monitor's sound was still activated. She had accompanied David on many hospital visits over the years to see a sick church member, so she half-expected what she would find and thought her experience would buffer her repressed anguish. But this wasn't a typical visit, and not only because her son was lying there. When she had visited members of the congregation in a hospital, the sounds were like those of any other living room: people talking, the TV on or a radio playing, and apart from the well-wishing, the conversations were much the same as any other, and she

and David and the patient would do their best to ignore the obvious. If she wanted, she could watch a monitor that displayed heart rate, oxygenation, and blood pressure, but the sounds didn't force her to recognize where she was, unless the IV complained, and she could pretend that they were all in her living room. This helped Marta and the patients alike to keep their spirits up. Here, however, the heart monitor blipped, the IV beeped, the catheter tube leading to the bag beside the bed gurgled, and the respirator sounded like anything but her son's breathing, which, when he was young, was soft and gentle and smooth—perfect Marta thought, when she had checked on Eric as a child after bedtime, not the ragged, forced sound of inflation and deflation. All the equipment's audio was on because of one simple fact: Eric couldn't complain if he felt something wrong, and no one had been here, until now, besides the medical staff. The sounds, Marta knew, were necessary.

When Marta grabbed her son's hand, the feel of it surprised her. It was clammy, and when Marta looked closer at him, Eric's skin seemed loose, as though it were not quite connected to his body, saggy and pale, especially his face where Marta could see pores she had never noticed. As a child Marta had compared herself to her grandmother; she was young and taut and rosy, with perfect skin and shining blonde hair, and Marta, for a few years, before her first period, felt that all children were superior to adults, whose bodies were breaking down while she and all of her friends were still growing into theirs. And here Eric was, with skin that looked like her own, only with fewer wrinkles from sun and wind from the Panhandle, but old before his time, as though he had aged years since the last time Marta saw him. Marta brushed Eric's face with her fingertips, offering a short prayer, until Eric's head moved slightly toward Marta's hand as though

in answer to her touch, and Marta ceased praying and held her breath until Eric moved again as the air was forced from his lungs. But he hadn't actually moved. The respirator had moved him, and it was then that Marta felt the first stab of despair, recognizing the possibility that Eric might not leave this room alive.

"Eric, honey, we're here," Marta said. She brushed his hair away from his forehead and spoke into his ear. "Everything's going to be fine." Fine, she thought. Lord, woman, think of something else to say. She dragged a chair up to the bed, studying David, who had finally moved deeper into the room, wide-eyed, both hands over his mouth. As she leaned forward, struggling with the weight of the chair, which made a screech, she gave David a tight-lipped smile, a smile that she hoped he interpreted as, Pull yourself together. She sat and grabbed Eric's hand. "Your father's on the other side." She raised her eyebrows at David, her face opening into a question, her head tilting just enough to ask silently, Well, are you going to say something or not?

When Eric was a teenager spending a couple of hours studying at the dining room table for a test and lost his focus, Marta would squeeze his upper arm. But now instead of saying, "Good job, son, keep struggling, keep going, keep fighting," Marta found herself saying something similar, something cliché—but what else could she say?—because she felt out of her depths. So she lied, hoping that David, who because of his experience was so much better at this, would take over soon, her voice breaking: "You look good, son. Keep fighting hard."

The heart monitor's beeping sped, almost instantly, and Marta blinked back tears. Nothing else, though, changed, no movement but what the respirator caused to Eric's body, only the monitor's blips speaking for Eric, or so Marta thought. She waited for

perhaps thirty seconds to see whether Eric would open his eyes or move an arm or finger at the power of a mother's voice, but again the only movement was of Eric's heart rate, now slowing, until she squeezed his arm again, and again, in response, without Marta saying anything, the heart monitor raced.

Marta looked up at David who mouthed, "I don't know what to say," and he ran his hands through his hair.

Marta closed her eyes. She would have to do this herself—just as she had raised the boys, mostly alone, during the day while David spent his time at church: wiping away her children's tears, settling fights, bandaging bodies that they threw around with abandon. Outside the door, she heard people crying, wet sobs and sniffles, sounds of loss without hope. They angered her, her strength renewed, and the emotions throttling her throat relaxed as she swallowed her worry. "Would you get me a cup of coffee?" Marta asked David. "I'm sure you need one, too." To Eric, she said, "He'll be right back, hon." And to David, feeling her anger dissipate—like Eric, David always withdrew deep inside himself when confronted with pain—she said, "Please close the door and call Levi again."

David circled the bed and kissed Marta's hair, but she barely paid attention, her eyes never leaving Eric's face, and spoke as though she and Eric were on the scheduled Sunday night phone call. "I saw Sally on Tuesday at the store. You remember me talking about her last week, right? Sally Muñoz? The girl two grades behind you? She's pregnant and as big as a barn and her cheeks almost as red, and you'd barely recognize her if you saw her. And just guess who the father is? Tim Booth, your teammate who supposedly hated Mexicans. You remember his father? Remember how he complained to the school

board about you guys having to read *The House on Mango Street* when you were a sophomore? I heard he almost flipped his lid when Tim told him he was marrying Sally. I thought you'd like to know that I agree with you now. Tim's not so bad. Good for him."

David

David slid the door shut, hearing crying and sobbing to his right, where a line of young women and men stood outside of Eric's neighbor's room, the sliding glass door pasted with signs reading, "Get better, Gavin" and "Gavin, we love you" in bold adolescent scrawls of purple and pink. Some of the teenagers were dressed in gold and blue cheerleading uniforms, some in torn and faded jeans. Many of the kids expressed loss, and although he knew their feelings were genuine—except for perhaps one young man who, when a pretty honey-color-haired girl hugged him, faintly smiled before he remembered how he was expected to act—he was somewhat annoyed by these teenagers' theatrics. How long had they known the person in that room? A few years? How close had any of them been to Gavin? David knew that loss was loss, that the degree mattered little. He realized, standing there, that their pain must be great; after all, he had been told that only two visitors were allowed at a time, and with so many kids visiting Gavin, he knew they were saying goodbye to him. And now he knew why Marta asked him to shut the door. He didn't want Eric to hear them either.

The waiting room, larger than David had imagined, was divided into two sections by a half-wall; on either side of it were burgundy chairs and couches, magazines, televisions mounted on walls, and a long faux-granite counter on which sat three coffee makers, styrafoam cups, plastic spoons, and different types of sweeteners. No one else was in the room. Thankful for this small blessing, David put his hands on the counter and extended his arms, bending at the waist. He forced himself to take deep breaths, head down, staring at the beige carpet and trying not to think of anything at all but calming

himself.

Still in this position, blood rushing to his head, each pulse a dull throb of pain, David heard the waiting room door open. He straightened and self-consciously wiped his nose with a finger, even though his nose was dry, still dehydrated from drinking too much last night and into the small hours of the morning. He poured himself a cup of coffee half with decaf and half with regular; for Marta he poured the usual—three-quarters of regular, the rest tap water, because Marta refused to drink or eat anything hot, the result, he thought, of years of always being the last to sit and eat, still claiming, even though both of the boys hadn't lived in their house for a few years, that hot food and drink burned her tongue.

David felt a light touch on his elbow, and he turned around to see a man, probably in his mid-sixties, with graying hair and large thick glasses, who wore a dark blue suit with a black and red striped tie.

"Excuse me," the man said. "I'm Harold Brown." He extended his hand, waiting for David to shake it. As David did so he read the small nameplate pinned to Harold's suit jacket, which gave the man's name, and identified him as, "Hospital minister." Harold noticed that David had read it, and tapped it, smiling weakly.

"David Wells. Nice to meet you."

"I wanted to let you know that if you need someone to talk to, I'm here. There's a chapel on the second floor in case you need privacy."

"Thank you, Harold. I appreciate that."

David felt as though he knew this particular drill, and he could tell that Harold felt no personal interest, was just doing his job, trying to comfort strangers through a time so

intimate with pain that the average layman had trouble understanding. Harold's face was cleanly shaven, not a wrinkle in his suit; there were no bags under his eyes, few lines in his forehead—just another day on the job—and David wondered what it would be like, sharing these moments, as a man of God, with people he didn't know and would likely never see again. What would it be like to look in their eyes and see such pained hope fulfilled or lost but not witness the outcome? If it was loss, David knew that this man didn't witness the pain of long-known church members mourn or punish themselves for weeks or months or years over those they had lost; this man didn't see church members recover, only to feel their pain recur on a birthday, anniversary, or holiday that they could not share with those who had moved on. Over the years David had had to lead a service and eulogy here and there for people he had never known, and there was a certain comfort to it, because he felt as though he could do his job, in the strictest sense, better when had had a personal investment. But he could not see himself surviving spiritually a day-to-day assault of anonymous sickness and death. Because Harold could—it seemed obvious that none of this had touched him—David didn't like the man.

"Eric's your son?" Harold asked, and David nodded.

"You work full-time here?" David asked.

"More like I volunteer full-time. I led a church until almost three years ago. Retired. I felt I needed to do something different."

"I think I know what you mean." David raised the coffee cups he held, as though he were toasting Harold, and said that he should return to his wife and son, mentioning that it was nice to meet him. With his hand about to grip the door's handle, David sidestepped as the waiting room's door swung inward, and there was Marta, who looked

surprised to see him standing right in front of her, her eyes irritated and swollen as though she had been crying,

"What's wrong?" David asked. "Did something happen?"

Marta grabbed a tissue from her purse and sat down with a thump. "No," she said, "there's no need to be worried. His heart rate was too high while I was talking and catching him up." She wiped her nose. "So a nurse said it would be best if we came back in a couple hours. He needs the rest."

David sat down and put his arm around her, hearing Harold fixing a cup of coffee, the tearing of paper bags of sugar unnaturally loud and intrusive, but his presence helped David remember the role that he felt he had to play. "He's young and strong," David said. "And he must hear us. That's a great sign."

Sighing, Marta opened her purse again, stuffed the soiled tissue into it, and rummaged around until she pulled out her cellphone. "Did you try getting a hold of Levi again?" she asked. David shook his head. Marta punched a few buttons, held her phone to her ear, and after a moment she flipped it closed. "Straight to voicemail. My lord, it's before noon on a Saturday. Probably hung over. Imagine that. At least some things never change."

"He'll call us back." He held her hand and kissed it, hoping that he was some comfort to her, when he heard a clearing of a throat, and saw Harold looking at him a few feet away. "Marta," David said, standing and letting go of her hand, "this is pastor Harold Brown. He works for the hospital. Harold, this is my wife, Marta."

Marta gave Harold her barest and briefest smile, greeted him, stood, and addressed David as though Harold didn't exist: "You couldn't pass up the chance to talk

shop, even though you're needed else…oh, never mind. Just another thing that never changes." She sighed again, as she had already done so many times today—David had never known to her to be a sigher, to show any sign of weakness, boredom, or regret—and gathered her purse, slinging it over her shoulder. After taking a few long gulps of coffee, she tossed the cup into a wastebasket, and said, "I was told there's a cafeteria on the first floor. That's where I'll be until I can see Eric again," and left.

A few minutes later that was where David found her, and she behaved as though nothing bothered her. She nibbled on a muffin and sipped on coffee, even wearing her reading glasses as she perused a glossy magazine, in preparation, or so it seemed to David, to camp here for weeks. To pass the time while Marta calmed down, David had bought from the gift shop a couple of bestselling trade paperbacks, thrillers that took little concentration to read, but stories he hoped had page-burning plots, ones that Marta might read to find some small solace.

When he brought the books to the table, Marta asked, "Think we'll be here that long?"

"Think these will take me all winter?" He held the books up so she could read the titles.

"Oh, don't insult me and what I like to read." She had lowered her magazine to say this, and now she raised it higher than necessary to hide her eyes from David. David knew what she was up to, so he slid one of the paperbacks over to her. Her magazine ended up folded and buried deep within her purse, her book a third of the way finished before they could see Eric again.

Josh

Already in his orange tuxedo—as the other inmates called the county-issued jumpsuit—and with a bit of fingerprinting ink clinging to his hands and beneath his fingernails, Josh swiped the prepaid calling card and dialed home. He heard a few clicks and the varied volume of white noise before the connecting ring. Although Josh had felt relatively calm before dialing, now that the phone rang, a lump developed in his throat, one that barely moved when he swallowed, not unlike a brand-new glove that needed breaking in; it would take time for it to stretch to comfort.

He could see them milling about across the wide corridor behind bars, those men who had said that he looked good in his tuxedo, some of them leaning against walls, others resting their arms through and on the bars and staring at the phones, studying the few men who already wore their new clothes. Later, Josh would remember all of them smoking and would remember that they were all laid-back guys, but only in comparison to a much rougher crowd. But there was no smoking here. Not that Josh smoked often—a sweet cigar every now and then—but it seemed like the thing to do, and he wanted a smoke, to fit in, to look tough and calm and cool, and it was something he could do with his hands besides wish them not to shake. He sure did want a smoke.

Others, like him, were at the phones. Two had already blubbered into the receivers as Josh had dialed; a couple of others, when they had said they couldn't get a hold of anyone, were led down the hall and introduced to what Josh guessed were bail bondsmen, who struck Josh as predatory. Why allow bail bondsmen here, where the newcomers were scared almost shitless and would pay just about anything, he imagined,

to avoid rooming with dangerous, unknown men when no one answered the phone? Josh knew the answer, and he knew that it didn't matter whether his parents answered the phone. They couldn't help him and neither could any bondsmen: he hadn't bought alcohol with fake identification like that kid he had talked to before being transferred to county this morning and who had simply paid and left; and he wasn't here for possession of a narcotic, which also meant you had to go to county, like that man in his early-forties, with a ponytail and beard, who was now talking to a bondsman and in street clothes. In fact, neither they nor a few others wore tuxedos. It was as though everything had been decided before they had pulled into the parking lot this morning. No, Josh knew he wasn't going anywhere, not for a while. He could tell that some of his fellow jump-suiters knew the same thing.

The phone had rung for perhaps a minute, and it now quit, followed by static and his mother's recorded voice: "Hey, you've reached the Tenney residence, Burt and Leslie. Leave a message and we'll give you a holler back."

Before he spoke, his throat knotted tighter—so, so tight and a little painful—as constricted as though he were a child again, sitting at the kitchen table after middle school, after he had been in a fight and suspended, and hearing his father open the front door, knowing he'd have to explain why he had found himself in trouble again. Josh turned and glanced behind him, and one of the men leaning on the bars was staring directly at him. That's all it took. Josh knew he couldn't explain what had happened in any detail, not without shedding a tear, and they'd probably find out soon enough anyway.

"Hey, it's me. I'm in the Oklahoma County Jail. Just thought you should know I

didn't mean it. It was an accident. Sorry I didn't call you back last night. If I had, well…Maybe…I guess it doesn't matter now. Anyway, that's where I am."

He hung up the phone after a long pause. Josh had wanted to say that he loved them, and he wanted to tell them to carry a message to Eric—that he loved him, too, being a childhood friend and growing up in church together, and he'd do anything to make up for what he'd done—to show that he wasn't heartless, that he cared, that he always cared about everything, even though he didn't act like it a lot. But he knew what he had sounded like—the way he usually sounded like when things turned south. A little regretful and resigned, as though these things happen, and there wasn't much he could do about it. The tone, though, the tone with which his mom and dad and, even once or twice, Reverend Wells had taken issue with in the past was unintentionally present: he sounded more apathetic than anything else. But what else could he do with that greasy-haired bastard staring right at him?

Bryce

After what seemed like a full day in the dark, the bulb brightened and a voice on the intercom said, “Good morning, gentlemen. Please stand and walk to the back wall if you hear your name announced. You will be transferred to county where you will be processed. The rest of you, be patient. We’ll let you go home shortly.”

Bryce had been one of the first to be loaded into the van, and for the past ten minutes he had sat quietly in the back, nodding off and jerking awake. But now he sat up straight, surprised. Through the tinted side window, Bryce saw Josh, cuffed and head down, behind half a dozen other men on the sidewalk of the parking garage. They were loaded, and Josh never noticed him. He didn’t look up once.

At county, in the early morning before the sun rose, Bryce had been in line and led in a different direction from Josh. Bryce had been fingerprinted, instructed that he would be given a court date—a date that could be in two weeks or six—and a calling card. It had been explained that if Bryce couldn’t afford bail, three hundred dollars, he should call someone who could, and that if he couldn’t get a hold of anyone, he could talk to a bail bondsmen; Bryce had the impression that, in all likelihood, he wasn’t staying and that he wasn’t worth the time or trouble. What the system wanted: money, nothing more, and it could be provided by cash, check, or credit—and it could be done so over the phone, which Bryce had explained to Chance and who had said he would call and pay immediately. Because of the guilt Bryce felt, it seemed too easy.

In the front alcove, Bryce waited for Chance to pick him up, switching his weight from foot to foot, his feet, still swollen, once again squeezed into high heels, preferring

not to feel exposed by standing there barefoot. Officers and deputies walked the hall behind him—Hurry up, Chance, Bryce thought—and some saw Bryce and paused, probably noting how he was dressed, before resuming whatever duties called them. Bryce scratched his chest and upper thighs. He wanted a shower, a change of clothes—even he noticed his clothes' sour smell, dried remnants of what was once a fear-infused sweat, which was perhaps the least offensive smell clinging to it—and he needed food. With little sleep and so much anxiety, Bryce felt starved and light-headed, his stomach cramping. He hadn't eaten since yesterday in the early afternoon, hours before last night's show had begun, to avoid feeling queasy onstage.

After a ten minute wait, Bryce spotted Chance's car: a five-year-old silver luxury sedan with a rainbow Pride front license plate, easing into a parking spot. Bryce walked out of the building—a grizzled officer coming in had held the door open for him, staring—and walked as fast as he could, yet limping, clutching his blond wig, which flowed from side to side with each stunted lurch.

Chance stepped out of the car and, neither of them saying anything, they hugged one another, Chance attempting to kiss him on the lips but instead meeting a stubbly cheek. Bryce had turned at the last moment, but now squeezed him hard and stepped back, still holding his hands.

"Hey, hey, jailbird," Chance said. "Where's my kiss?"

"You don't want one," Bryce said. "Not with my breath."

Chance pinched his nose, opened the passenger side door, and winked. "You do smell ripe. It even cuts through this Oklahoma wind."

It didn't take them long to roll down the windows once they were on their way

back home. Bryce felt safe now, and though he knew the analogy was inaccurate, he couldn't help but to feel as though his freedom was akin to being let out of school on the last day of the academic year, free from having to pretend he was someone he wasn't, overcompensating with crude jokes to fit in and acting more aggressively than he needed to, free to go home and watch television and stare at men as much as he liked without fearing that someone would notice, or worse—that one of his teammates would turn around and catch him appreciating his rear or the shape of his back or the nape of a neck or the curl of hair around an ear. Bryce now half-expected to smell freedom: freshly mown grass, elms in bloom, the pungent scents of tulips and irises and new mimosas, all the smells of spring mixed together and hard to distinguish unless he concentrated and breathed deeply—and so different from cologne and perfume and hairspray and face cream and deodorant, the smells of adolescence crammed into one tight building. But there wasn't much to smell in November and on the road. Exhaust. Himself. His freedom felt hollow, but he was still relieved.

Looking through Chance's windshield, Bryce watched the world whiz by, ready for decent sleep, food, and a hot shower. But the next emergency, he knew, had to begin. He had to know what had happened to Eric. He remembered the blow to the head, saw it clearly, heard the bat's reverberative clang, and he could again see Eric's head rebound from the fire hydrant and the blood that flowed. The panic. His anger—what had caused it all. Hesitant to ask but knowing he needed to, Bryce spoke his first words since entering the car.

"Are you going to mention the elephant in the car?" Bryce asked. "How is he?" He looked at Chance, who turned and double-taked, and drummed his fingers on the

steering wheel. He turned off the radio.

"I called last night," Chance said. "A couple of places, and finally found him, but they wouldn't tell me his condition."

"We should go there. Now."

"Yeah, but I'll be surprised if we can see him. They won't even say how he's doing over the phone."

"Chance…"

"Okay, but not now. They're not going to let us near him with you looking like that."

"Fine then. As soon I'm cleaned up."

***

At home in the bathroom, Bryce looked at himself in the mirror for the first time since last night backstage. He still wore makeup, smeared and smudged, the worst around his eyes, a mess like the rest of him, his hair matted on top but spiked elsewhere. Bryce thought he looked like a cross between a homeless cross-dressing prostitute out to turn a trick and a raccoon that had climbed out of a Dumpster. But his face and hair weren't the worst. The tape he had used to hug his genitals to his body had unstuck when he had hurried to Eric last night when he had almost passed out in the middle of the club. He had felt the tape zip away, tearing out pubic hair, and winced, and he knew then what he must have looked like, but he hadn't cared, preferring his genitals to have some freedom after being constrained to so tightly for more than two hours. And who would have seen him in

the dark club besides friends and acquaintances who had suffered similar costume malfunctions? No one if it hadn't been for Josh, and now Bryce saw what Josh had, remembering his smart-ass quip after digesting his first eyeful: "Man, that's the meanest camel toe I've ever seen." Bryce had to agree, the outlines of both his testicles visible through his pants, not only noticeable, but bulging, commanding attention, begging to be gawked at.

No wonder Josh had laughed, Bryce thought. He twisted on the shower, shed his clothes, waited for the water to warm, and remembered the sound of Josh's laughter, ornery but not necessarily violent. Hell, Bryce would have laughed, too, cut a self-deprecating joke if the man hadn't had used the word *faggots*. He wondered whether he had overreacted. Had Josh been bent on violence? Or was he an ignorant redneck out on the town for a few laughs, until Bryce challenged him? What if Bryce had used a different tactic and said something like, "Ha, ha. Real funny. But, you know, you just scared the hell out of those two guys. Is that what you really want to do? Ever heard of Matthew Shepard? Of course you haven't. Well, let me explain"? Bryce wondered, though his anger and insult, whether he had forced Josh's hand.

Bryce stepped into the shower stall, hoping that scalding water would help him relax and its white noise would drown his thoughts. Instead, when his tension eased, his memory became keener.

"Get the hell out of here," Bryce remembered ordering Josh. He had pointed at Josh's friend. "Both of you." Bryce shoved Josh a second time, as hard as the first, but this time Josh had seemed prepared for it and only backed up a step, using his bat as a short cane behind him, which helped him balance as he swayed.

Why had he shoved him? If Bryce had honestly thought the man was violent, why make himself the target?

Josh had laughed again, straightening. “Now that’s no way to flirt.”

“Josh, let’s get out of here, dammit,” the ballplayer behind Josh said. “Let’s get a beer.” He pulled on Josh’s arm, trying to drag him away.

Snatching his arm back, Josh said, “Come on.” He winked at his friend and at Bryce. “This is fun.”

“Is that what you think’s going on here, *Josh*?” Bryce said. “A little flirting, a little fun.” He stepped up to Josh and shoved him with one hand, this time playfully, his hand lingering on Josh’s chest. Bryce smiled. “A ballplayer, huh? Yeah, I bet you did want to see those guys lift their skirts. I bet you check out men in the shower and compare bats. Wonder if yours measures up, don’t you? Well, let’s go, Slugger. Let’s see what you’ve got. Take a swing.”

With a flick of his wrist, Josh whirled the bat vertically once. Josh narrowed his eyes, and it occurred to Bryce that Josh knew Bryce was attempting to goad him into taking a swing, and Bryce now knew that Josh didn’t feel up to it. “Naw, I couldn’t do that to a lady.”

Bryce saw Josh’s arrogance and self-satisfaction deflate and shoved him again, trying to scare him away. “Lucky for you, I’m a man. Come on, batter, batter. Swing. Isn’t that what you came here to do? To convince yourself you don’t like a little dick every now and then. To prove you’re a man, Slugger.” Bryce stepped close and extended his hand, pretending he was going to grab Josh’s crotch. “Poor lonely baller. You just want someone to play balls with, don’t you?”

Josh's eyes widened, and he took a step back. "You're nuts. You really want me to take a swing." Josh laughed and shrugged. "All right, asshole, let's play." Josh sidestepped and moved his left foot in front, pointing his big toe at Bryce, and brought his bat to rest on his right shoulder.

Shit, Bryce remembered thinking. Shit. I overstepped. I just pushed him into this. Literally. He noted his batter's stance, his grip on the bat, close to its crown. He's going to do it, Bryce thought. He's going to swing. But Bryce had thought that if he stepped into Josh's swing, he could bypass the swing's power and wrestle the bat away from him, and thinking this, it was as though Josh could read his mind: he choked the bat, placing his hands higher up the grip, which would make it more difficult to take the bat away.

Matt walked up behind Josh, put his hand on the bat, and said, "No way. You aren't going to do this. This isn't a game."

"You know what I'm going to do, Matt. Don't even worry about it." Again, his tone wasn't serious, and Bryce thought Josh would change his mind at the last second. Josh winked, and with his elbow, shoved Matt away.

So Bryce played along, just as arrogant and unconcerned, wanting to call Josh's bluff. "Yeah, Matt," Bryce said. "Why don't you stay out of this? Come on, batter-batter."

For a long moment Josh stared at Bryce as though nothing else existed, and Bryce returned his stare, knowing that they both were gauging the distance. As a taunt or as a mantra to release nervous tension or as an attempt at humor—Bryce hadn't known then and still couldn't determine his reasoning—he repeated, "Swing, batter-batter, swing" until Josh did, when Bryce had hoped that Josh would lose heart and walk away.

But why didn't I walk away? Bryce now asked himself. The shower's water had run cold, which felt good on his scalded back, by the time Bryce asked himself this question. He yanked the water off, thinking that he didn't deserve any relief from his pain.

Chance knocked as he opened the door and eyed Bryce's back, which Bryce knew must have looked painful—it was—but Chance, instead of mentioning it, stared at slick linoleum and asked if he felt better, to which Bryce lied, "Yeah."

"I called the hospital. No one but family can see him, but I did learn something."

Bryce ran a towel over his head. "Well?"

"She said he's suffering from elevated intracranial pressure. He's in a coma."

"Jesus. Anything else?"

"We might be able to see him if he becomes stable."

"So he's not—"

"No."

Marta

Marta marveled that, in such a short amount of time, the waiting room had come to feel like a second home, and she narrowed her eyes at the mess that again needed cleaning. The muddle, for some reason she couldn't explain, forced her to imagine the bar in which Levi worked. But instead of beer bottles crammed into large trashcans, scattered cigarette butts and torn beer labels on the floor, the stale scents of nicotine and alcohol and cologne and perfume and decadence, the floor sticky and in shadows, the waiting room, in contrast yet still similar, was day-bright with creased magazines and faded newspapers in every chair and on both couches, the reading material spilling to the carpet, used Styrafoam cups with bite marks and lipstick stains overflowing three small trashcans with candy bar wrappers peeking out of them, torn sugar and sugar-substitute packets with specks of saccharine dust spread across the counter.

The room she was in and the room she imagined both spoke of desperation, and Marta now felt certain that Levi had lost his cellphone, and if she didn't get a hold of him, if he didn't see his brother, she knew, no matter how little he seemed to take the world seriously, that he wouldn't forgive himself if he missed the opportunity to say goodbye. A timed air-freshener mounted to the wall shushed a cloud of deodorizing spray above Marta's head, neutralizing the room of memories, resetting the cycle of real and imagined loss.

No wonder this place is almost empty, Marta thought. I bet they're all downstairs in the cafeteria or at home getting some decent rest; they couldn't stand being here another moment. She thought about telling David that they were eating out tonight, but

changed her mind when he picked up a newspaper and sat, flipping the pages, appearing as though it were a morning like any other. Marta decided that if he could endure it, so could she. More than likely, however, David was scouring the paper, while feigning disinterest, for any word of what had happened to Eric, but Marta knew that the crime, as the doctor had told her, had been committed too early in the morning for the paper to include a story about it. She sat, too, and watched David flip through another paper, and once finished, he walked to the coffee pot, his eyes glassy, not really seeing what was in front of him, as though he were wandering through their home, his mind probably busy composing a sermon, already approaching this event from a distance and deciding how he would use the experience as spiritual material, another day like any other, akin to the way the hospital staff approached their work. She felt another twinge of anger, but stifled it. She knew people managed pain and worry in different ways.

David's pain, however, was internalized, absorbed somewhere and somehow, never to be released—as always. No, he'd never do that. For David, to admit grief or anger was one thing, but to show it was unbecoming, a weakness for a man of God, ungraceful and unacceptable, nothing but an irritant, unimportant; for Marta, though, converting anger to grief was an aerobic exercise—a breath of oxygen to feed a fire, an explosion of carbon dioxide when she yelled, and the tears afterward washing and quenching her spirit. She remembered when she lost her sister unexpectedly. Hyperventilating at the news, screaming, throwing dishes. How Levi, at the age of six, joined in and broke her favorite vase, and how, after she had calmed, David put his arm around her on the couch, and Eric, then three, sat on her lap, neither of them saying a word, Eric possibly more comforting because she couldn't rile herself again with such a

quiet and sensitive child using her as a pillow, his tears soaking through her shirt, still upset because his mother had been. How could Marta begin her process without Levi to validate her anger?

Throughout most of Saturday Marta and David had sat with Eric for intervals of close to thirty minutes, after which they were told he needed rest and were not allowed to visit again for an hour, a compassionate and heavy-set nurse, who smelled of smoke, sending Marta a text when Eric's heart beat slowed again. When they weren't with Eric, they spent their time mostly in the waiting room and cafeteria with others who were just as worried about their loved ones, and while Marta and David came and went more often than others, there was still a certain schedule to everyone's migration: lunch, midafternoon, supper, and a shift-change—Marta and David, however, came and went twice as often, their behaviors as repetitive as possible, so repetitive that there was a certain rhythm to their schedule, that was, in a way Marta didn't understand, somehow comforting. Comforting, until right before supper, a detective had spoken with them.

It was five in the evening now, and only a few people lounged in the waiting room, red-rimmed and bleary-eyed folks who, like Marta, needed decent sleep more than another trip to the cafeteria, where she and David planned on going again. In her exhausted worry, Marta imagined a path, worn and meandering, down the hall, then branching off. One to an elevator, the other down two flights of stairs, both leading to the first floor where the worried grazed and watered. Earlier today, instead of imagining herself and others like her as nickering horses moving in single file to a watering hole, she had thought of flocks. Geese flying in a vee, their movement a shared burden, honking intermittently to spur each other on, and once landed, chattering and eating

whatever they could find or stomach, ready for the long haul, full of hope and optimism. But in ten hours, simultaneously a long and short time, their energies ebbed, and all the visitors Marta had watched come to and go from the ICU seemed either sway-backed and slack-jawed, heads hanging—or tense, prepared to bite, tails twitching. David was the former, Marta the latter, gum-smacking and foot-tapping.

But then there were Harold and the staff—the doctors and nurses, candy stripers, and custodians, who talked among equals, as though it were another day, another dollar, as it was for them. Smiling, cutting jokes, discussing the weather or sports, whether they made minimum wage or six figures. The custodians appearing solemn when needed, the healthcare staff sounding so when speaking to patients and family. And maybe genuinely feeling that way, for the moment, their minds eventually turning away from what the patients' families couldn't.

But Harold, the most deft, moved among them all, asking twice for the waiting room to be cleaned, for a doctor or nurse to explain something more clearly and in more detail, all in the same gentle manner in which he had spoken to Marta when he asked if he could pray for Eric and her family, as though he, puzzlingly, needed her permission. Marta was reminded of the times when David had had to make similar appearances to a hospital when he was needed, when one of his flock had broken wing and landed with a thump—Marta had always preferred to think of congregations as flocks of birds instead of sheep. David approached the job with the same gentleness and light heart as Harold, but with a pain underneath that only Marta recognized. A pain more visible after they would return home, a weariness in his eyes and brow that David, feeling keenly, claimed Harold lacked.

Maybe David was right. Maybe Harold lacked some kind of sincerity that Marta couldn't glimpse, but she thought it more likely that David, in his worry and grief, needed to criticize a man of his calling to fill the time, to think about anything other than their son, even if, while busy finding fault with Harold's approach—and because of it—David seemed more pained, guilty that he felt pulled to criticize a man who could be enjoying retirement on a golf course, whacking through a sand trap, or casting from a pond's bank, fishing. And she begrudged him for his ability to think about anything other than her son and wondered, every now and then while knowing she shouldn't be thinking it, why David didn't react the way she did, with nervous energy: unable to sit still, constantly dialing Levi, wanting to scream at someone, but knowing no one deserved it, except Josh.

The detective, somewhere in his forties, in good shape, solid and broad, had flashed his badge—for Marta, a surreal experience, as though she were at home watching a re-run of *Law & Order*, a show she watched most early afternoons—and shook Marta's hand first instead of David's, the grip so firm and undeniable that Marta had to recognize that Eric had suffered a violent act. Not a car accident or a nasty spill down a flight of stairs. Not a racing illness she didn't understand, depending on a doctor to save him from an obscure disease. Undeniably, Eric had been a victim. Bludgeoned almost to death. And here was someone who could do something about it. He not only could, but he appeared motivated, crisp, and awake, somehow knowing that he should acknowledge a mother first.

Detective Dorris had spoken in a clipped and efficient tone. One of facts with only the slightest emotion as he calmly explained what had occurred, where, and at what time, explaining all of it so quickly that he never seemed to pause for breath, rattling off

each piece of information as though he were in a hurry and had more important matters to attend to, as he rifled through his notepad. Yet he spoke quietly, and his speech slowed more and more until he sounded vaguely human, and then, as he told them about Josh, how he had admitted to the crime but claimed that it had been an accident, the detective had spoken with care and had asked whether they had any questions. They hadn't. Marta, in shock, remained silent, and David had said that there had to be a mistake. The detective had asked a few questions, but only one Marta would not forget: "Are you aware that Eric's gay?" he had asked, a question that had left both stunned.

Marta and David talked about Eric's high school girlfriend, then his few and far between dates that Eric had mentioned in college, but it occurred to Marta, and surely David realized it, too, that Eric had not mentioned any women in his life for more than two years. When the detective restated where the crime occurred and told them that people who knew Eric and who had witnessed the crime claimed that he had just come out of the closet, Marta and David look at one another, bewildered at first. Marta continued to talk about Eric's past, for David's sake, not her own, but David looked at her and shook his head, a sign that meant that the point was not worth belaboring.

The detective had said that he or someone else would be in contact with them again and had left a few moments ago, and for the third time, David now said, to no one in particular, as fact, "Had to be an accident," David said. "Some kind of misunderstanding."

"Do you mean him being gay or do you mean Josh?" Marta asked.

"Certainly Josh," David said. "Maybe Eric, too."

"I know where you stand on homosexuality in theory," Marta said, "but this is our

son. Do you still feel the same way?"

"It doesn't matter. I just want him to be okay."

Marta took David's hand and squeezed it at the same time that Harold entered the room and smiled, followed by a doctor, one Marta didn't recognize. Marta shook David's paper—to get his attention—reached for his hand and squeezed it, hard enough that David, after he set his paper down, reached across his body and patted hers, small comfort considering Marta was imagining that Eric had died. Alone. Without his mother to hold his hand as he slipped away.

"Is he okay?" Marta asked.

"He's the same," the doctor said, and Harold introduced Dr. Smith, a common name for a common doctor—a bulbous nose, high forehead and thinning hair, small eyes and beard—who seemed to be playing a part, a doctor Harold had grabbed, Marta imagined, from a storage room. One who would do in a pinch for a daytime soap, a type of show she loathed. Again, a surreal experience. "But meds aren't decreasing the pressure as quickly as we'd like. When you next visit him, it'll seem like he's hyperventilating. That's because he will be, and the air he'll breathe will be highly oxygenated. It should help with his high ICP. If it doesn't, we'll drain some cerebrospinal fluid and go from there."

"We didn't want you to be surprised by Eric's change in breathing," Harold cut in.

We've just been told, Marta thought, that my youngest was assaulted by his high school best friend, possibly because he's gay, and here's Harold worried over our reaction to Eric panting like a winded Labrador. David, as patient as ever, nodded and

thanked both Harold and Dr. Smith, and Marta watched him pace after they left, still wanting to yell at someone. When her cell rang, Marta thought she had an opportunity—to tear into Levi for not calling earlier, for not already being there at the hospital. But after digging her cell out of her purse, she read the display—Leslie Tenney—and let it ring to voicemail.

Marta closed her eyes, shook her head, and pitched her cell back into her purse. While David didn't normally press her for information and respected her privacy, her helpless confusion must have shown, because David asked who had called. With eyes still closed, she breathed deeply, consciously relaxing the muscles in her forehead, her eyebrows rising, her lips pursing as she exhaled through pursed lips.

"Leslie," she said, opening her eyes. "What do I say to her? What can I say?"

David rubbed his chin. "Imagine how she feels," he said, his cell ringing at the same time.

Marta had wanted to say, *To hell with imagining how she feels. Her son isn't lying in a hospital bed, where her son put ours*. Instead, she settled for a warning: "David, look at your phone before you answer." David rarely did, as though caller ID didn't exist. Marta's phone notified her that she had voicemail, the synthesized jingle muffled by her purse.

"Here," he said, holding out his phone so she could read the display: *Levi's cell.*

She flipped open the phone. "Where have you been? Didn't you get my messages?"

"I'm sorry, Mom," Levi shouted over loud road noise. "I had an accident with my cell, but I'm almost there, about an hour away."

"You still could've called." She wiped away tears of relief. "From a payphone, a friend's cell. We need you here."

"I know, I love you. Would you put dad on the phone?"

David

David and Levi spoke for five minutes, Levi apologizing for not calling sooner, yelling over the roar of the road, a talk show playing on Levi's car radio in the background. He should have been apologizing to his mother but expected David to relay his apology to her so that he could avoid his mother's anger. Levi claimed to have dropped his cellphone into his toilet after listening to Marta's first message, and in a rush, let it dry in his car's floorboards, the heater on full blast, the windows of his car cracked open at seventy-five miles an hour to offset the heat. He said he hadn't stopped and called from a payphone because he wanted to get to Oklahoma City quickly. The faster, the better. Although ecstatic his phone still worked, Levi said he could still smell and almost taste urine as he talked on the phone. Levi always made excuses for not calling more often or talking longer, when the reason was obvious; this excuse, however, because of its oddity, struck David as true.

"So you're close?" David asked.

"Yeah, I passed Pauls Valley not too long ago. Hey, you should know something."

"Yes?"

"NPR just aired a blurb about what happened to Eric, so it's caught national attention. Just wondering—am I going to get mobbed by reporters outside the hospital?"

"We haven't heard anything, so I don't think so. But how would they know who you are?"

By the time David and Levi said their goodbyes, Marta had drifted into a nap,

which was no surprise considering that they had been up since four in the morning, driven five hours, and spent much of the day fighting tears. Before sitting beside her, David grabbed a blanket from the back of a chair across the room and spread it over her lap. On an end table sat the remote for the waiting room's television, which had been stuck on MTV for most of the day, as Gavin's visitors, mostly high school students, sat staring at it as they came and went in a rotation from Gavin's room.

David kept the volume muted but switched to the six-thirty news that, over the course of a few minutes, showed images of pigs and syringes, American troops in a mountainous region, and the president behind a podium. After a couple of minutes and a round of commercials, the news returned showing pro football scores, and while David read on the screen that Dallas had thrashed Seattle, thirty-eight to seventeen, a few of Gavin's friends walked into the room, glanced at the TV and at Marta sleeping, and sat across the room, whispering, two of them trying to catch up one who must have been a newcomer on Gavin's story.

David couldn't help but overhear some of their conversation, and he pieced together how Gavin, a popular athlete, had come to be here. He had been driving on Friday, late for the bus, which would take the players to an out of town game. Although no one was certain, they thought that he had tried to cross the railroad tracks to beat the train so that he wouldn't miss the bus even though he could have driven himself. Some of his friends claimed that he wouldn't miss a bus ride with his teammates for anything in the world. Others thought that he was too careful for that, that maybe the sun had blinded him, that he had never seen the train—there were no lights, no bells, no crossing arms. David thought the same of Eric. Eric had always been a careful boy and young man. So

why had Eric tried to break up a fight outside of a bar? He had always been too careful. And he thought the same thought as the teenagers: Eric, just like Gavin, must have never seen it coming.

On the television, a graphic in white letters on a red background read, "Hate Crime in OKC." A camera panned through a business district on a bright day, and the camera settled on a reporter at what David assumed had been the scene of the crime. David pressed the remote to increase the volume. He needed to know if the media had made any sense out of this. But the volume was unresponsive, and the news cut to a parking lot at dusk, a hotel in the background, where David watched Burt and Leslie Tenney, heads down, hurry to their car, reporters following them. There were no motels of that size in Beaver's Walk. Like David and Marta, Burt and Leslie had come to Oklahoma City to help their son, if there was anything they could do except wait. The news cut to the anchors, both appearing somber, but then switched to a different graphic—a University of Oklahoma football helmet. The station's coverage of sports had begun, and the sports reporters all smiled, obviously reveling in another win. The camera flashed, momentarily, to the anchors who had reported on "Hate Crime in OKC," and there they were smiling as though they hadn't reported on a tragedy only two minutes ago, Eric already forgotten. David, though, knew they had not covered anything substantial, nothing that would give anyone an understanding of what had happened. If they had, how could they smile? How could they talk about sports?

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"I know this'll sound weird," Levi said, watching Eric hyperventilate, "but he reminds me of Samson."

Samson had been David's Great Dane and his jogging companion before David and Marta were married; his name referred not only to the size of the dog, large even for his breed, but also to his uncropped ears and tail. He had died from heat exhaustion on the way to the vet on a scorching day after David's evening run, and Levi had been in the car with David as Samson panted and wheezed and eventually passed. David could tell that the comparison shocked Marta, and David felt the slap of Levi's words. David, though, had to admit that there were similarities: the slackness of Eric's skin, his oily, unwashed hair, and, of course, his shallow, fast breathing, strangely reminiscent of Samson's pant. More than anything else, what occurred to David was that Levi probably had not referred to Eric's appearance but only to the panting and the feeling of absolute helplessness twenty years ago, the mood already present, somber and quiet as it had been then, neither David nor Levi speaking on the drive to the vet—only listening to Samson breathe and hoping he'd hold on. Although Eric had later not remembered Samson, David remembered that, after his death, Eric had called for him at the back sliding glass door—"San-son? Where San-son?" (he hadn't yet differentiated his N's and an M's)—intermittently for three weeks. On the fourth week, David bought another dog, spending twenty dollars at the Guymon Humane Society for an adolescent female border collie who could keep up with an active man and with a mobile and curious boy of three and who sometimes herded Eric around the house, to Eric's squealing delight. Only then had the family ceased grieving.

Levi, hyperventilating and looking wildly around the room, sat and stuck his head

between his knees. David wondered whether Levi was thinking what he was: How could they ever replace Eric? When would their grief end if Eric died? David knew that it wouldn't.

"You all right, son?" David asked.

"Just having"—Levi exhaled and inhaled—"a little trouble breathing."

"He's in much better hands than Samson was," Marta said. "They're doing everything they can for him." Marta marched across the room as she dug into her purse. "Here," she said, thrusting a small, brown paper bag at Levi. "Breathe into that." She bent over and smelled Levi's hair. "God, you wreak of smoke." Her voice changed from disgust to blame. "No wonder you can't breathe."

"Let it alone, Marta," David said. "This isn't the time for me to play referee between you two."

Marta and Levi, although similar in temperament, had not gotten along ever since Levi abandoned Southern Methodist University, a college from which David and his father had graduated before coming home to Beaver's Walk. Levi would have been the fourth generation of first-born sons to do so, the fifth to be a pastor. David had moped around the house for days after Levi dropped out, and Marta had assumed, an assumption David had never corrected, that David had played his typical role of peacemaker, stifling his anger and disappointment for the sake of a smooth family life, and had never reprimanded Levi. Marta's role, her self-appointed job over the years, had involved telling the boys, Levi especially, when their father was less than happy with them, and she had been much harder on Levi ever since he had ended a Wells' family tradition.

Marta nodded to David, turning red, and squeezed Levi's shoulder. "When you feel better, talk to him. He'll be glad to hear you."

"How can you tell?" Levi asked. "I thought he was in a coma."

"Just talk to him and you'll see," Marta said.

Levi handed the paper bag back to his mother, thanked her, and instead of pulling up a chair next to Eric, as David and Marta had when they spoke to him, Levi plopped down next to his right hip, shaking the bed and rattling cables.

"Eric, you know, I know you like peace and quiet these days, but isn't this a little extreme? Why don't you hop out of that slumber, say 'Hello,' and quit worrying everyone? Come on, get to it." Even though both boys were in their twenties, they still enjoyed horsing around every now and then, and Levi, in an attempt at humor that was, David thought, more for Marta's and his own sake than for Levi's, circled his left arm around Eric's head, acting as though he were placing Eric in a headlock, yet never touching him, and with his right hand, pretended to scobb his nob. When his kidding elicited no reaction, Levi looked at Marta and asked, "So how can you tell he knows I'm here?"

Because Levi was trying so hard to lighten the mood—now squeezing Eric's knee, a place where he was always ticklish—David didn't have the courage to tell him that Eric's heart beat had raced when he and Marta spoke to him. Marta approached the bed, coaxing Eric and stroking his hair, to tell him that Levi was finally here. Eric didn't respond.

It was then that David began to barter with God, an act he had warned members of his congregation would bring them closer to doubt and despair. How could God hear

or answer their prayers, when it was plain that God did not barter? David bartered anyway. He told himself that he'd patch up the rift between Marta and Levi; that he'd devote any additional income, if any were to be had on an already meager living in a small town church to the soup kitchen for the poor and elderly; that he'd give up his pipe and bourbon; that instead of placidly going through the motions, preaching with a predictable rise and fall of voice any new member of the congregation could predict after one Lent, he'd speak with passion and fire; that he'd forgive Josh without reservation. He offered so many deals as his panic subsided and turned to anger, that he would never remember them all, and in his frustration he briefly thought of offering an ultimatum: if Eric died, he'd leave the church.

David calmed down, knowing he had gone too far. He craved the freedom of rebellion, a way out. His threat, empty, lasted only seconds, just long enough for Levi to tell Eric that he'd be right back after "he shook hands with the man in the bathroom." Fear, anger, desperation, ultimatums, empty threats wouldn't do. God and his family deserved better.

Joshua

The light in Josh's cell hadn't been out long. Earlier in the day he'd feared lights out, a time he imagined, from watching television, when he'd hear heavy breathing from neighboring cells, the sounds of lonely or violent men comforting or abusing each other. Or maybe Josh'd hear whispers of "new fish," taunts from rough men who wanted to beat him for no other reason than to assert their dominance and amuse themselves. He'd imagined near total darkness, flaking paint and rusty bars, squeaky springs beneath his bunk, a shit and urine splattered toilet, bedding chewed by mice and rats. He imagined that a large cellmate—bald, goateed, potbellied, wearing a stained wife-beater, tufts of hair on his shoulders and tattoos on his neck—would corner him, stroke the flesh beneath his chin as though he were a cat and expect Josh to stretch out his neck, close his eyes, purr, and curl up on his cellmate's lap.

But Casper didn't frighten Josh. When Josh had walked in holding clean bedding and few other odds and ends, Casper hopped off the top bunk, peeled his sheets and pillow, and flung them on the bottom bunk. Casper—scrawny with sparse peach fuzz, a freckled long nose, a protruding Adam's apple, and greasy wheat-colored hair—barely reached Josh's shoulders with shoes on. It took fewer than five minutes to learn that Casper was serving six months, now well into his third, for writing a few thousand dollars' worth of hot checks and for assault, although Josh could tell he wasn't really violent. Casper barely mentioned his assault conviction. Instead he focused on his ignorance of his checkbook, claiming to have believed it had been as good as credit, and

now that he knew the difference, he was prepared, once out of county, to spend only the money he actually had.

While Josh had doubted Casper's claim of innocent ignorance—could anyone be so naïve and clueless about money?—he came to understand throughout the day that Casper was as simple and childlike as he imagined Matt to have been when he was twelve. After Josh told Casper a little about himself, not mentioning why he was there—Casper didn't pry—Casper yakked about baseball nonstop all day long. The day itself followed a simple schedule: breakfast, which Josh had missed by an hour, followed by a little social time when they could wander outside their cells in the pod, and with the same break following each meal. Casper followed at Josh's heels as though Josh were an older brother he wanted to impress. At first Josh thought that Casper might have been concerned that Josh intended to harm him, which would explain the constant jabbering to get on Josh's good side, but in the afternoon, Josh could tell that Casper's excitement and simplicity were genuine. He, indeed, enjoyed baseball, and Josh appreciated the luck of having him as a cellmate, grateful they had a common interest that could distract them both. Younger than Josh, a mere nineteen to Josh's twenty-two, Casper seemed more frightened than Josh, eyes wide and blinking and swallowing for much of the day, his tongue stuffed in the left side of his cheek as though he wished he were chewing tobacco to calm his nerves. Or perhaps he wished for Big League Chew, a type of chewing gum Josh had sucked on as a child—after all, he couldn't imagine a small line of tobacco juice running down Casper's chin.

From the bottom bunk, Josh heard Casper yawn and ask, "Who you think has a sweet swing?"

The question, although a common one, jolted him. “How ’bout you go first this time,” Josh said, not wanting to talk about it.

“Dustin Pedroia.”

“Shit, all you shrimps been saying that lately.”

“Still good though.”

“Yeah, but I’d go with Clemente if I had to pick a shorty.”

“Never heard of him. How short is he? Who’s he play for?”

Josh snorted and sat up. “Never heard a Roberto Clemente? You sure you like baseball? He’s a hall a famer, 5’11”, 175 pounds soppin’ wet. But he had a hell of a swing. Smooth stroke and powerful.”

“I call bullshit. That ain’t short.”

“Oh, knock it off. Forget the shrimps and play it straight.”

“Fine. Griffey, Jr. then.”

“Ah hell, that’s obvious. Everyone says that, too. Next you’re gonna rattle off Hank Aaron or Ted Williams, Mantle, and you’ll probably throw in Jeter and A-Rod.”

“No way. Screw those Yanks. I’d call Manny and Ortiz.”

“Manny’s obvious too because you like the Sox. But Ortiz? Jesus, he only chops wood. Swings for the fences almost every single time. Had a crappy year, too. His worst.”

“Fine,” Casper said and sighed. “I can tell you’re gonna put down anybody I name ’cause you know more than me, going to college and all. But you’re not even taking into account that he was hurt this year.”

"Let's just drop it. I guess I'm all talked out."

Josh heard Casper turn over, probably facing the wall and pouting. He thought about David "Papi" Ortiz's swing, how it was strong and so smooth for such a big man, crushing the ball when his bat connected with it, not a hitch to it like Josh's swing when he went after a fast ball, cramped and tight, with a stunted follow-through; Josh had flat-out lied about his opinion of Papi just to shut Casper up about swings. But now Josh couldn't stop thinking about them.

Almost every time he connected to burning pitches, not often last year, he knew he had sliced the ball, not quite catching it cleanly, a bit behind it, the bat's crown dipping too low, the ball careening to the edge of right field then into the stands, a foul ball. Before it would land in the crowd, Josh would feel the bat's vibration, sometimes painful through his gloves, and the more vibration he felt, the worse he knew he'd shanked another. But the last time Josh had swung, he'd barely felt any vibration, and he wondered whether it was because of what he had contacted—Christ, Eric's head, fuck me, he thought—or because he hadn't made up his mind whether to put the brakes on and tap the big blond asshole's left kidney or to go ahead and swing on through. Because he hadn't committed to either action, had his swing, just this once, smoothed itself out? Of all times for it…and why did he feel the urge, he wondered, to swing at all, even if only to frighten some freaky cross-dressing jerk?

The beer. It had to be the beer. After all, athletes spat insults without thought. It was a learned behavior ingrained since before puberty, maybe as early as Tee-ball, practiced over the years until smack-talking was as automatic as swiping away gnats and mosquitos during an evening game under stadium lights. Josh's own in high school and at

OSU had said worse things to him than Blondie had. But he knew it hadn't been only the beer. Josh, for a moment, thought he smelled Blondie's perfume. A man wearing sweet perfume, reminiscent of cotton candy. Tight black gleaming leather pants, high heels, and a halter and a blond wig. Standing there in front of him. Calling him Slugger. Telling him he was shit. Daring him to swing and implying he'd miss, just whiff through the air. Blondie'd thought he was that incompetent and untalented. One part of him wanted to play the prank: after appearing as though he might drive his bat through him, Josh would tap Blondie's side, and say, "See? See what I could've done to you." Josh knew that would've been pure drunken ego, one dominant man trying to dominate another. Blondie was bigger. More aggressive. And strangely, too, scary in his get-up and another part of Josh wanted to lay him out, especially because Blondie was asking for it and must have thought he could take Josh even after absorbing Josh's swing.

When Josh swung, the bat had slipped, but he wasn't sure why. Had it been nervousness, adrenaline that produced sweaty palms? Had it been the dark shape that'd formed to his right, Eric himself, breaking his concentration, a shape emerging from the darkness that had caused him to flinch, to swing harder than he intended, because it occurred to him at the last minute that he was going to be bushwhacked? Or had it been a thought previous to that one: Screw it. Let's do this? But what had he planned on doing at that moment? What had been *this*? Did he think, Screw it, I'm going to scare the piss out of the freak or screw it, I'm taking him outta the game?

No matter the reason, the bat had slipped in exactly the position where Josh did what he always did: he swung for the fences, an exercise of muscle memory, practice turned unconscious, an inevitable reaction after thousands of practice swings on which

his body demanded to follow through. Whatever his intentions—and he didn't know what they had been anymore—he had told the police that he hadn't meant to hurt anyone, his tears and panic genuine, and only this morning, after he had calmed down and Detective Dorris had questioned him, that it occurred to him that many of his teammates and his coaches would remember the trick he had taught himself: Eric was first person Josh had shown it to, because he had wanted to impress him. Surely Matt had vouched for him.

And here I am, thought Josh. He wondered where Matt was and guessed he hadn't been taken in; after all, he was relatively sober, not having had a drop since before driving to OKC. More important, he hadn't done anything and even tried to stop Josh. Josh wished that Matt had stopped him, wished he had yanked the bat away—Matt stout enough to do so—and smacked him. As drunk as he had been and as good a friend as Matt was, Josh imagined he would've backed down and not held a grudge, not even for a moment. Just another drunken disagreement during another strange drunken evening. Better to back down and let it go. But no one had. Not Josh. Not Blondie. For what?

"Hey, Casper," Josh said.

"Yeah?" Casper answered, his voice soft, sounding as though he'd been on the edge of sleep.

"Papi's gotta fine swing. Wish I had a bit of his control and power. I'm just in a bad mood, I guess."

"That's all right. I was scared my first day. Hardly said a word to nobody, but it's really not all that bad. Just boring is all."

"Boring I can handle," Josh said. "You're all right, Casper. Talk to you in the morning."

Josh hadn't yet sunken into bed. Sitting up in the dim light, he could tell that the toilet would gleam in the morning, that the floor would be clean, the bars smooth, and the bedding would remain whole, safe from rats. Jail wasn't what he had imagined—except the groaning bunks. But he couldn't sleep anyway.

David

Harold spoke to David, and although David knew that he should somehow respond, he couldn't. Harold had popped in several times overnight to see how they were doing, sometimes saying little, just sitting with David and Marta and Levi, David assumed, so that they wouldn't feel so alone in their worry and grief. His presence had helped on Saturday, when Marta had tried to call Levi again and again, feeling angry and helpless afterward. David knew that she hadn't been angry at Levi, only panicked, but she had sounded that way yesterday, and it was as though Harold had known the perfect time to show up—with a firm handshake, a hand on a shoulder, kind reassuring words that had calmed Marta each time, and although David appreciated this, he still felt, on some level, as though Harold were an intruder, a stranger, witnessing pain that should have been private. Go away, David had thought a few times.

But now he didn't want Harold to leave. Harold had taken over so smoothly, as Marta cried on David's shoulder and the morning sun shone through a window on to her hair. David could see how flat it clung to her scalp, not having been washed since Friday and dull in the morning light, and he smelled her, a little sour from not showering for three days, and felt her tears soak a small portion of his shirt, her breath acrid, her soft sobbing shaking his shoulder. Levi, his eyes bloodshot, held his mother's hand. Harold sat across from them, leaning forward, almost knee to knee with David, holding David's hands, telling David for possibly the third time that he'd taken care of almost everything—that he had already contacted the funeral home in Beaver's Walk, that someone from there would soon be on the way, that the funeral home, too, would make

almost all the arrangements, that Harold had also called David's church, and he had said that everyone would try to make this time as painless as could be. That he and his family should get rest. Shower, sleep, eat. That to grieve, and grieve properly, they would need their strength. That he would sit with Eric—whom David and Marta had already seen, clean and unhooked from all the cables and tubes, and who at last looked at peace—until he was picked up to be taken back to his hometown.

Not once did David think, Go away. Instead, he thought, Thank you, Thank you, but unable to speak, unable to express his gratitude to this stranger whom he had not trusted but who now was trying his best to help his family move forward, even if only a few steps. He silently thanked the nurses who had cleaned Eric up, preparing him as best they could for viewing; after the doctor had delivered the news and asked whether they wanted to see him, David had been reluctant, not wanting to see his youngest son attached to wires and cables, a tube in his throat, with days of stubble, his body unwashed and ripe and now dead. Marta had walked with determination behind the doctor, but David felt no conviction, was in no hurry, and when they approached the doorway, the doctor opening it for them, David had wanted to grab Marta's arm to prevent her from rushing in, but there had been nothing gruesome to see. Someone had taken the time to wash and shave Eric, and David noticed that makeup had been applied to Eric's temple, close to where he had been struck, the base disguising a dark bruise. What David had thought would be a moment of horror had become, in a small way, a blessing. They could grieve without memories of disgust, without wondering whether the hospital staff had ignored any detail. David thanked God now, for the doctors, the nurses, and for Harold, for all who had done their best and were still doing everything in their power to allow his

family the opportunity to respond to Eric's death with integrity and grace.

"David, have you heard me?" Harold asked. "Have you heard what I've said?"

Without opening his eyes, David whispered, because he didn't trust his voice, "Yes, thank you. Pray with me."

For a few moments the room was quiet except for Marta's crying, as David prayed, heartbroken, feeling a pain he could not express and trying to reconcile an image that sometimes came to him in the small hours of the morning: of his two sons on either side of him, holding his hands on his deathbed as he spoke and comforted them, giving advice and telling jokes. David let go of Harold's hands to fish a tissue out of his front shirt pocket for Marta. "Here," he said.

"Thank you." She stood, dried her eyes, and wiped her nose. "I'll be back. I'm going to freshen up before we go." Before she left, she bent and kissed David's hair.

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David drove home alone in Levi's car. He had insisted that Marta and Levi ride together, mostly not wanting either of them to be alone with their thoughts, and partly hoping that they might speak to each other as he thought a mother and son should, and also partly so that he could think. Should he speak at Eric's funeral? Should he pretend that he didn't believe that Eric had been gay, when he wasn't sure? Should he reveal that he didn't care whether Eric had been gay? He knew he would if given the chance. He'd admit to feeling at fault for Eric never telling him who he had been, if that was who he had been. If he had been gay, how could Eric, who had grown up in one of the most

conservative regions in the nation—where David, too, was a pastor's son—tell him that he was gay?

In a trance, not aware of where he drove, David sank into memory, thinking of his father's funeral, in the same church where Eric would be eulogized, where David eventually would be, too. He remembered the packed church, remembered what Reverend Tom, a Presbyterian minister and his father's best friend, had said—that David's father always took God's side in any dispute, one of the fairest men a congregation could ask for, and fiery for a Methodist, which was never a Methodist's or a Presbyterian's strength. As David remembered what had been said about his father, he also remembered what his father had written David about leading a church after his father was forced into retirement.

It had been on the first Sunday of the summer after David's junior year at SMU, almost a year after his father's stroke, a debilitating one that stole much of his speech and left him unable to lead the church. He could still write, but the stroke had also robbed him of much of his extensive vocabulary. That morning, before church, David told his parents that, after earning his bachelor's degree, he'd pursue a Master of Divinity and a Ph.D. His parents were happy to hear the news. Proud. And not surprised from what David could tell because of his upbringing and family's history. At church David sat next to his father in a pew for the first time, and again, for the first time, David listened to someone other than his father deliver a sermon in his church. In the middle of the reverend's sermon, David's father painstakingly scrawled a note on a tithing card and showed it to David. It read, "I give him a few more months at most."

After the service, David asked him why, to which he responded—in his broken

speech composed of long pauses, stuttering, and a game of pantomime they played until David's father finally grew so frustrated that he wrote down what he had wanted to say—and David still remembered his father's words: "Liberal politics from the pulpit won't work for our crowd." This was news to David. He hadn't heard any mention of politics. His father tried to explain the offense until his mother interrupted, pointing out that the new pastor had alluded to President Carter's views on energy conservation—and, no less, when Oklahoma was experiencing an oil boom—and if David knew anything about politics—he didn't, being so engrossed in his studies—he would have caught the references.

For the next four years, in attempts to find a suitable replacement for David's father, the church went through three different pastors, not one remaining longer than a year and a half, all of them transferred at the congregation's request. During this carousel of pastors, David dabbled in politics, decided he was a moderate Democrat, somewhat to his father's disappointment, and met Marta, a Dallas native and casual part-time feminist, obviously more liberal than David himself; during this time David also voiced his intention to return to Beaver's Walk and lead his father's old church as had been expected of him anyway. For the first time in a number of years, and a few months before his death, David's father spoke without a flaw: "Please, David, never talk about politics." They sat down and had a long conversation, father to son, about how petty some members of the church could be—petty concerning a pastor's interpretation of the Bible even if Methodist in nature, petty about who mowed and who gardened and who ran the kitchen and who was allowed to lead Bible study for which age group; petty about who collected tithes, who were chosen as trustees and deacons, petty about who taught

vacation bible school. Petty, petty, petty. He told David that his job, every now and then, would focus on teaching them how not be petty—while also, as their leader, not giving them an excuse to be petty.

Leading and managing a church were challenging and difficult jobs without mentioning politics, and David now certainly knew that after so many years of balancing personalities. Why mention them here, all the way out here in No Man's Land, where people lived partly to escape any mention of politics, where they had chosen to live in what they felt was God's country?

No, David knew, as he became more aware of where he was driving, that he couldn't talk about Eric's sexuality, not if he didn't want to be transferred from the only home he'd ever known and where a Wells had led the Methodist church for over four generations. He decided not to speak at his son's funeral. He'd lie. He'd claim that he would be too overcome with emotion to speak, a partial truth, and he hoped Eric understood. In shame, David wept.

Part II

Bryce

The drive to Beaver's Walk had seemed simple enough until they crossed into the Panhandle, the first sign reading, "Beaver County." After four hours on the road and having started at six in the morning, Bryce, Chance, and Lisa had been relieved to see that they were close to Beaver's Walk and more than ready to stretch their legs. But Chance tried to ruin the good news: "Well, hell, my phone says we still have a couple of hours left to go." Bryce's eyes left the road and its surroundings—the rolling hills and plateaus in the distance to the south—and watched Chance smack his phone and shake it, gritting his teeth. "Dammit, no reception again."

"Oh well," Lisa said from the backseat, "it doesn't matter, does it? We're almost there."

"Yeah, settle down, Hulk," Bryce said. "It wouldn't be the first time your phone's been wrong, and I've still got us going in the right direction."

"I don't think you quite get it," Chance said and pointed to the time displayed on the car's dash. "It's a little after ten, and we're not supposed to get there till noon. And don't tell me I'm wrong about when we're supposed to get there. I checked online last night."

Bryce had to admit that Chance was right—the numbers didn't crunch—and decided to pull over in the next little town either to find an Oklahoma road atlas that

might have been buried somewhere in the trunk or to buy one and maybe, swallowing his pride, to ask for directions. Their first chance, a scant eight to twelve miles into the Panhandle, was at a place called Slapout, a name it seemed to deserve. It seemed as though the town, if it ever existed, had been slapped out of existence, only one functional building still standing, one that Chance and Lisa didn't want Bryce to stop at. "Just keep driving until we see a little civilization," Lisa said.

Despite their complaints, Bryce pulled over, saw that the gas station was closed, and had no luck finding an atlas in the trunk as the biting north wind, smelling lightly of sage, lodged grit into his hair and eyebrows and attempted to sandblast the stubble from his cheeks. Once back in the car and on the road, Bryce reassured them that he'd find where they were going. After all, where could a town hide out here? He hadn't seen but a couple of populated towns since leaving the metro—only Ceiling and Woodward—and if the towns kept growing smaller, from Woodward, to Fort Supply, then to May, which boasted a population of three, then the possibility was slim, Bryce reasoned, that anyone could ever drive by a town, blinking and missing it. Even a modest house would stir attention out here. After twenty minutes, however, he pulled into an open gas station, with its pumps out of service, in a place called Elmwood and asked where he might find Beaver's Walk.

"Oh sure, hon, been there a plenty," said a tall woman in her fifties, with broad shoulders, her thick fingers holding a cigarette. "I guess I can see why you're confused. About a half mile up the road you'll see a sign that says 'Beaver 14 miles' and points you to the north. Now don't go that way because Beaver's Walk isn't even in Beaver County. You just keep on going straight because Beaver's Walk's in Texas County." She leaned

on the counter and nodded with authority as though she had just preached the gospel.

Worried that the drive might be longer than he'd initially thought, Bryce asked, "But it's not in Texas, is it?"

She slapped the counter as though what Bryce had said were outlandish. "Oh, gosh, no. It's right here in Oklahoma where it's always been. So you keep going straight west till you hit Guymon, okay? And once you do that there are two ways to get to Beaver's Walk, one that circles north and another that circles south. Are you sightseeing?"

Bryce shook his head, having trouble imagining who would drive here to sightsee.

"Okay, well don't go south then, the Goodwell way. You go north up through Unity because Unity's where everyone wants to be." She snorted at her humor, which was lost on Bryce, then must have noticed that he wasn't following her and straightened up, serious. "You know, I have an atlas right back here. Wanna have a look?"

Bryce studied the map, apparently the store's only copy, and saw where he needed to go, memorizing the route, which was rather simple, although indirect and needlessly curved on a flat plain.

"So, let me get this straight," Bryce said. "Beaver's Walk isn't in Beaver County. It's in Texas County, which isn't in Texas but Oklahoma?"

"I never claimed it made a lick of sense." With his back against the door to push it open, Bryce waved and thanked the lady before stepping back outside. "Good luck." The wind swung the door wide open, and Bryce had to push it closed.

Chance was standing in the middle of the lot, holding his cell phone, his other hand shielding his eyes even though he wore sunglasses. "Got a signal?" Bryce asked.

"Sure do, and I see exactly where we are and where we're supposed to be going. We'll be there in an hour and a half." Chance shoved his cell into his pocket and slipped his arm through Bryce's, Chance's body heat always welcome but even more comforting in the biting cold wind, and they walked, leaning into one another, to the car. "I got a text, too. Josh Tenney was charged with voluntary manslaughter. That's it."

Bryce let the car's passenger side door handle slip out of his hand and turned around to lean against the car. Chance held him, and Bryce heard the backseat window roll down and Lisa ask, "Is something wrong?"

"Just Oklahoma, Lisa," Chance said. "The whole damn state."

Back on the road, Chance explained to Lisa the issue: the chief of police and the district attorney of Oklahoma County had stated that Oklahoma did not have a hates crime bill to protect homosexuals and that they did not think that anyone in the state deserved special status. Chance read the DA's statement aloud: "No one is special in the eyes of the law." Chance turned around in his seat to face Lisa. "Sounds fair on the surface, right?"

From the rearview mirror, Bryce watched Lisa's eyebrows crinkle, and she hesitated to answer. "Well, yes, I guess it does."

"What if I told you that Christians are protected? What if I told you that if Josh had swung that bat at a Christian only because he was a Christian, then the attack would have been a hate crime? Still think that's fair?"

"Wait." Lisa shook her head. "So there's a hate crime law for Christians and not for gays? But he's saying everyone's equal?"

Bryce gripped the steering wheel. "Yes, that's exactly what he's saying, and he's

the DA. He knows what's what. He knows that Christians are protected. And they are the vast majority."

Lisa leaned back into the seat and crossed her arms. "That's fucked up. So he lied. Why would he do that?"

"Why do you think?" Chance asked.

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Beaver's Walk, although Bryce had never visited it, seemed familiar, the ratio of churches to convenience stores—the town's two main institutions from what he had seen so far—about the same as the small town where he had been raised. He had to admit, though, that he'd never seen a gas station converted into a church; in front of this first building inside city limits, a marquee on wheels with a flashing arrow next to the road advertised both the New Hope Baptist Church and broasted chicken. Way out here in the Panhandle of Oklahoma, a flat dry place in the middle of nowhere, where Bryce counted more signs marking cemeteries than indicating the distance to the nearest towns, it felt as though lonely buildings accepted Jesus into their foundations and cross beams, ready to change however they needed to bring people together.

According to the GPS on Chance's phone, the Methodist church stood only five blocks away. To get to it, Bryce drove through what a sign designated as the historic business district. From Bryce's perspective the sign was ambiguous as to whether businesses in this town were historical re-enactments like a grade school performance of the Land Run, cute and only vaguely educational, sustained only for the sake of

entertainment or practical and actually conducted business. But the three-block stretch of two-story shotgun brick buildings, vaguely Art Deco in design, on either side of the arrow-straight yet potholed highway wasn't completely empty. Cars, most of them older and oxidized, were parked in front some of the buildings—the signs read, Cassandra's Jewelry; Jim's Machine Shop; Gladys' Fine Used Books; Tom's Classic Car Restoration; two read simply, Radio Station and Bank—but if the town had been healthy, Bryce suspected that a few more cars would have sagged there, parked diagonally, slowly being sandblasted by the Oklahoma wind on a Thursday early afternoon.

"This is worse than I imagined," Chance said. "Do you think a single gay man lives here? No wonder Eric said he didn't visit much. And he described it as quaint. Yeesh."

"You've seen where I grew up," Bryce said, "so it shouldn't surprise you."

"I don't see how women live out here either," Lisa said.

Bryce's hometown, which he referred to as Hickwell, never uttering or thinking its proper name, sat in the foothills of the Ozarks, barely within the eastern boundaries of eastern Oklahoma, and if the grizzled gas station attendant who filled up their tank an hour ago in Hardesty had been right, half of Oklahoma didn't belong in Oklahoma. Instead, according to the greasy old fart, anything east of I-35 was considered "plains queer" and not Oklahoman in the slightest. Bryce had wondered, briefly, if the man had somehow known he and Chance were gay, even though Bryce had removed Chance's rainbow pride front license plate, despite Chance's complaining squawk, in the dark earlier this morning. But it occurred to Bryce that the tobacco chewing hick had been ribbing him in good fun and had probably said the same thing to every person he hadn't

seen before who drove up to the pumps from the east, thinking it a witty and a pure and proud countrified joke. As they had driven farther into the Panhandle, however, and as the land grew starker, flatter, and somehow rougher despite its leveled plumb-lined layout, he was no longer sure that the gas attendant hadn't meant "queer" in the insulting sense Bryce had first heard as a junior high kid who knew who he was and knew he had to hide his identity. In the lonelier landscape in the middle of Oklahoma's Panhandle, where people were few and far between, where one close friend might be the difference between complete social isolation and an evening of laughter, Bryce might have also attempted to repress his identity entirely. Maybe Chance had a point. Maybe gay men wouldn't and couldn't live here.

The GPS commanded Bryce to turn left.

"You think many people will attend?" Chance asked.

Eric's homosexuality, while still in doubt in Bryce's mind, was now, whether true or not, widely known, the news cycle for the last three days having spit it out over and over, thanks in part to Chance. He had answered, emphatically, when questioned by police, that Eric was gay, and he had done so again when reporters had interviewed him and when the ACLU had become interested in the case. After Bryce again had voiced his doubt, Chance had said, simply, "Well, I damn well know he was," and when Bryce had asked why it was so important that the assault be considered a hate crime, Chance had answered with more confidence and passion than Bryce was used to: "Even if Eric were straight, it's still a hate crime. He swung that bat at you. *You.* It could've been you, Bryce, don't you know that? And if he hadn't swung at you, it would've been someone else farther down the block. He did what he did because you're gay. That can't be

tolerated, and without some press, do you really think anyone around here would give a shit?"

Remembering that conversation, Bryce reflected that if Eric weren't the victim, no one in Beaver's Walk would've paid any attention to the crime. But even though they were now aware of it, they probably had no clue of the politics behind it—or of how all these churches, which helped life become more bearable out here in the boondocks, helped to shape, even this far away from Oklahoma County, the politics of the state and Bryce's rights as a human being. The thought baffled him. How can people I don't know, Bryce asked himself, and who live so far away affect my life like this?

A block away from the church, cars were parallel-parked in the street, some in front yards, and when the church came into view, a single story brick building, the parking lot—gravel in the middle of town—was packed, bumper to bumper, so tight that whoever had parked in the middle would be the last to leave.

"There's your answer," Bryce said.

"Wow," Chance said, leaning over the steering wheel and craning his neck for a better view of the crammed parking lot. "A better turn-out than Dino's funeral." Last year Dino, one of Chance's clients and older friends, an elder statesman of drag and widely popular, had died of a stroke—too much wine and too many cigarettes—and his funeral, as Dino had requested years before, had been a party. "I haven't seen a whole lot of houses around here. Damn, where do all these people live?"

Bryce, as Chance drove two blocks past the church and found a tight parking spot alongside the narrow road, didn't mention the obvious; that almost all the trucks and SUVs—Chevys, Fords, GMCs, and Dodges, the silhouettes of gun racks in rear windows

seen through camouflage or American flag tinting—had four-wheel drive; that, as in Hickwell, more people who claimed to be Hickwellites lived outside of town than in it. But Bryce knew what Chance really meant: it was surprising, maybe even shocking, that so many people would attend a young man's funeral merely a few days after being outed posthumously. Small towns, after all, were unforgiving to those who didn't fit in sexually, usually driving them away, either in ridicule or in scorn, and Bryce wondered whether so many people were present because of their love for Eric, for the entire Wells family, or for the love of a spectacle. No matter, if funerals were the same here as in Hickwell, Bryce knew that plenty of home-cooked fried food was guaranteed, a sure attraction for some hard-up people living out in the sticks who needed a hot meal on a cold day.

When Bryce opened the car door, he held onto the handle, expecting the wind to blow it wide and the cold to cut. But the wind, which had veered the car over the center line twice, had lessened sometime during the drive, and he quickly felt the sun's warmth on his back through his suit. Bryce closed the door, rested his arms on top of the car, and looked over his sunglasses at Chance, who was dressed similarly, in a dark suit. "Well, are you ready?" he asked. He nodded toward a news van parked close to the church's entrance, a reporter looking and speaking into a camera. Two more vans were parked at the edge of the lot.

"I don't think anyone's really ready for a funeral, Bryce," Chance said.

Bryce came prepared to answer what he thought would be an inevitable question—*How did you know Eric?*—and he'd answer honestly. From work. He'd leave it at that. But Chance, whom just about anyone could guess was gay—by his walk, tone

of voice, plucked eyebrows, moussed hair, and moist lips—might accidentally talk too much, because he'd be upset; and for those people whose gaydar was weak and who didn't notice the obvious because they had grown up in a small town with little to no diversity, Chance would eventually reveal himself when—not if—he'd cry, the sound of his weeping never restrained like most straight men's. Bryce felt guilty that he worried about whether these people knew he and Chance were gay. He hadn't cared in years, but he couldn't help wondering whether some of these people, whom Bryce hadn't yet seen, could put two and two together and ask whether they had been there when Eric was struck—and, if so, why hadn't they saved him. Bryce imagined questions to which he had no answers, and he imagined being surrounded, once word had spread, of polarized camps—one supporting Eric, the other Josh—demanding the truth, whatever it was, both sides concluding that their small town boys couldn't and hadn't been at fault. Instead, the blame would somehow fall to Bryce and Chance, a crowd pressing against them, angry and judgmental, ready to run them out of town. Or worse.

Bryce's fears were put to rest as soon as they entered the church. In the hall, just outside the already crowded sanctuary, only one person spoke to them, an old blue-haired woman, who, smiling, asked them to sign the registry and handed them programs. Small children, some in their Sunday best, others in jeans and boots, skipped and jumped and sprinted down the hall. Their parents half-heartedly told them to stop, and the children momentarily did, vibrating until they could no longer contain themselves, aware of the somber tension and fighting against it, knowing that a world outside existed, while adults did their best to ignore it for the moment. The levity of the children's behavior, Bryce knew, as surely as anyone who watched them, let everyone know that life moved on, and

once the funeral had ended and the meal in Fellowship Hall had been devoured, the children would sprint outside, chasing one another—a boy would pull a girl's hair, a girl would kick a boy's shin, and they would make a truce after agreeing on a game to play. The adults would smile, nodding and thinking, Yes, life still goes, just the way it always should.

No one spoke to Bryce and Chance inside the sanctuary either, where there was standing room only, the restless adults mirroring the children in the hall, some dressed as well as the children, others worse. Few people spoke to each another, and those who did spoke to an immediate neighbor, leaning in closely to whisper into an ear. But despite their quiet, like the children, they seemed to vibrate yet at a lower rate, a hum of expectancy. A few turned around, scanning the gathering crowd and offering tight-lipped smiles.

Bryce and Chance settled against the rear wall next to a stained glass window, more or less out of sight, except from the late-comers who also were left standing, and Bryce had only a moment to read the top of the program—*In loving memory of Eric William Wells: September 17th, 1985 – November 2nd, 2009*—before the side door of the sanctuary opened.

A pastor, with a salt and pepper beard and bald head, wearing robes, strode into the sanctuary, and a somber man in a dark gray suit, hands clasped in front of him, followed at a much slower pace, Eric's family—Reverend Wells, Mrs. Wells, Eric's brother, and a couple who must have been one set of Eric's grandparents—following him. The pastor sat behind the pulpit and reviewed notes, while the family was ushered into a pew, front and center.

Bryce recognized Eric's family from television. The news had repeatedly aired a short video clip of them exiting the hospital the day Eric had died. In the clip, Mrs. Wells had appeared defiant, twice looking directly into the camera, eyes red but squinting as though the camera were an insect she'd like to swat; someone who could have been only Eric's brother had hugged Reverend Wells before walking away with Mrs. Wells, his head down and shoulders hunched; Reverend Wells, however, had sauntered, stared straight ahead, and murmured, "Please, not today." As the cameras followed him to his car, ignoring his request, he picked up speed, his face flushing, his body seeming to coil. At his car, he wheeled around and mocked the reporters, somehow sounding sincere: "Thank you for respecting our privacy and thank you for your support during this difficult time," his delivery so effective that local anchors reported the news with a touch of disgust.

After the family was seated, the funeral seemed like any other—an opening prayer, a hymn, a brief eulogy spoken by the pastor, who lived in a neighboring town and recounted his memories of Eric as a small child and his life achievements. Afterward, Mrs. Wells and a woman who must have been her mother climbed the three stairs to the chancel and walked to the lectern. The light dimmed and a projector's screen, behind the women, slid down as a slide show began, composed of numerous photos of Eric and his family and friends.

Here was Eric as a toddler sitting next to a bowl of dog food, a huge dog towering over him and eating out of his hand, a long line of slobber stretching from the dog's jowls to the linoleum floor. A number of sequenced shots displayed Eric, a couple of years older in this very church, walking toward his father at the pulpit, and Mrs. Wells

explained that he couldn't wait until his father finished his sermon to tell him a secret. Each photo showed Eric a little closer to the pulpit, and the last photo of the sequence showed Reverend Wells preaching, his mouth open, with Eric straddling the reverend's shoulders and pointing at something beyond the camera's reach, his father's eyes following Eric's finger. Mrs. Wells said that, before this photo was taken, her husband had stopped his sermon and kneeled down to ask Eric what he had wanted. Eric whispered in his ear, the reverend scooped him up, said, "He's forgotten why he came up here. But let's not forget why we're here…" and continued his sermon as though a child were not giggling over his head. Eric remained there until he pulled on his father's ears too hard for him to ignore. He set Eric down, telling him to go yank his mother's ears because his had quite enough, thank you.

Mrs. Wells and her mother took turns narrating, and there were photos of Eric's birthday parties, Eric growing up in front of their eyes: his first bike; his first insect collection; first tee-ball game; first baseball game, his first dance; first girlfriend, a blonde taller than Eric in her high heels, with braces and a wide smile; photos of Eric in the glee club, on the high school football and baseball teams; high school graduation; his first dorm room; college graduation; and finally a photo that Bryce remembered taking and emailing to Eric at his request: Eric stood in front of a stack of books at the library—his first job after graduating, just this past June, five short months ago.

For the length of the slide show, Mrs. Wells had held up well, her voice breaking only here and there, her mother picking up where Mrs. Wells left off, while she dabbed at her eyes or wiped her nose. She had done her best to smile throughout, and her smile, as she remembered her son and shared her memories, had been genuine.

But now she appeared grim, gripping the edges of the lectern and leaning into it, and from across the room, Bryce saw that her knuckles were white. “There are many other pictures I would’ve liked to have shown you, but I was told they were in bad taste,” Mrs. Wells announced as though she were a pastor herself, a fire in her eyes and in her body, her feet spread apart as though she were prepared for a confrontation. “But I will show you just one. I think it’s appropriate, and I think Eric would want it that way. He never held a grudge, and I know he doesn’t now.” She clicked a button on the remote she held, and there were Eric and Josh in their Beaver’s Walk high school baseball uniforms, the local ballpark behind them, the same tall blonde from an earlier picture, now shorter than Eric, beside him, and a girl Bryce had never seen before, brunette, slight, and much shorter than Josh beside him. Mrs. Wells turned to the screen and studied it for a moment before she spoke again. “This was their last game together, and as many of you know, they were best friends since they were kids.” Turning to her audience, she leaned on the lectern again, staring to her left. “I know this might seem tasteless right now, but I want you to remember them this way.” Bryce, embarrassed for Mrs. Wells, put his hand over his mouth and stared at the floor. He had recognized, from television, the couple at which she was staring down, her body rigid as though in challenge.

David

David knew at whom Marta stared, and he knew everyone was staring at them, too. He had heard the shush of fabric as necks rotated in their collars, and pants, skirts, dresses and jeans scratched the course padded pews beneath them to twist in their seats to gain a better view. If he were Burt or Leslie, he knew how they'd feel. Blamed. But David didn't look at them, not until Leslie sobbed and barreled down the aisle, her hands covering her face. Burt stood, his ears on fire, shook his head, and followed his wife.

And still Marta stared, even after the door had banged shut behind Leslie, even when Burt, still walking, looked behind him at Marta, the large and proud man crying. David stood and said to Burt, "It's not your fault." But Burt didn't seem to hear him. "Marta tell him." The door closed behind Burt, and Marta blinked as though she were waking from a trance. Annie, patient woman she was, the best mother-in-law David could ask for, put her arms around Marta and tried to lead her away.

"I don't feel done," Marta said, still at the lectern. "There has to be more to say."

And still she stared, unblinking, but David couldn't tell at what. David went to her and hugged her. "It isn't their fault," he said.

As David walked her down the steps, Marta blinked again as though to clear the confusion from her head. "I never said it was."

Behind David, Pastor James said, "Let us pray."

***

David had no appetite and doubted that Marta did either, but Annie and her husband, Hank, a short skinny man becoming shorter with age, brought them food anyway, heaping plates of smoked brisket, potato salad, fried okra, and baked beans. Marta had chosen not to join everyone else in Fellowship Hall, where so many people, David imagined, wanted to offer their condolences in between mouthfuls of food and pretend they could help. Marta had walked to his office without a word after the service, and he followed her, silently, not knowing what to say.

David couldn't bring himself to leave her alone, even though not showing up to break bread with his congregation might appear more distant than they would prefer; he had, after all, helped almost all them in their times of need, and David imagined that they would want to take advantage of the opportunity to help his family, though David had no idea what they could do.

Marta rested behind David's desk, her feet up on another chair, her eyes closed. David sat on the other side of the desk, a position he had not occupied sat since his own father had led this church over twenty years ago, one where even as a young adult he felt as though he were a small child. The feeling returned. He'd had no idea what to say to his wife, just as he'd had no idea what to say to his father when he had told David that he had expected him to move back to Beaver's Walk to take over the church because he had to retire early. David hadn't felt ready—not big enough for the job, spiritually or emotionally or intellectually—so he hadn't said anything. Now he had no idea what to say to his wife, for the same reasons.

Annie set a plate down on the desk and shook Marta's foot. "Eat, girl," she said. "You'll feel better."

One of Marta's eyes slid open a sliver, noting the steaming plate of food. "I'm sure it needs to cool off some."

At dinner, when the boys had been small, Marta had spent so much time urging them, picky eaters until eight or nine years old, to eat—a plane rolling into a hangar, a train entering a tunnel, complete with sound effects—that by the time she lifted a fork or spoon to her own mouth, the food had cooled. During those years she had become used to eating meals at room temperature, and eventually she preferred them that way. David suspected, though, that her preference was, and had always been, an act, an excuse—a good one—to speak with all the men in her life without interruption, the men who for thirty minutes had to sit still.

"You just couldn't help adding that photo after I went to bed, could you?" Annie asked.

Marta sat up, and despite the steam that hovered above the greasy fried okra, she picked up a piece with her fingers, popped it into her mouth, and chewed. "It's always been one of my favorites," Marta said, covering her mouth. "We've all seen it many times on the mantel, Leslie and Burt, too, by the way."

"But I told you how it would appear."

"And I told you I didn't care."

"You saw their faces…"

Marta leaned forward and slapped the desk with the palm of her hand, the plate rattling on the desk. "She would've cried anyway. And she should." She leaned back into the chair. "Listen, I'd felt so many emotions—I still do—and here you are, mother, giving me hell about it? Now? Right now? Is this really the time?"

Annie drummed her fingers on her lips, and she began two sentences, one beginning “I,” the other “You.” She paused for a moment after Hank put a hand on her shoulder. “I’m going back out to the hall to check on Levi and everyone else. Holler if you need anything.”

David opened the door for Annie and Hank, Annie marching through it, eyes straight ahead, her posture and expression resolute as though today were a day to endure and survive, nothing more. David had to agree. Hank, as he walked behind his wife and passed David, widened his eyes and mouthed, “Wow,” surprised, as was David, that Marta had caused her mother to back down.

After he closed the door, Marta didn’t waste a moment to complain about her mother. “God, you’d think she’s entertaining guests, and I’d done something in the middle of a party to embarrass her, like I hiked my skirt up for the world to see and said, *How-dee-do*.”

“Maybe she doesn’t mean to sound that way, kind of like how you didn’t mean to sound…”

“Like I was blaming them?” Marta finished. “Well, perhaps that was there some.” With her fork, Marta played with her mixed vegetables. “You mean to tell me that you don’t feel any of this is their fault? When Josh was a kid, Leslie and Burt let him practically get away with…” Her voice trailed off, and David sensed that her last word would have been *murder*. “Well, whatever. I guess my behavior’ll make great news for the *Daily Journal*, won’t it?” As upset as she was, David was surprised that she hadn’t referred to the town’s newspaper as the *Daily Wipe*, a name of disgust she spat when she read an op-ed article not to her taste.

"Your mother might be more right than we'd like to admit." Saying *we*, David felt, had been a struggle. "But, Martie, we should make an appearance. They showed up, and it's important for people to feel like they're helping in some small way." In case it would change her mind, David told her that he was almost positive Burt and Leslie had left.

Marta shoved her plate away. "Just give me a few minutes of quiet, would you? We'll go soon enough. Just sit and eat for a moment."

Bryce

Bryce, Chance, and Lisa went outside for a smoke after the service. Smoking, after a funeral, seemed somehow fitting to Bryce, a middle finger thrown at the inherent dangers of the bad habit, a testament that he was still alive and would go down swinging. Not that he had always thought about smoking in this way. Three years ago, tired of always wondering where his smokes and lighter were, of counting his cigarettes to make sure he had enough to make it through a day, of smelling it on his clothes and fingers, of tasting it on Chance's lips and tongue, he had decided to quit and had convinced Chance to do so as well. They now rarely smoked except at The Slant, where they chain-smoked with everyone else there, choosing not to fight the urges, which would cause them to tense when they were supposed to relax and have a good time. The morning after Bryce had been released from country jail, Bryce had awoken to the smell of cigarettes—Marlboro Lights, Bryce knew from its scent, Chance's preferred brand—and when he got out of bed and went to the living room, Chance stood up, a smoke in between his lips, went to the kitchen, and came back, handing Bryce a cup of coffee and pack of Camels. Neither had said anything, not even "Good morning." They had smoked three each before Bryce cracked a window.

The wind outside the church had picked up again, and the news vans were still there. Two cameramen, their cameras by their sides, snapped to attention but relaxed and looked disappointed when they saw Bryce, Chance, and Lisa huddle together. Bryce flicked his lighter over and over, but the wind had picked up again causing the sparking flakes of flint to be useless.

From behind them, a voice called, “Face the wind. Trust me, it works.” It was Levi, an unlit cigarette between his teeth. He turned away from them, toward the wind. Bryce heard two flicks of a lighter, and Levi turned back to them, exhaling smoke, the wind carrying it away. “Years of practice out here.” He handed his smoke to Lisa, winked, and said, “I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Levi.” He eyed her up and down.

Chance put his arm around Lisa and said, “This is my girlfriend, Lisa, and I’m Chance.” He offered his hand in place of Lisa’s, and Lisa laughed.

“Smooth,” Lisa said, “real smooth. Both of you.”

Levi, undeterred, took Chance’s hand and shook it. “Well, hi Chance and Lisa. And who’s this big guy?” Bryce smiled wanly, shook Levi’s hand and introduced himself. From within his jacket pocket, Levi pulled out a small unadorned hip flask and pointed it at Bryce. “You look like you need this as bad as I do.” Levi drank, tilting the flask far back, wiped the flask’s neck with the sleeve of his sports coat, and offered it to Bryce, who took it and sniffed. Levi nodded. “Go on. Nothing like a little scotch at a funeral. To Eric.”

“To Eric,” Bryce said and lifted the flask, sturdy and cold in his hand, an inch above his open mouth, the neck not touching his lips. The scotch, surprisingly sweet, drained faster than he expected, and when he righted the flask, a rivulet dribbled down his chin. He wiped it away with the back of his hand and gave the flask back to Levi. “Nice. Thanks.” Bryce made a fist, pressed it against his midsection, and silently belched. His stomach growled, audibly.

“There’s plenty of food inside,” Levi said. He offered his flask to Chance and Lisa, but they shook their heads at the same time and in the same manner, giving the

impression, to someone who didn't know them, that maybe they were a couple.

"No, we really should get on the road," Chance said.

"You sure?" asked Levi. "There's no decent food for seventy-five miles. Can you all wait that long? There's more than enough."

The mood in Fellowship Hall, where Levi led then left them, explaining that he had to get back to his family, was greatly different than in the sanctuary. Here people spoke with animation and smiled, the food they ladled and slapped onto their plates lifting their spirits before it had even touched their tongues. A radio trickled country music into the room, and if Bryce had just walked in, he would've been unaware that a funeral service had ended only moments ago, the mere length of time it took to smoke a cigarette in high winds.

They hadn't been in line to fill their plates but three minutes before a young man, as straight forward in his appreciation of Lisa as Levi had been, walked up to them in greeting. The kid smiled and winked, at first appearing to be around Lisa's age but upon closer inspection only nineteen or twenty, dressed in a blue and gray plaid western shirt, black jeans, and dark tan boots, his skin prematurely leathered from the sun. Indentions in his hair showed where a hat usually lay on his head. Instead of cutting in front of the teenager, as he had with Levi, Chance laid a hand on Lisa's butt and kept it there while the kid and he shook hands, Chance's fingertips turning white as the kid—Slocum was his name—pumped Chance's hand.

Once finished abusing Chance's hand, Slocum took a step back, smiled, and tipped an imaginary hat to Lisa. Chance put his arm around Lisa, who, after she removed his hand from her ass, said, "Chance is only being protective." She elbowed him in the

ribs.

Smiling, Slocum said, “Sounds like she’s the boss, huh, Chance?” Before Chance could answer, Slocum moved on to his next question. “Where are you guys from?” Bryce introduced himself and told Slocum what he wanted to know without providing any detail, and Slocum made himself helpful by pointing out foods to avoid and which ones to load up on.

“But this one here,” said Slocum, while pointing, “you’ve gotta try: Mrs. Harforth’s peach cobbler. I’m telling ya, you guys’ll love it. I’ve grown up on this stuff and even dated her daughter for a while just to eat more of it, besides the occasional church pot luck. It’s that good.”

Slocum followed them to a table after they had made their choices and sat uninvited as though he were a lost puppy who had attached himself to Lisa or possibly a member of the unofficial welcome wagon. Bryce set his tray down harder than necessary when he sat at the table, and iced tea slopped over Bryce’s tray, over the lip, and onto the table.

“I’ll get you some napkins,” Slocum said and rushed off, his boots loud on the linoleum floor.

Lisa said, her jaw set, barely opening her mouth, “Chance, I know you don’t mean any harm, but don’t you dare put your hand on my ass again.”

“In case you haven’t noticed,” Chance said, “every boy who’s hit puberty is staring at you, and I saw two young men sit down when your admirer Slocum said hi to you. They looked disappointed. You’d think these boys had never seen an attractive woman before.” Chance leaned over Lisa, putting a hand on her thigh—Bryce could tell

he did so without thinking about it, Chance almost always in physical contact when speaking—and asked, “Can you translate this behavior?” He set his elbow on the table and his chin the palm of his hand.

Bryce shrugged as though the answer were obvious. “She’s new, and this is a small town. She’s going to attract attention.”

“So how am I doing as a straight man?” Chance asked Lisa.

“As straight as an arrow and oh-so-convincing” she said.

“Smart ass.”

When Slocum returned to the table, he tossed extra napkins in Bryce’s direction, looked at Chance’s hand on Lisa’s thigh, and put a hand on Chance’s shoulder. “I don’t know how you’re used to behaving,” Slocum said, in a lecturing a tone, “but we don’t usually go around being all handsy at church functions.”

Chance patted Slocum’s hand and looked at him exactly how Chance most likely saw him: as an innocent child, naïve and clueless about anything outside of Beaver’s Walk, ignorant of much of adult behavior.

“Well, I wouldn’t have to if you stopped eyeballing her and undressing her with your eyes,” Chance said. “You’re making her uncomfortable, and I find it insulting.”

“Eyeballing?” Slocum said, loud and indignant. People looked in his direction, half of them young, still teenagers or younger, the other half middle-aged or older, none of them a threat. *A threat of what?* Bryce asked himself. Why Bryce had felt paranoid about anyone’s reaction here was now beyond him. These people seemed harmless. “I was not,” Slocum continued. “I was being polite to strangers, as I was taught.” He looked at Lisa, as though expecting her to help. “Besides, if you’re his girlfriend, I’ll eat my

hat." He leaned forward and whispered. "I can tell he's gay. I'm not a moron even though he thinks I am."

Lisa dropped her fork onto her plate, a loud clang, and Bryce could tell that she had clearly tired of this game, as had he. Maybe on another day it would have been fun. "Don't worry about it, Slocum," Bryce said. "Chance doesn't mean any of it, do you Chance?"

"Well, I don't like anyone accusing me of being less than polite, whether he means it or not," Slocum said.

"My fault," Chance said. "I was trying to have fun at your expense, but it looks like you're much more intelligent and refined than I thought. I apologize." He looked at Bryce as though it were his fault. Bryce had, after all, asked Chance to act straight, a role that, as far as Bryce knew, Chance had never attempted, and Bryce knew now that he had underestimated at least one person who he had considered a country bumpkin, probably because of his own past.

"Hey, I'm sorry if I came on strong," Slocum said. "You mind if I have a seat? I have a couple of questions about Eric."

Bryce would have answered No had Chance not patted the chair beside him. Before Slocum could sit, though, pastor James, sitting at a table across the room, spoke up. "Slocum, boy, you need to remember what this event is." Sheepish, Slocum excused himself, to Lisa only, listened to what the pastor had to say, and didn't look in their direction again. Although none of their neighbors said anything, Bryce noticed that many of them smiled as Slocum was lectured—more than likely about hitting on a woman at a funeral. Bryce, though, wondered what Slocum had wanted to ask.

They finished eating, saying little—Chance had mouthed, “Wow” after Slocum left—and when Bryce said that it was time to go, that it was a long drive and that they had to work in the morning, Reverend Wells and his wife walked into the room. Everyone stood and formed a line.

Marta

"Maybe if we're lucky some of that cobbler I smelled earlier will be left," David said.

Marta grunted and already regretted giving in to David's request as she walked down the corridor. What would going into Fellowship Hall accomplish? What could anyone say that she hadn't already heard? Although she knew when she'd hear "I'm so sorry for your loss" and "Is there anything we can do for you?" and that those statements and questions would be heartfelt, she still couldn't help but feel their wishes and offers would be hollow. If she allowed others to do something for her and to take some of her church responsibilities, where would that leave her? In the next few months, she knew that without the tedium of habit—luncheons with the Methodist women, food drives, choir practices, her volunteer hours at the local hospital, the Bible school class she led—she would lose herself in her grief. But a part of her wanted to get lost in her grief and wanted David to as well. She wanted him not to worry about his sermons or the men's meetings or the morning coffee prayers, the confirmation classes he'd soon begin teaching or the marriage counseling he'd have to resume for a few of his congregation's couples. A part of her wanted them both to laze about in their house in pajamas and robes all day, perusing photo albums in bed and sifting through boxes stuffed with Eric's baby and toddler clothing. She wanted to indulge her grief as though it were a sweet tooth and to drown it in gallons of ice cream and chocolate syrup. But she knew her indulgence in her grief would not last long if David had anything to say about it. He had already asked what the choir would sing this Sunday and whether she would resume directing them next

week. He seemed incapable of discussing anything but work, and Marta reflected that they had rarely discussed anything else for years. The grieving process, for David, seemed almost at an end, as though its culmination would be in Fellowship Hall even though Eric had not yet been buried.

Buried, Marta thought. That's the difference between us. While I want to bury myself in my grief, David wants to bury it—period. Like it never happened.

Eric's casket was no longer outside the sanctuary. Cam Boothe, the funeral director, must already have wheeled Eric's body away, into the hearse where he waited for the family to proceed to the cemetery for a short and private graveside service. Two services, she knew, would not be enough to extinguish her grief. Two days ago David had begun to protest when Marta had told Cam that she wanted church and graveside services, but he held his tongue, and Cam scribbled away, marking every suggestion Marta made—from the flowers to the color of the programs (eggshell, ivory, or cream?). Cam had been the only person, so far, not to stand in the way of what she wanted.

And Marta didn't want cobbler, didn't give a damn about it. She wanted to bury Eric and go home. She wanted her parents to drive back to Missouri and stop attempting to help by walking into her bedroom unannounced, yanking the curtains open wide to let the sun in, and shaking her foot, as though the light alone had not been enough to wake her. She wanted to sleep until the early afternoon and watch television all day and stay up until three or four in the morning. She wanted Levi to leave as well. Even if she had the energy and had wanted to play the role of mother, Levi had not wanted direction for quite some time—he had made that perfectly clear after he had dropped out of SMU and told her to go to hell when she had lamented that he had ended a Wells' family tradition of

four generations and had broken his father's heart. More than anything, she thought again and again, she wanted to be left alone. The only person from whom she wanted anything was David, and what she wanted from him was simple: she wanted him to allow her to feel her pain.

As though she gave a damn about that cobbler…

As much as Marta felt she didn't need or want anyone near her at the moment, she gripped David's arm hard, but she didn't allow herself to lean into him as she walked down the sloped hallway to Fellowship Hall, where Eric, when he was younger, had skipped or sprinted to raid the donuts and cookies and had strolled, when he was older, with confidence to grab some coffee or tea before Sunday school. Above the Fellowship Hall's door a clock noted the time, and Marta guessed that perhaps forty minutes had passed since the funeral had ended. She hoped that the room would be mostly empty and that she could eat a few bites of cobbler, to placate David, so that this day could end.

Through the open double doors, Marta didn't see anyone at the serving tables; the volunteer servers were either in the kitchen or off to the side at one of the tables, enjoying the food they had helped prepare. Marta also didn't see much food, which was a small blessing, as she wanted to waste as little time here as possible. But when they walked in, she could tell, without turning her head, that several people were still here. Conversations stopped momentarily, then resumed, quieter than before, except for the children, who yammered on, oblivious.

Marta let go of David's arm once they reached the dessert table, and she gathered onto two paper plates the last slice of peach cobbler for David and a slice of apple for herself, and turned around to David, who held two glasses of iced tea and packets of

sugar. David, in what must have been sensitivity to Marta's mood, walked to an empty table, smiling and nodding left and right, instead of sitting at a half-occupied table, his usual habit, to be as close as possible to his congregation. Before they could sit, her mother approached David, hugged him, and hugged Marta afterward. As her mother held on, refusing to let go even after Marta no longer returned her mother's embrace, she saw her father shake David's hands in both his, and it was then that everyone stood up. They made a line, meandering around the tables, each person intent on hugging or shaking hands with the family, as was customary, a tradition Marta had begun—and had forgotten until now—when she had first helped with funeral services held at the church, not allowing anyone a single bite of food until each attendant had offered his or her condolences. Granted, they had already eaten, but she didn't blame them.

Finally, her mother let her go and said, "I'm sorry, baby" to which Marta said that she was sorry, too; she hadn't meant to take a bite out of her earlier. Her mother stood beside Marta, her father now hugging Marta and kissing her forehead, silent, and once he released her to stand farther down the line, Levi was there as though no time had passed between embraces, as though no one would allow her a moment not to feel safe and loved, which was, she knew, the intention. When Levi stepped back, Marta pulled him back to her. She could no longer hold back her tears. The sense of community overwhelmed her, and as she was hugged and received pecks on the cheek from so many different people—she hadn't remembered letting Levi go—she kept crying and shaking—what her mind and body had needed for three days, crying so hard that her body recognized, long before her mind did, that she would need rest early in the evening, and that her grief would wake her in the morning, long before she felt ready.

David

David had been shaking hands and hugging his congregation for perhaps twenty minutes, when in relief he saw that the line was almost at an end. Who knew so many people would stay for the chance to offer simple condolences? The attempts at comfort, though, had begun to grow painful, his right big toe sore from having been stepped on a number of times, which was no real surprise since David had large feet and one of them usually took a beating before and after each service. Now, though, his foot was more sore than usual, his congregation feeling, rightly so, that they should move closer to him when shaking his hand or giving him a hug. Again, he felt pressure on it, Shorty, a tall man nicknamed for his short fuse, in front of him saying, "Whoops, sorry, Rev," referring to David's foot he had accidentally stomped. "Everyone loved Eric, I guarantee you that," he said, pumping his hand harder than necessary as though his grip conveyed his conviction, which had also been the norm. David's hand was now sore, too.

David looked down the line and noticed three people he didn't know: a young attractive woman, a slight man perhaps in his late thirties, and the last in line, a large fellow, who seemed vaguely familiar. The first two said the usual—"I'm sorry for your loss"—and the last, the familiar big man, with tears in his eyes, said, "I'm sorry" in a much different tone, one of guilt.

"Thank you," David said. "Have we met?"

"I remember you," Marta interrupted. She gave the man a hug. "David, you remember Bryce, don't you?"

"I'm sorry," David said to Bryce. He shrugged and shook his hand.

"We met just once," Bryce said, "and not for long. A few months ago you and

your wife came by to see Eric at the library. We worked together."

David again shook Bryce's hand, this time with enthusiasm. "Right, right."

"Well," Marta said, "thank you so much for coming. That's such a long drive." She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue. "I'd really like to talk longer, but I think I need to sit." As though on cue, Levi and Annie both put their arms around Marta and led her to a table, although David knew, had she needed to, Marta could have walked a few miles without any help. The effort to comfort her, though, comforted David.

"Bryce," David said, "do you have a moment to talk?"

"Sure, but I can't stay long. Like your wife said, it's a long drive and all of us"—Bryce gestured to the attractive woman and her slim friend—"have to work tomorrow."

David walked into the empty corridor outside of Fellowship Hall and held open the door for Bryce, who told his friend to wait a moment and walked through the doorway appearing bewildered.

"I know this may sound strange," David said. "Eric did mention you a few times here and there, and I wanted to know, since it seemed like you two were friends, if you knew what Eric had been up to before…before what happened."

Bryce, visibly uncomfortable, said, "I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"Well, what was he doing there? I'm having trouble understanding why he was there in the first place."

"Where?"

"The Slant."

David could tell that Bryce didn't want to answer the question, but he did anyway. "Because he wanted to see me onstage."

"So you were there, too?"

Bryce swallowed. "Yes, I was right there. I was the reason he was there. I was the man Tenney was swinging at." He wiped at his eyes, even though he hadn't yet shed a tear, but David knew that if he asked much more that Bryce would.

"I'm so sorry that you had to experience that," David said gently. He placed a hand on Bryce's shoulder. "But I'm so glad you there with him. I'm grateful he wasn't alone."

Bryce shook his head. "I wish he hadn't been there at all."

David nodded. "It's been a taxing day. For all of us. I'd like to talk to you again if that's okay."

"Sure."

"Let's exchange numbers."

They said goodbye, and again David held the door open for him. He watched Bryce walk away and wondered if he was staring at the back of Eric's boyfriend, but when David looked at his two friends and saw how the slim man was studying Bryce's face as he walked toward him—full of concern, something in his posture protective, as David could be with Marta, somehow worried and tense until Bryce was standing next to him, which David certainly felt sometimes when he needed Marta near him—David could tell that he and Bryce were a couple. Which still left David with a few questions, questions that he couldn't determine at the moment whether they were important. Even if answered, David knew, the answers wouldn't matter. His son would still be buried in the next couple of hours.

Marta

Marta sat alone on the couch in the living room for the fourth straight afternoon after the funeral, her bare feet resting on the coffee table. Staring at nothing, she listened to commercials on AM radio, a Christian station, one of the few choices out here. The FM stations were almost as few, and unless a family could afford cable or satellite television or lethargic dialup internet service—few could, but some spent the money anyway—the radio kept the people of Beaver's Walk entertained and, in Marta's opinion, sorely misinformed.

For over twenty years of marriage, Marta had turned and tuned to the radio when conversations with David ebbed. Whether because they weren't getting along or because they had fallen into a familiar and comfortable rut, their schedules simply didn't coincide due to a busy family and church schedule, and Marta, for whatever reason, benign or aggressive, enjoyed listening to pastor Stanley "Sprout" Zacharias. The tone, timbre, and pitch of his voice, a resonating baritone, sounded much like David's. Their delivery and pacing, too, were similar, the rise and fall of their voices comforting and calming. Marta wondered, but had never asked, whether David had modeled his preaching style after Sprout's, because, as Sprout's admirers had been saying for more than forty years, he had been sprouting faith ever since he had started preaching, where others could not grow anything. But their similarity ended with their voices and delivery, and Marta possibly had never questioned David about their similarities because Marta viewed Sprout and men like him as her nemeses. In fact, Marta now realized, she enjoyed listening to him because she could momentarily redirect any anger, annoyance, or disappointment she had

with David at Sprout, imagining an argument with David as she argued one-sidedly with Sprout.

The make-believe arguments she had conducted after they had moved from Dallas to Beaver's Walk were common and easy to win. Sprout had argued, as most evangelical Baptists still did, that having one parent at home full-time —ideally the woman, as they stated explicitly back then but only implied these days—was the best structure for the nuclear family. Marta found the claim baffling, having grown up with both her parents working, both schoolteachers; the vast majority of married couples couldn't afford this supposed ideal, and she had met many women too competent at business and with figures to stay at home, just as she had met men who could out-cook their wives. Her parents were a good example, and later she met other couples: young ones living in married student housing at SMU.

The argument over the rural airwaves had changed in the first few years Marta had lived in Beaver's Walk: there were too many single mothers—either never married or divorced. Again, the argument had been too easy to defeat. Had Sprouts forgotten rural America, where men abused both alcohol and women, usually in direct proportion to one another? He criticized young men and women who were waiting longer and longer to get married and were having sex and living together first, while Marta thought, *Thank heavens*, although she had never admitted the thought to her sons. Marta no longer knew how many times David had observed, after marrying teenaged pregnant couples, products of abstinence-only education, that the newlyweds would need all of God's mercy, grace, and help for the marriage to succeed. Dirt poor, naïve, ignorant, and with little in common, except for physical attraction, hyperactive hormones, and a shared place of

birth, young couple after young couple (or their parents) asked David to marry them, and Marta and David had now witnessed two generations of the same families make the same mistakes, mistakes that seemed to be a young woman's inheritance. The ones who escaped this inheritance either avoided early marriage and pregnancy or learned from experience, remembering their mothers' abuse and possibly their own, and divorcing their husbands. Too many women, their children in tow in church, appeared happier and healthier after a year of divorce, the bags under their eyes not as dark and heavy, the hunch in their shoulders unkinked, a spring in their step, their hair combed and sprayed, the entire family wearing decent clothes for the first time in years.

Marta, without a doubt, looked forward to Sprout's claims, claims made after genuine prayer and sermons that, though simplified for the general audience, did no harm and sometimes felt uplifting. If Sprout had stopped short after his radio service and not attempted to tell his audience what was best for them, as though all families were homogenous, she could have imagined her husband, on these lonely days, speaking to her through the speakers. Nonetheless, when his talk show would begin, Marta would find herself speaking to the radio, sometimes yelling at it, just as David, Levi, and Eric had when they gathered around the television to watch baseball or football. Sometimes, on a particularly bad day, when Marta had grown disgusted with her life and wondered how a woman with a degree in women's studies had ended up marrying a pastor and moving out to the sticks, she made popcorn and poured herself wine or a beer during the commercial break between Sprout's service and his talk show. Sprout and his guests would discuss how they could solve many of the world's problems, problems reduced to what had happened to the traditional family.

Today, instead of nibbling on popcorn or cookies or crackers and sipping on wine or beer, half of which would usually end up down the kitchen drain by the show's end, Marta stretched out on the couch with a tumbler of bourbon, neat, three-quarters full, cupped in both hands and in between her breasts, waiting to battle Sprout on any subject about the family he mentioned.

"Welcome back to Family Talk sponsored by A Prayerful America for the Family and the Christian Family Association. I'm Stan Zacharias, and in case you're just now tuning in, I've been talking with Christian child psychologist Dr. Jimmy Williamson. Before we went to break, we were talking about what a lot of the nation has been recently. About the Wells and Tenney case, but more specifically about their families."

"That's right, Sprout, and thank you so much again for having me."

Marta stood, her heart racing, her face flushed, and for a moment her fingertips tingled. With shaky hands she searched for a blank tape in a drawer next to the stereo cabinet, and when she found one, she inserted the tape and pressed record. Admonishing herself for her reaction—*of course, they'd talk about it; what did you really expect?*—she took a long swallow of David's bourbon and refilled her tumbler before sitting back down. David, who had never wanted to hear what Sprout had to say but listened to Marta when she had sometimes railed against him, would have to listen to this.

"You were saying that there had to be signs that Eric Wells, early on, was gay, may God rest his soul and have mercy on him."

"What a load of horse shit," Marta yelled.

"Yes, that's right."

Marta knew was untrue. Eric had had a typical childhood. Like other young boys,

he had had no interest in girls, but when he eventually noticed them, he behaved the same way a boy had treated Marta when she had been a little girl: he pulled a girl's pigtails and shoved her on the playground, the same girl, Alyssa, with whom Eric had played doctor all those years ago and with whom he dated throughout high school. Sure, there was the first incident: a girl, whose name Marta couldn't remember, had kissed Eric on the mouth on the playground in the second grade, and Eric, confused and embarrassed, had slugged her right in front of his home room teacher. These grade school incidents had concerned Marta, but never once had she imagined that Eric might be gay. Instead, she had feared he might grow up to be another misogynist no matter how many times David and she talked to him. Eric, though, matured quickly, and a mother couldn't have asked for a more polite child once he entered junior high.

Sprout and Dr. Williamson spoke at length of how a young boy transfers affection from his mother to his father and blathered on, describing how a boy might over-transfer his feelings to his father and never outgrow this stage of development. Their conversation, obsessed with sex, seemed Freudian and outdated, and Marta recognized Sprout's shift to Spout, her nickname for him when he spouted nonsense.

"If it's true," Sprout said, "that there were signs that Eric Wells was gay, is it purposeful that Reverend Wells never talked about homosexuality in his church?"

`"Well, Sprout, that's partly conjecture, but it does seem to fit. I think there are a couple of options for why he didn't. First it could be because Reverend Wells, and God bless him in this situation because it has to be so difficult, was in denial. He didn't want to see the early warning signs and probably couldn't preach against homosexuality because his subconscious wouldn't allow him. If he had preached about it and prayed

about it and studied Scripture on this issue, he would have had to think about Eric and what he was becoming or had already become."

"But it doesn't, Dr. Williamson, explain why he hasn't said anything publicly about homosexuality, especially recently. And he should. His son's sexuality was a factor, maybe the main factor, in his death."

"You're blaming Eric for his own death," Marta shouted. "Fuck you." Marta shook her head and gulped down some bourbon. With so much wrong with Sprout the Spout's claims, she wasn't sure where to begin her attack on his assertions, and for the first time, she didn't feel as though she could argue with him effectively. She tried to ignore the assumption that Eric had been gay—his sexuality didn't matter to her—but she couldn't. It was possible that Eric had been gay: he was quite sensitive, almost always helpful around the house, terminally polite, and once he had left home, he had not mentioned any girlfriends, all of which could point to him being gay—or could only mean that he had been a respectful young man who had been raised well, studied hard, and kept his private life private.

Other children, however, had been raised just as well and had kept their identities hidden. Marta had heard gossip over the years, gossip that, until recently, could not be confirmed nor denied: rumor said that Tessie Applebaum, whom Marta remembered as a petite young woman, feisty and flirty and the same age as Levi, who had taken her out on a couple of dates, was now a lesbian living with her lover in Massachusetts; Wade McCoy, a rangy wrestler who had placed second in state his senior year three years ago, supposedly lived with a man in Portland, Oregon. There had been a couple of other similar rumors about children who had moved away after graduating high school, none of

whom had come back to church when they visited their families. For a long while Marta chalked it up to the constantly grinding rumor mill that entertained so many people who led boring lives in a small town, but she could not deny the rumors any longer, not once Facebook had become popular and she saw with her own eyes that these children, now adults, were gay. Not that she had been surprised that gays and lesbians had grown up here. No, she was surprised that the rumor mill had been at all accurate. Marta supposed that Eric could have been one of these children, and if so, she loved him nonetheless and possibly loved him more for blending in and finding a way to survive growing up here, for his stoicism and quiet good humor.

"Let me replay a phone call we received earlier in the show," Sprout said.

Marta didn't recognize the caller's voice, though it was familiar: female but low and raspy, accented with a phlegmy attack, certainly a smoker, which didn't help Marta place the voice, as there were plenty of smokers at the church. The woman complained that Reverend Wells had never taken a stance on any hot-button issue, and because of that, combined with Eric's sexuality and the reverend's continued silence about it, she could no longer attend the church.

"There's a big loss," Marta said. "Happy trails." She held up her tumbler, toasting the woman.

For the next several minutes Sprout fumed that all pastors had a responsibility to educate their congregations properly, and as he spoke, Dr. Williamson blindly agreeing and saying, "Amen" and "That's right," it occurred to Marta that discussing Eric had been only a segue to discuss her husband, who had always seemed too moderate to many people in the area. Marta knew that, for Sprout, pastors like her husband were threats to

Sprout's authority and to the brand he had created over the airwaves, a brand supported by conservative companies and charities who wanted to keep him on the air. Sprout spouted about moral relativism and qualified his statement, saying that Reverend Wells and others like him were most likely not moral relativists, but unless he discussed important issues occurring in the real world, no one would know he wasn't.

Finally, it dawned on Marta that Sprout the Spout had a point. Her husband had never spoken about homosexuality and the church, and if he had, perhaps her son would still be alive. Marta stood, weaved to the stereo, stopped the recording, turned off the radio, poured herself another drink and prepared for David to come home.

David

David noticed, as he pulled up the street and into the driveway, that their house was the only dark one on the block. Light spilled from the windows of his neighbors' houses, illuminating dead flower gardens and bushes that had slipped into sleep, while brighter lights flashed intermittently from the glow of televisions in other houses. When he climbed out of his car, he heard, from somewhere down the block, men yelling, "Go, go, go!" Shortly afterward, through his next door neighbor's window, a TV commentator said, "The Steelers score again…" but he lost the sound as he walked to his porch, concentrating instead on the smells of his neighborhood: steaks and possibly beer bratwursts grilling, smoke from a nearby chimney, maybe blackjack or oak, and a light scent of dew, even though he could see, in the fast fading light of early evening, that the lawn was dry. But it wouldn't be for long. The temperature, as David had heard Burt announce earlier on the radio, would drop and dew would form and, in the early hours of morning, turn to frost, then back to dew in the bright morning sun, the cycle repeating until, by the end of the week, the entire town would smell of mildew, a smell David didn't mind. It signaled that the cold was here to stay, and maybe soon, in a few weeks if they had any luck, it would snow, and the neighborhood would hush under nature's cold white insulation.

With the house dark, David opened and closed the front door as softly as he could, the latch making the only noise. Marta, David thought, must have been asleep, slumbering the whole afternoon away, and possibly intending to sleep through the evening as well. She'd been sleeping too much lately, but David, afraid to criticize the

way she was dealing with her pain, had given her as much distance as she wanted lately.

Starving, David crept to the kitchen and didn't bother to turn on the light; instead he used the refrigerator's bulb to guide him as he made a ham and cheese sandwich, and again, as he had for the past few days, he ate a cold meal alone, standing up. The small sandwich curbed his hunger, but he knew it wouldn't last long, and when he finished, he decided it was time to wake Marta, who never could eat until wide awake. He also decided that he would make Marta anything she wanted for supper, anything at all—steak, pot or rump roast, spaghetti with meatballs and sauce made from scratch, even if it meant eating a late dinner—anything to see a glimmer of affection for him or a passing interest in life, if even for a moment, in her eyes.

On his way to wake her—he pictured himself first sliding into bed beside her and gently placing his hand on her hip as she slept on her side, not wanting to jolt her out of sleep—he heard a tinkling, a familiar sound that he couldn't quite place. He stopped and titled his head as though he were a dog trying to find a better angle from which to find the source's sound, and he heard it again, ice cubes in a glass. The living room seemed larger than it was, its depths unknowable.

"I'm right here," David heard Marta say from somewhere inside. David switched on the overhead light, the room now smaller and familiar but with a difference. Marta was sitting in his recliner, dressed in his green and blue plaid pajamas, feet up, one hand holding a tumbler, the other shielding her eyes. She set the glass down on an end table, pulled her sleeve up before it dipped into the glass, and turned on the lamp beside it, a softer glow. "You know I don't like that light. Please turn it off."

David did, sat on the couch, and after taking his shoes off, put his feet on the

coffee table, staring straight ahead at the dark TV screen, wondering what to say or what to ask. He thought of asking, Why are you drinking alone in the dark? But he couldn't, afraid there would be a hint of disgust in his voice, disgust he felt. He also thought of asking, What's wrong? a much more open-ended inquiry, but he knew the answer. So he sat there waiting for her to speak, and as he waited, he thought of nothing at all.

After a long moment, Marta said, "In case you're wondering, I'm pretending I'm you."

"A little early to be pretending *that*, don't you think?" David asked, pointing to the tumbler in Marta's hands.

Perhaps five years into their twenty-eight-year marriage, David had begun to take Marta and her contributions to the household for granted, asking "Hi, how are you, dear?" in a mumble after he walked through the front door from work, accepting a peck on the cheek but not returning it, pacing the dining room floor, his head down, hands deep in his pockets, still unsure of and pondering the marital advice he had given to Judy and Ted Foster, uncertain that he, the new minister, could say much of value to people who had been married for ten years longer than he had. And if he hadn't been worrying about them—Was it the Fosters or the Hesters that year? David wondered—he would have worried of how to stretch a nickel for the soup kitchen or for the meals on wheels program for the elderly, and he missed what Marta had said to him as she set the table for supper, Levi on her hip, still only grunting when they ate at the table.

David wasn't sure how long his behavior lasted—weeks, a couple of months?—but he remembered the evening Marta had thrown a dinner a roll at him and said, in a deep and mocking voice, "Oh, Marta, look at how clean the house is, and the food is

wonderful, Levi is so clean—well, he was just a moment ago, he's such a handful—and I'm just so lucky to have you as a wife. I even noticed that the flower beds were weeded, the rose bushes trimmed, and gosh darn it, you managed all this while being six months pregnant. How in the world do you do it all? Marta, where do you find all this energy?" She picked up another roll, launched it at him, and in her normal tone of voice asked, "What do you have to say to that?" She squinted, smiled, and picked up the salt shaker. "I suggest you say something fast, and something flattering. There aren't any more rolls." Every few years, Marta had instigated the game, sometimes reversing their roles out of curiosity—just to see what the other would say—instead of in criticism of David's behavior or lack of attention.

David now didn't know what motivated her to play his role. To give himself to time to think of how to approach her—seriously or with humor?—he turned away from her and walked to the kitchen to hang his sports coat on a chair and to grab a glass of water, his throat dry. Marta's voice, gruff, followed him: "Too early? Ha! I'd say it's much too late, never mind the time of day."

When David walked back into the living room, he didn't recognize the expression on Marta's face, the way she was looking at him. It wasn't a look of love or anger or amusement or annoyance, emotions he was used to, looks that he could recognize at a glance or sometimes without looking at her at all. It wasn't apathy either; he could tell she was focusing, her eyes narrowed. And it wasn't only grief, though grief was certainly present in the line of her face, her crows' feet longer and deeper, her lips thinner, and present in her hair, too, grayer and coarser than only three weeks ago. David ceased studying her, knowing that he didn't know what this was, and asked her, "So how long

have you been pretending to be me?"

Marta held up the tumbler, eyeing it, and gently shook its contents, the ice again tinkling, and David could tell by the drink's color, the lamp on the end table illuminating it, that she had poured whiskey straight on the rocks, only the ice at the tumbler's top diluting the drink's color to a lighter amber-brown. "Not long," Marta said. "My third, I think. Maybe an hour, maybe longer." She sipped and held the liquid in her mouth, swishing it from cheek to cheek and around her teeth. After she swallowed, she said, "I really would like to play our game." She looked at the alcohol in her glass, and at David, back and forth twice. "I'm a little ahead of you, so I'll understand if it takes you a moment to get into character."

"Should I pour a glass of wine?"

Marta shrugged and lifted the glass to her lips, but before drinking, she said, "Whatever'll help you embrace your role."

David walked to the credenza and, with his back to Marta, opened a bottle of Marta's favorite wine, a Château Margaux, a bottle she had been saving for a special occasion; he thought that if he were her and if she were going to be forced to play a game that she didn't want to play and didn't yet understand, she would probably drink the most expensive alcohol she could find, not to be petty or passive-aggressive, as David surely now felt, but to embrace the role in playful good humor, to exaggerate the tendencies of others. David wasn't sure he was right, but nonetheless, after he had sat down—first setting the bottle on the coffee table where Marta was sure to see it—he swirled the wine in its glass, and over-acted while smelling it, his nostrils flaring in and out. He completed his act with a smile of feigned enjoyment and put his feet back up on the coffee table.

"Mmm," he said, "Margaux." Marta watched David closely and titled her head back when David did—David looking her in eyes the while over the glass's rim. He took a long swallow. "Ah," he voiced in satisfaction. "I can see why this is worth the expense."

"Oh, David," she said and paused. "I mean Marta." She put her hand on her chest in guilt or perhaps offense—David couldn't tell which. "You've gotten so much better at this game. And without hardly any practice lately. Myself, I'm drinking my eighteen-year-old Elijah." She nodded her head, widening her eyes in mock joy. "At least that's what the label said, but who knows how long it's been collecting dust on the shelf? It could be pushing thirty by now."

Marta smiled, and even though David had not witnessed this pained smile on Marta before, it dawned on him where he had seen it—as well as many of her expressions in just the past couple of minutes: on Rayburn Thomas, a straight-laced carpenter, who had lost his daughter eight or nine years ago, when Ray had accidentally run her over with his own work truck as he pulled out of the garage. She had been hiding beneath the right rear tire, devouring candy, candy that Ray had forbidden her to eat before supper. Afterward, Ray blamed everyone: himself, his wife, God, the candy, its maker, the milk for spoiling in the fridge, the fridge for not being cold enough, making him rush away, slamming the column shift into reverse and pressing hard on the gas, right before supper so that Cassy, a growing five-year-old, could have fresh milk with her supper. Although David had never known Ray to drink, he had shown up at David's office a month after Cassy's funeral on the pretense of needing help, when what Ray had really wanted to do, and had accomplished, was to attack David for representing God—when Ray had

suspected, indeed believed, that God, if He existed at all, “was worthless at best, and evil at worst, take your pick” and David was guilty by association.

“I don’t know if I want to do this, Marta. Perhaps we should just speak as ourselves.”

David hadn’t expected the sarcastic bite in her voice, the cynicism in her smile, or the malice in her bark of laughter as she pretended to be him. She sat up in her chair, looked at the ceiling, and proclaimed, projecting her voice as much as she could, with her arms wide: “Ha, Marta! It’s too bad you don’t like bourbon. This Elijah sure does hit the spot. He worked miracles in the Bible, and he’s still working them today. Har! Har!” She slumped, slipped back into David’s wide and deep impression in his recliner, and nodded once, as though to say, That’s how you play. “Are you getting the idea now?”

“Okay,” David said and removed his feet from the coffee table. He sat up straight, at attention, his hands resting on his lap, appearing as prim and proper as he could. “I’m ready.”

“Outstanding. I’d like to ask Marta a few questions. First, what are you supposed to do now?” Leaning forward as though she would be delighted to hear any answer he gave, Marta rested her elbow on the recliner’s arm, rested her chin on the palm of her hand, and waited.

“That’s not something I would ask. That’s you asking yourself.”

“We’re playing a game of pretend. You remember how, I’m sure.” She gripped the arms of his recliner as though she might sit up again. “Do you need another example? No? Well, pretend then.”

After listening to the grandfather clock tick and watching headlights swing

through the front hallway, David said, “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do right now.”

“Was that you or me?” Marta asked.

“That was you.”

“Oh, you should try harder. I’m not convinced. But that’s all right. So you don’t know what to do? Hmmmm.” She put a finger to her lip. “I sure can appreciate that, Marta. Because I know I haven’t done a damn thing to help you.”

“That’s not what I’d say, and you know it.”

“Fine, fine. You’re right. But you should be thinking it, and I know I haven’t done anything to help you either, so fair’s fair. Neither of us is doing much of anything to help.” Marta paused. “So what is it that you want, Marta?”

“To feel better,” David said.

Marta said, more to herself than to David, “Well, that’s obvious, but I’ll try to work with it.” Her voice rose, light and optimistic. “Okay. So how do you get to feeling better?”

“With time and prayer and trust in the Lord,” David said, “as you’ve heard me say to many people and—”

“That’s crap. It’s not an answer. Even if you weren’t pretending to be me, you can’t say, ‘Time and prayer heal all’ right now, Reverend. I’m your wife, and I deserve a bit more than your stock answer. And you’re still not being me.” Marta pointed at David and said, “Marta,” and pointed to herself and said, “David,” and asked, “So, Marta, what did you do today to make yourself feel better?”

“Well, let me ask you this. How do you, as David, get me, as you, to feel better?”

David asked.

Marta lifted her glass to take a drink, but stopped. There were tears in her eyes. "Nice volley."

"I never played tennis or volleyball, so I wouldn't say that either."

"Just play the goddamn game and answer my question."

"I asked the last one."

"And you asked it out of character. Get back into it."

David rubbed his temples. "I don't know if I have the patience for this."

Marta didn't reply. Instead she looked at him, her face impassive, and tapped a fingernail, burgundy, the color of the wine in David's hand, against her tumbler. Her hand around the glass muffled her fingernail's consistent rhythm, its clicks in rhythmic counter-cadence to the clock's tick on the wall. She waited, not saying a word, seeming comfortable in silence, the same strategy David used when tempers, including Marta's, were becoming thin. Better to be quiet and patient—wait it out—than to continue and possibly cause an eruption, David had always reminded himself and others, and Marta knew this. The game, David knew, would not end either until Marta declared it over or until David walked off, and David could not walk away or lose his temper—his pride in his patience wouldn't allow it.

"I wandered around the house," David said, resuming his role as Marta and trying to answer the last question she had asked. "I went into Eric's room and wished we hadn't boxed up some of the things he left behind after he moved out. But I was glad what was left was still there. It gave me a little comfort. And I thought about going up to the attic to redecorate his room like it was when he was younger."

"Why, Marta, that's a lovely idea," Marta said. "But don't you think it's a little morose? Shouldn't we focus on moving forward in grace and humility and giving thanks to God?"

David recognized that he might have said this if Marta had done what he had just described. Because she saw his potential response so clearly, David concluded without any discernible defensiveness, that she hadn't been in Eric's room today, or if she had, she had not thought of redecorating it, as he had momentarily last week, and he admonished himself in much the way that Marta had. Still, he was unsure whether he would have said it aloud. The thought of Eric's bedroom reminded David that he needed to reclaim Eric's belongings from his apartment in Oklahoma City before the end of the month. Maybe he'd give that particular job to Levi, who, for reasons David didn't understand, had not yet returned to Dallas. Or maybe they could do it together. Now that, David thought, would be a morose father-son outing, and he rejected the idea.

"I talked to Levi, and we had a nice conversation over lunch," David said. "He also gave me some comfort. Where is he anyway? I didn't see him leave." David had been gone all day, so naturally he hadn't seen Levi, but he tried to work in the question while still acting as Marta.

"Another wonderful idea. I'm so glad *you* finally talked to him." Because she had emphasized the word *you*, David knew that Marta and his son were still not speaking in any meaningful way, but still exchanging pleasantries as though they were unwilling roommates, stuck and unable to afford not living with the other. "I have no idea where he is, but I'm sure he'll find his way even if you don't think he will." Her tone told David that her opinion of Levi hadn't changed.

"Maybe…" David began, "maybe…"

"Maybe?" Marta asked. "You mean you don't know what you did today? You're losing it fella."

"You mean gal."

"Come on. Tell me what you did to feel better today."

Finally, David understood. "I didn't do anything. Something made me feel worse."

Marta nodded. "I'm sorry you had such a rough day, hon." She stood, and David removed his feet from the coffee table, preparing to stand to receive a hug and kiss, relieved to have his wife returned to him, briefly, before she sank back into her despair from which who but God knew when she would return. But instead of walking toward him, she walked away, kneeled at the stereo, and turned around with her finger on the cassette player's PLAY button. "It's going to be a rough for a while," she said. "And I think it might get worse before it gets better."

She pressed play, and David sank deep into the couch, listening, but the more he listened, the less he paid it any mind, familiar with the argument. In the back of his mind, barely recognizing that he was doing so, he began to compose a sermon in response, one he was unsure he would ever deliver because of what his father had told him all those years ago and because of his congregation's response to one of David's offhand comments he made during a Tuesday Morning Prayer and Coffee ten years ago.

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In 1998 the manse in which David and his family lived was a few miles outside of town. The gravel road to the highway that led to town was riddled with potholes and stretches of wash-boarding, and David usually grumbled under his breath, wondering how long the car's tires would last and what underneath the hood would jiggle loose. But that day the drive hadn't bothered him. The boys were getting along well and both had made straight A's for the quarter, for Levi a miracle; Marta had been particularly pleased with him; even his congregation was getting along well. He banged without rhythm on his steering wheel to a classic rock radio station, the speakers blaring at a volume his sons would have appreciated.

David wished he could remember the drive in more detail, but he couldn't, a failing of all good memories. An impression was all he possessed. He did know, however, that the ten-minute drive from home to church was carefree—just music, the feel of vibrating rock under his wheels, a crisp morning with the sun through the windshield warming his face. How often, David wondered, had he felt carefree after that morning—truly carefree, fearless, everything in order? He couldn't remember another time as an adult.

Once at church, David saw that the men had gathered where they usually met: around a rectangular picnic table near the back of Fellowship Hall. And he remembered this well, without having to imagine what took place—the details vivid, as all bad memories always were. When David entered the kitchen to grab a donut and cup of coffee before joining them, he could hear them talking. He heard Perry say that Clinton was a no-good liar, that he should've been impeached for perjury. Charlie said he got away with it because he was a scoundrel supported by other scoundrels, and Cletus said

something about Slick Bill not being bright enough, or slick enough, to be president if he couldn't keep one unattractive woman's trap shut. David looked through the kitchen's serving window and watched the men nod their heads and laugh. Even Burt, who usually said little, grumbled, noting that presidents should be kept to the highest of standards.

Talk such as this was the norm before David opened the meeting with prayer, and not once had he commented on politics, as his father had warned him. And remembering his father, David—before he let his memory of the event unfold further—also remembered that at this time he believed that the church and the spiritual life in general were above politics, that everyday issues muddied the pure waters of the Gospel, that the rhetoric of politics, which was meant to represent communities and bring communities of difference together, made neighbors, even churches—whether on the same block or on opposite coasts—divisive. And David still believed this. Strongly.

Because David had never mentioned politics, it was possible, actually likely, that all the men assumed that he was just like them—either a Republican or an independent, when he was actually a Democrat. And because everyone at home and at church were getting along so well lately, he wasn't careful in what he said. He felt as though he could say anything, and anything he said would be accepted. His body felt light, his mind at ease but sharp, and he thought he had a healthy perspective on the issue.

As he pulled out a chair—the men still complaining about Clinton's moral bankruptcy—David, in a chiding manner as though he were talking to his children, said, "Oh, now, come on, you're Christians. No matter a man's mistakes or failings, you should try to sympathize. Empathize and forgive. That's why we're here. I think it's hard to judge a man who is trying to save his career and marriage. Let us pray." The statement

hadn't been offensive—it was the Christian response, David thought—but it caught the men off guard. Coffee cups on the way to puckered lips hung suspended in the air by frozen arms, the chewing of donuts ceased, and even Cletus' toothpick, constantly moving from one side of his mouth to the other, had found an anchor, clenched between molars.

Except for that brief hiccup, the meeting had continued as usual, no one mentioning the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal again or offering an opinion on anything controversial. They were decidedly silent. But during the week, David noticed surreptitious sidelong glances, a hitch or hesitance when a member of the congregation spoke to him. Even a deacon and a trustee, who David had recommended to their positions, stopped and stared, uncharacteristically without a smile or kind word, as he walked the church's halls. At the time David had thought all of this was a product of his imagination, so he tried to ignore his neighbors' chill. Marta told him not to worry, that it was his oversensitive reaction to being a closet Democrat living in a small community overrun with Republicans, and not your average Republican either—more conservative than most. And David still loosely remembered what Marta, at the end of that difficult work week, had advised him to say the next time he felt the overwhelming urge to voice an opinion remotely political: "Say what you have to say if you really have to say it. But then act disgusted. David, say this. Repeat after me: 'Now let us pray for the sorry bastard.' They'll think that you don't really mean it. That you're just doing your job. Kind of like how I'll wag a finger at one of the kids, but I'm smiling."

That Sunday, however, his inklings during the week coalesced to hard evidence: a number of his more conservative members of the church hadn't come to the morning's

adult Bible study, and, worse, they hadn't shown up for the church service either. Although no one ever told David straight out that some of the members were boycotting church because of David's political opinions, David knew that was exactly what had happened. The same had happened to other pastors who had tried to replace his father and mistakenly talked about politics: a boycott. Lower numbers. Out of pettiness, out of a disagreement over an interpretation that shouldn't have mattered in the least.

What David had thought might have been a thoughtless slip that would lead to harmful gossip—there had been gossip, but it was far from destructive—actually led to closer relationships with some of his congregation, specifically Kevin, Andrew, John, and, of course, Burt, all of whom had been tickled that there was another Democrat in town, and a pastor no less, living way out here in No Man's Land. One well-meaning but potentially contentious remark had created friendships—as well as a job offer. Burt had mentioned, a couple of weeks after David's slip at Tuesday Coffee, that the station needed more variety. A country AM station, even way out here seemingly in the middle of nowhere, had competition and had to separate itself from the competition of other stations that had stronger signals, ranges that spanned more than one hundred miles. So Burt explained that he was trying to leverage variety; he had already hired a couple of guys to discuss sports and they had increased the number of listeners and advertising dollars. Now he was looking to add a religious aspect. Once Burt was sure of David's reluctance to mix religion and politics—Burt agreed with David that they made an awful tasting concoction—he asked David if he would like a shot at the microphone. He asked in front of the new circle of friends, who supported David and told him that he should try

because, through his Bible study classes, they had learned more from David about the Bible in the last few years than in the previous twenty.

But David didn't consider it for long. He remembered what his father had told him before David had agreed to move home and lead the church. After David's refusal, old man Thompson, Burt's boss and owner of the radio station, slapped down some money to air Sprout's show, which had been in syndication already for quite some time.

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"Have you heard enough?" Marta asked.

David nodded. Though David had heard little after Sprout had used his own son's death as an excuse to attack him, he pretended that he had been listening. What he wanted to do more than anything was to speak out and to challenge Sprout, but he knew it wouldn't make any difference. Sprout had a larger audience, financial backing, and could use his microphone to respond to whatever David might say in length and in public.

"Good," Marta said.

Marta

After Marta pressed the tape player's STOP button, she watched David blink a few times as though he were waking, and he asked, "So why would I bother to record that?"

"Game's over," Marta said. She held out the tumbler at arm's length and jiggled it, waiting for David to take it. "I can't drink anymore of this. It's too strong." Once she was sitting cross-legged on the couch—wineglass in hand, her bottle of Margaux across from her on the coffee table, and David was in his recliner, feet up, his bottle of bourbon on the end table—she sipped her wine, angry that so much of it had been wasted on David, who had never appreciated an expensive wine. "Did you have to open my Margaux?"

David shrugged. "You opened my Elijah."

"It's not the same. Your bourbon will keep for a long time opened, and you know it. Besides, when you opened my bottle, you had no idea that I'd been drinking your precious…. Oh, never mind." She concluded that there was no point in being small—it was only wine. "And never mind why I bothered to record that. Just to tell me what you think of Sprout's diatribe."

"The usual. In his opinion, anything that happens in the world is a call to teach and preach his worldview and no one else's."

"That's it?"

"He's called out other pastors before."

Marta realized then that what had initially caused her to fall in love with David,

almost against her will, was his patience and gentleness, his belief that others were inherently good and, due to that belief, his perpetual calm, which she now loathed. How could he attempt to be so rational? How could he not be angry? How could he be so distant, never once even discussing Eric's sexuality? Why hadn't he cried more often at losing him? Now she wanted nothing more than to see David react. Earlier she had planned on forcing him to sit down and listen to her, to listen to all her thoughts and everyone she blamed—herself, the town, David, Josh, Burt and Leslie, the media, religion—but she had planned to do so in a way he would understand. With calm, a few quiet tears. With a qualification—that she knew it hadn't been anyone's fault, that she believed it was an accident. But his reaction—his calm arrogance, as though these events had not affected him—had changed her mind. Sprout, she thought, had a point, as twisted and incorrect as he had been, and David's inaction had been and still was a problem. And Marta wanted David to see it; more than that, she wanted him to feel it.

"What if I told you I agree with him?" Marta asked.

"Please," David said and smiled as though he couldn't take Marta's question seriously, as though, Marta imagined, David thought she were playing another game but now a harmless one. "In what way?"

"That this is your fault."

David scoffed, took a long swallow from his bourbon, and smiled. "Come on, you don't seriously believe that."

"Well, then, let's just drop it if you aren't going to take me seriously." Marta closed her eyes, resigned. Resigned that David would do nothing to fight for his beliefs. Not here. Not surrounded by so many people so unlike both him and Marta. Even if she

provoked him, she thought it likely that his anger wouldn't last, that it wouldn't harden into resolve, and that he'd drift back into complacency. Still, she knew David couldn't resist hearing what she had to say after she'd blamed him for not taking her seriously.

"Oh, no. I'd love to hear this. Please tell me how all of this is my fault."

"David," she said, her eyes still closed, "I feel a little drunk. This probably isn't the best time. And I don't blame all of this on you. But you did play a part."

"Let's hear it then. I'm all ears."

Marta sighed, leaned back into the couch, and put her arm over her closed eyes as though she were lounging in a lawn chair, the sun too bright through her eyelids. "I spent the afternoon blaming you for all of this," she lied. Let's see what he thinks of that, Marta thought. "For bringing me here to this little town. For the lives we've had. *I've* had. For you not being here as much as you should've been. Maybe if you could've shown them more of how to be men. Just maybe, and maybe if I could've been harder and less motherly…well, maybe he wouldn't have turned out to be that way." Marta inwardly cringed at what she was saying, purposely vague, only half-believing herself, knowing that David would assume he knew to what she referred.

David stood—Marta heard the recliner slam and his voice above her. "That he wouldn't have turned out to be that way?" She heard his shock, and his voice rose. "There was nothing wrong with him. Who the hell are you? When did you change your mind on all this? So you think it's my fault, huh?"

"I did," Marta said and opened her eyes. "But it's ours. It's our fault. It's unfair to say it's all yours."

"I can't believe you think this." Marta could see his indignation and confusion,

and she wasn't surprised that he was preparing to yell; instead, she looked forward to it. "It's not about fault."

"There's no sense in getting angry about it. It is our fault. He always needed more work and attention."

"Fault has nothing to do with it. I refuse to think that I…or we had anything to do with it. Besides, no matter what he was, there was nothing…and if he were still alive." David now stopped speaking, now shaking, his face red. "If he were gay, there would be nothing wrong with him. Nothing. I'd love him all the same. I do love him. It's not anyone's fault."

After gingerly setting down her wineglass, she kicked his recliner closed and stood in front of David, just inches from him, neck craning so that she could look him in the eyes, and placed both her hands on his chest. She shoved him, but only forced him back a step.

Levi

Levi smacked the bar and called, over the music, for Freedom to bring him another rum and coke. Freedom, brunette and curly-haired, had grown more attractive despite her tattoos—sleeves for both arms—and her piercings—five in one ear, seven in the other, one for each eyebrow, her nose, lip, and tongue, some of them appearing more like fishing tackle than jewelry—and she looked better and better each time Levi had slouched in a stool here and drunk until almost sloppy. Levi knew she had heard him. She was holding up one finger, her arm high, signaling for him to wait, as she listened to DeSean, the local pool sharp, speak to her at the other end of the bar. Levi figured he'd have to wait a good five minutes for another drink the way Freedom worked. Befitting her name, she roamed the bar as she pleased, curls bouncing and facial hardware rattling, sometimes skipping as though she were a teenager whose hips hadn't yet widened instead of a mother in her late thirties, who played pool or darts or perused the jukebox and tended bar when she felt good and ready.

Which was fine with Levi. Freedom's work habits, or lack of habit, forced Levi into a slower drinking pace, a canter instead of a gallop. While he waited, he crunched ice between drags from his cigarette, watched the television, which was tuned to the news, and read the scrolling subtitles along the bottom of the screen, which warned of a long economic downturn. Levi might have worried if he were anyone besides a bartender himself, knowing that a bad economy was a boon for bars and liquor sales in general and that his skills, though certainly not unique, could land him a job almost anywhere. Besides strapping one on—what a wood-burned sign above the beer taps commanded

customers to do, the image of a wide-eyed horse attached to a foaming feedbag below the scrawl—that was what he was here to do. To scrape up a job, to work hard and drink a little, to keep from remembering and thinking. And Levi knew that was why Freedom forced him to wait. She knew, just as Levi did, that jobs were scarce and that the other two bars in town were rough places, the people there wired tight and barbed, just as likely to throw a cheap shot to a kidney as to toss back a shot of corrosive rot gut. The Stables was a more laid back watering hole, and Levi knew not to take Freedom's frustrating bait.

He'd wait. Patiently. As he had done every night, except Sunday, for the past ten days. And he'd smile when he'd get his drink and toss his clanking three quarters of change into the brass spittoon Freedom used as her tip jar. Not that she needed tips. She now owned the place, Levi had learned, inheriting it just this past spring after her father, who had underpaid Freedom to tend and manage the bar but kept her and her daughter housed, letting them stay in the apartment above the bar, where Freedom and her daughter still lived. Yup. She had certainly grown more attractive to Levi. Hard-muscled and lean with a sharp angular face, small slanted dark eyes, with her hair tied back tightly, Freedom had always been strangely attractive, but now the attraction didn't seem odd to Levi. Because her father hadn't allowed her to wear her face jewelry while she worked and had forced her to wear long-sleeve shirts to hide her tattoos, Freedom had always seemed severe and conservative when Levi had swaggered in for a drink in his early twenties. But now she had unfolded, her face softened by the curls framing her face. Sleek and exotic with her dangling hardware, her face was no longer creased and thin from stress, and her body had thickened, with curves here and there, where none had been

before.

While Levi knew he was seeking comfort in drink and smoke, he asked himself whether he was hoping for a bit of comfort from Freedom, who he now stared at openly. He had to admit he was finding some comfort—the rum tasty, his cigarettes reliable, and Freedom sexy, looking great for someone a decade older than he was, so he didn't care whether he appeared as a lonely drunk ogling the female bartender. Hell, if you can't get drunk and gawk at a women here, he asked himself, where can you? But no matter how much he drank and stared, Levi couldn't keep images of him and his brother from creeping into his mind:

There they had been several summers ago, at a corner booth, sharing pitchers of beer, Levi explaining why he had to leave the seminary, how he couldn't hack it, and Eric telling him that he had never understood how Levi could take the pressure of being expected—no, *obligated* had been the word he used—as the first born son, to be a preacher, as though Levi's fate had been sealed before he were born.

And for perhaps the second or third time in his life, Levi had asked Eric for advice, how to tell their parents, how to make them understand, and Eric, the quieter one, the introvert, sensitive and kind, the child with the demeanor of a soft-spoken preacher, a demeanor Levi wished he had, shook his head and spoke with fire: "They may not understand. But that doesn't matter. Telling them, that's what's important. You tried it their way." His next words had shocked Levi. "If they don't get it, screw em. But they will eventually. You're their son."

Had Eric been talking about himself? Levi asked himself. Had Eric been waiting for him to give their parents their first shock so that he could test the freezing waters and

know what to expect when he shared the news of his sexuality?

Levi took another drink, not wanting to think about Eric. Instead, he remembered his conversation with his father, who had been disappointed, at first angry and feeling betrayed when Levi had told him that he was dropping out, but Levi had presented his reasons. After reading Nietzsche, Sartre, Buber, and Kierkegaard, Levi's faith had wavered. His father had also felt the pull of Neitzsche's and Sarte's ideas, and told him that he had found Buber as relevant and accurate as any Christian in his rendering of how humans should interact with and think of one another, and in Kierkegaard found a Christian, the lone Christian of that particular existential group, a bit mad and miserable, making the others appear humorous, humane, and somewhat logical in comparison.

His father had told him that he understood, accepted his decision, and claimed to feel pride in Levi's honesty. He said that he had been relieved at the news; after all, it'd been better for Levi to discover this his beliefs could be threatened so easily *at* seminary as compared to *after* seminary, when he would be on the job, confronted with others' crises of faith, crises sprung from actual events—bankruptcy, divorce, the loss of a spouse, a parent, or a child—instead of philosophies anyone could find in a local library and peruse in comfort and solitude, free to stop reading at any moment. Levi, if his faith were really so brittle, had done everyone a favor, including himself, his future congregation, a future wife, who if she were anything like his mother, might be attracted both to him and his faith as though they were indistinguishable. While Levi wanted to believe all this, he still remembered his father's expression, which wasn't proud but sad. And his mother still hadn't forgiven him for ending a family tradition.

Levi now stared at Freedom and ground more ice until he caught her eye. She

stuck out her bottom lip, pretending she was sad for him, and motioned him to walk behind the bar and made a circle with her finger in the air around the customers in front of her and mouthed "A round"—the signal he had been waiting for. She had hired him. At least for now.

After the first hour behind the bar, Levi had sobered and found a rhythm, timing how long he could leave a pitcher filling unattended while he mixed drinks or fished out a spicy pickled egg, perhaps a few years old judging by its smell and texture, out of a cloudy three-gallon jar. As the bar filled, Levi sometimes found himself shoulder to shoulder with Freedom, who helped when Levi flagged and bumped him purposely with her hip, smiling. At nine, two hours after he had taken her post, she asked him what he had made in Dallas.

"Three hundred per night a couple of times per week easy, sometimes more," Levi said. He soaked a glass in suds in the sink, rinsed and dried it smoothly and without looking at his hands, scanning the crowd for a raised glass in need of refilling. "That was just tips. Seven bucks an hour on top of that. It's a popular place."

Freedom scoffed. "Well, you aren't getting close to that here." She shook her head. "Ever." A line of condensation running from a bottle of beer to the dark cherry wood bar caught her attention and she wiped it away before cocking her head and squinting at him. "Why would you leave that job?"

Levi thought about lying to avoid any questions about his motivation for sticking around, but he couldn't think of any believable reason, except that he had been fired, which was untrue and wouldn't do him any favors. He opted for truth. "I haven't left it. I'm good friends with the manager and asked for some time off. A long leave."

"Feel like you need to stick close to home right now, huh?" she asked. Levi nodded, surprised that she'd finally alluded to his loss and relieved that she didn't ask another question. "Let me tell you, because I know from experience, after you move back to your hometown, it's hard to leave even if you want to." When Levi didn't reply, her no-nonsense tone returned, which Levi could tell didn't suffer squabbling. "Eight an hour, plus sixty percent of the tips, because—let's face it—you'll be back here a little more than me. Six hours a night, four days a week. No bullshit. That's the best I can do." Freedom stuck out her hand, and Levi shook it.

"Now," she said, an ornery glint in her eye, "I'm off to play some pool." She skittered around the bar, pumping her arms and staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed at Levi, acting as though she were daring him to reprimand her, but Levi knew the score. She would work behind the bar only when she needed to, and Levi could tell, by the efficiency with which she handled the short rush—her pours faster and more deft and confident than Levi's—that she had worked her tail off for years. It was her turn to take it easy, as Levi, in his early twenties, on breaks from school during short visits home, had seen her father do—throwing darts much more often than slinging beer. Freedom had earned her name, and Levi, grateful for her playfulness, kindness, and honesty, wanted to make her his, at least for the short-term. Talking to her felt like home, she reminded him of a woman in a rocker bar in Dallas with whom he had had a short but fiery fling. A win-win.

Until tonight Levi had kept to himself, only bothering Freedom when she bothered to pay any attention to him, and every now and then playing a game of chess against Emmett or Orville, grizzled retirees. The two regulars were fixtures of the bar,

whose bald heads would gleam with a bit of brass polish, if they ever removed their hats—one with a Caterpillar logo, the other a John Deere; on other nights one wore a hat with a Chevy logo and the other a Ford, or Pennzoil and Quaker State, carrying on a never-ending debate, considered heated and academic and informed here, about the brands they preferred. When words failed them, and words always did, they let the chess board determine the winner of the night's argument. Levi ignored everyone else and hadn't stayed out past ten in the evening in order to avoid the harder drinking crowd who might recognize him and offer opinions about Eric that he preferred not to hear. He had, after all, come here not to think about him.

But tonight Levi couldn't, now that he was on the job, keep to himself, and he looked everyone in the eyes and smiled when they ordered, but he didn't chat them up for better tips as he usually would. Instead, he prepared himself for an insult a high strung drunk might holler about his family and distanced himself as soon as he filled a drink order. So far, though, the distance he had created had been needless. Customers who'd found his face familiar and guessed his name had offered their condolences, even if they had already done so at the funeral, and told him how much they respected his parents.

Levi, however, stood firm on a rule. A theory, really. There was always one per night. One incident every night in every bar he'd ever set foot in, the reason why going to bars was worth it for some, and why others avoided them: the story. The story people would talk about the next day. And Levi believed he was the staring the story in the face. A man, middle-aged, somewhat scrawny but with wiry and hard-worked long muscle, who wore a denim shirt, jeans, and ball cap, clapped Emmett and Orville on the shoulders and hollered, "Don't you old bastards ever play nothing else? Why don't you play a good

game of grab-ass instead and…" The drunk stumbled backwards, as though speaking and moving simultaneously had been too complicated an exercise to continue in his condition, holding on to Emmett and Orville, who almost toppled out of their stools before they shook loose of the drunk's hold.

After righting himself and his bottle of beer, Emmett yelled, "Dammit, Duane, go pester someone else." Orville, huffing and puffing, too upset and out of air to speak, launched a handful of peanuts into Duane's face.

Duane covered his eyes and shouted, "You old fucker, you've blinded me." Cursing, he again stumbled backward until the back of his thighs nudged a table, and he stuck his hand on top it, inside an ashtray, for balance. Head down, Duane looked at the floor, blinking away tears and flecks of peanut husks.

Levi, wanting to squelch any further disagreements, poured Duane a small glass of beer, grabbed Emmett a longneck and a towel, and swung open the bar's lift gate. From across the room, Freedom smiled, gave Levi a thumbs-up, and returned to her pool game, leaning over the table to take aim, seemingly confident that Levi could placate two old men and a drunk. "Little harm done," Levi said to Emmett, who was drying chess pieces with a napkin and grumbling under his breath. Levi set the bottle in front of him. "That's on me." After Levi wiped up the spilled beer and left the towel with Orville to clean the chess board, he held out the glass of beer to Duane, who, still blinking, took it and tried his best to focus on Levi's face.

"Thanks partner," said Duane and downed half the glass in one gulp. After Levi turned around to walk back behind the bar, Duane raised his voice. "Hey, wait a second. Aren't you that faggot's little brother?" Duane barked a laugh. "Boy, I bet that had to be

a might weird? Looking at your equipment while growing up, why I bet that must've been awful, and your folks keeping it a secret…"

Levi, without thought, turned around and backhanded Duane. He staggered back, his eyes closed, as though he might have passed out already, but when the back of Duane's head struck the wall behind him, Duane's eyes fluttered open and widened, and his body went rigid, his face contorted, and he rushed at Levi. Levi stepped forward to meet Duane's attack, but as Levi swung a haymaker, Duane kicked him in the shin and followed the cheap shot with blows to his face and one uppercut to Levi's midsection, which sent Levi to his knees, where Duane kicked him once in the gut before a large man in overalls wrapped his arms around Duane and picked him up in a bear hug, hauling him to the rear entrance. The big man set him down, gripped the scruff of Duane's neck, opened the door and shoved Duane outside, lightly, as Levi imagined a father who had tired of roughhousing might force a son to take his rambunctious energy outside.

Levi picked himself up and heard someone from across the bar yell, "That scrappy little bastard's a surprise, ain't he?" Everyone in the bar laughed, all twenty or so patrons, and as Levi walked back to his station, rubbing his sore ribs, he heard a few people begin sentences such as "You remember the time that 3-D…" Levi eventually learned that Duane's nickname, 3-D, stood for Drunk Dumbass Duane and referred to the cartoonish way he fought, bobbing and flicking out his fists and feet chaotically.

Freedom, now behind the bar, gathered some ice in a towel, wacked it on the bar, and handed it to Levi. "Put that on your lip," she said. Squinting, she leaned in for a closer look and told him that perhaps he should place the towel on his left eye or cheek.

Levi took the towel and eased it onto each injury, testing the pain, and after

wincing each time, tossed the towel in the sink. To relieve the pain, he downed two shots of bourbon. Coughing and wincing, he held his ribs and said, "I'm guessing you'll just pay me cash." He saw Freedom's resolute expression. "And I won't need to come in tomorrow night. Sorry that I already screwed this up."

"For hitting 3-D?" Freedom asked and poured herself and Levi another shot. "If that were a rule, no one would work here. But I'll tell you one thing. You aren't qualified to work the door if you can't handle little ole Duane." She poured them both another. "Last one, cowboy, and then I'm sending you home."

"That's all right," said Levi, feeling his split lip with his tongue. "I'm fine. Really. He didn't hit me that hard."

"Look, I didn't want to say anything, but I've been nervous about you since you've been camping out over there." She pointed to a stool at the end of the bar. "Keeping to yourself is one thing, but having to serve people like 3-D seems to be another, and they probably won't let you keep to yourself. You're going to hear some more of that, and you should wrap your heard around it before you come back to work."

"I was just surprised. I can control my temper, Freedom."

"I don't know if I could, and I've been doing this a lot longer than you." She sighed, smiled, and bumped him with her hip flirtatiously. "Look, I've brought you and your brother enough pitchers to know that you won't let those comments slide. At least not for a while. And you shouldn't. You guys were close. But I have to do what's best for my livelihood. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I get it. Thanks for the chance, though, and the shots."

"Hey, I'm not firing you over someone like 3-D. I'm just giving you fair warning.

Heck, I hope to get you drunk again." She opened her mouth wide in mock surprise at Levi's expression. "But go home tonight. See your folks. Isn't that why you're here?"

***

During the short drive home, a mere six, short dimly lit blocks, so different from the long and brightly lit city blocks of Dallas, Levi held the wheel with both hands, palms slick with sweat, and constantly glanced in his rearview mirror at a patrol car that had slid behind him after pulling out of the bar's parking lot. He made complete stops, counting to three before easing into the accelerator, used his turn signal obnoxiously early, and sighed, his shoulders slumping and one hand leaving the wheel after the patrol car turned left two blocks away from Levi's parents' house, the officer inside probably bored and disappointed when Levi had failed to break a traffic law.

Once in his parents' driveway he could see lights on deep inside the house, and in the center console, Levi found a tin of breath mints and popped three into his mouth, noting the time: ten-seventeen. His parents were more than likely still awake and, more important, possibly still roaming the house before bed. Although there was nothing he could do about the smell of cigarettes they'd surely notice from a few feet away or the sight of his bruised face, if they drew close enough to see it—braving the smell they knew they'd whiff to give him a hug goodnight, a habit they had resumed his first night back home—he could, at least, soften the blow of his breath, breath that he suspected a match could ignite. On the porch he attempted to check the stink of his breath and cupped his hands around his mouth and nostrils, it steaming around his hands, moisture clinging

and tickling his nose. A sneeze threatened, which he fought, then forgot, when he heard shouting inside, his father's voice: "It's not anyone's fault."

Levi opened the door and heard his mother, who said, almost as loudly as his father had spoken, "I'm not talking about Eric. But let's go ahead and talk about him. Let's talk about both of our boys. Maybe, just maybe, if they had grown up somewhere else—oh, I don't know, say somewhere that isn't redneck central—maybe Eric would've come out in high school, and maybe Levi wouldn't have been the womanizing drunk he turned out to be. Maybe instead of phone calls, they'd come visit us more often. Maybe Eric would still be alive. But I can't blame all of that on you. Oh no. I came with you. Here. Against my better judgment."

"Against your better judgment?"

"This tiny town in the middle of nowhere? God, yes. It's a far cry from the suburbs of Dallas. The first time I laid eyes on it, I didn't like it. Dust everywhere. Do you have any idea how much I fight the dust? But I loved you, and you loved it. I even told your mother that I was unsure, but she said it was a great place to raise kids. Ha! Some place. Not much to do, not much around to get them into trouble, but not much culture either. No art, hardly any music, no museums, and a lousy library."

"Who the hell were you talking about earlier?"

"Josh, goddammit. And every other kid you and this town were supposed to educate. It's an absolute failure. This damn town doesn't leave many of its children a future."

"It was an accident. How am I supposed to prevent accidents?"

Levi, somewhat hurt but not at all surprised that his own mother had called him a

womanizing drunk, turned off the porch light, went back outside, sat in the semi-darkness on the front steps, and lit a smoke, still hearing his parents' voices but not making out their words. He didn't need to hear them to know what they were saying. He knew they were playing the blame-game and probably wouldn't quit—at least his mother wouldn't until tears or exhaustion overwhelmed her, whichever came first. But he understood why. Both his parents had been unusually quiet and distant. Yet while his father had seemed to accept his mother's newfound silence as a matter of course and a natural part of the grieving process, Levi had felt his mother's tension. His father hadn't been at home much, spending more time at the church in his office, and she'd stare at television at home, watching talk shows—some of them about Eric and what had happened—and talking to herself, too low for him to make out her words, when she thought Levi hadn't been watching. And he had felt the tension across the table at dinner when he bothered to eat supper with his parents, and he waited for his mother to throw a dish, to yell, to express her loss as she usually did, but she had waited.

Now that the tension had broken, Levi felt relieved that they had finally resumed speaking. A part of him wanted to march into the living room and join in. He'd look at them both and calmly say, "You know what the two of you really should do? Give each other a good 'Fuck you.' Hell, I'll be the first to start. 'Fuck you, Mom, it's your fault.' Boy, that sure feels good, doesn't it? I bet I'll even feel better if I say it again: 'Fuck you, Dad, it's your fault, too.' Hey, anyone wanna blame me? Might as well while we're at it, so go ahead and say it: 'Fuck you, Levi. He was your little brother and you should've known and kept him out of harm's way.'" Instead, he chain-smoked cigarettes, listening to the rise and fall of his parents' argument, and when his mouth and throat dried, he

stubbed his cigarette out on the steps and looked in his trunk for his flask. When he found it, it was empty. Now annoyed—yes, ma'am, Levi thought, if I weren't a drunk a couple of weeks ago, I'm well on my way now—Levi opened the driver's side door and leaned into the horn, letting it honk until the front porch light came on and his father walked out onto the porch, Levi's mother behind him and peering through the storm door.

When the horn's blare faded, Levi only heard the wind for a moment. But barking and howling followed, the neighborhood's dogs on alert, and porch lights flicked on, up and down and across the street, as his parents' neighbors stepped out onto their porches, some saying something about having to work in the morning, and others asking whether everything was all right, all of them using their hands as visors to shield their eyes from their own porch lights to see what the trouble was. One threatened to call the police and to that, Levi's father, his hands palm out at chest level, said, "It's over, and everything's under control." He put his hands on his hips and stared at Levi.

Levi rested his arms on his car's roof and watched his parents' neighbors shake their heads in Levi's direction before going back inside. Levi held up his empty flask as though toasting them. As some lights winked out, some came on farther down the block, and from every direction dog owners admonished their well-fed, barking alarm systems.

"You mind taking a break from your fight just long enough so that your drunkard son can come inside to fill up his flask and not hear your bullshit?" Levi asked.

His mother cursed and retreated from the door. His father opened his mouth twice, looking as though he might yell, and said, quietly, "Listening to my bullcrap, son, is mandatory after that racket."

David

David had surprised himself when he had asked Levi for a smoke, but he wasn't surprised that the cigarette felt familiar again—its taste not as biting or as hot or bitter on the tongue as the smoke from his pipe, which he smoked only occasionally—as though it hadn't been fifteen years since he had smoked, his last cigarette on the day of his father's funeral, throwing away the mostly full pack that night, drunk and disgusted with himself for being so weak. The smoke from his fourth cigarette of the night drifted away, first through his fingers where he felt its warmth, up toward his roof, past the gutter clogged with autumn's leaves where he lost sight of the rest of the tendril. He imagined it drifting, then being pulled toward the chimney, heat following heat, where it would mingle with wood smoke, carried by the light breeze from the southwest that had warmed the late evening, past the northern part of town and across Oklahoma's border into Kansas and through it to Topeka and farther through the plains, faster, through the Midwest and Northeast, and still farther and farther, a straight line as the crow flies, the breath from his lungs carried by nature farther than he himself could ever hope to carry it unaided. And he would need aid, God's and man's, if he were to do what he was planning.

Sitting beside him on the porch steps in the dark, Levi said, "So let me get this straight." Levi took a slug straight from the bottle and pulled on his cigarette. "Mom thinks you should talk about homosexuality and the church"—he blew smoke out, continuing to speak, as though the smoke didn't and couldn't irritate his throat, the way David used to smoke, without guilt or fear—"and you think you should do it, too?" Levi shook his head. "You know what will happen."

"I think that's what I'm going to have to do. Sacrifice my career for my marriage."

"Dad, I'm not even convinced Eric was gay."

"Does that really matter?"

"You'd end up kicked out of the church. Three generations of our family leading the Methodist church here will end. I know that's important to you."

"It was going to end anyway, Levi, and I don't mean that as criticism. Just fact."

"To find work, you'd probably have to move. There isn't much here."

"I don't think your mother or I would mind that. We moved here for tradition and to raise you boys. That's done now. You should know that your mom's never been as angry as she's seemed to be with you. I think she did it because she thought she was speaking for me. Because I wouldn't. I think that's why she's so angry with me now. She has a point."

"But it's not her career."

"Oh, you're wrong there. A pastor's wife is just as wedded to the church as her husband. That's another reason why I think she's angry."

"I can't even imagine you not living here. It's always been home."

"Mine, too. I have trouble imagining it myself."

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The radio station's offices were on Main Street, on the east side of a flat stretch of road as flush as though a thin gray banner had been unfurled and draped over the high

prairie. After parking between Burt's baby blue Chevy truck and an oxidizing maroon Buick that belonged to the radio station's receptionist, Claire, who was also Burt's daughter, David climbed out of his vehicle and closed the car's groaning and sagging door, noticing that their cars were the only ones in the diagonal parking spaces downtown, which wasn't surprising. It was a little past five o'clock, and all of the stores closed around four if not earlier when business eventually flagged. As usual, the radio station, the only business open, flapped on in a town that, though well-kept—the sidewalks and streets swept, each storefront given a facelift once every fifteen years—appeared to be on the cusp of death. But this was only appearance. Most of the business owners lived in the second or third floor and parked in the alleys to leave more open spaces for potential customers.

When David entered the station, Claire, Burt's oldest child, older than Josh by ten years, looked up through her thick glasses—beveled and set within frames too large for a woman in her mid-30s—blinking rapidly, her trademark response to anything she didn't expect, and ceased painting her nails, her small brush poised above a thumb. "Well, hi, Rev," she said. "Looking for Daddy?"

"I sure am," he said. He closed the door and approached Claire's desk. To avoid looking at Claire's magnified eyes—David had always found them curiously mesmerizing—he concentrated on her nails, which were only half-done, a deep purple that clashed with her red hair that the sun now highlighted through the front window. "Is that a color you've worn before?"

"Huh uh," Claire said, raising one hand level with her eyes to inspect her nails, as though she had forgotten what she had just been doing; Claire, literally, was slow, a

product of not getting enough oxygen during childbirth, but she was dedicated, tireless, always courteous and, more important, genuine. Humored and enthralled by her simplicity, David followed her hand, and at this angle he had no choice but to look in her befuddled eyes as well as at her frizzy, short bangs. “I’m sure sorry about Eric. I know my Josh didn’t mean it.”

“Thank you, Claire,” David said. “I appreciate that.”

Her eyes drifted over David’s shoulder, and she stared distantly for a moment, at what David didn’t know, and again she blinked, just now remembering that David stood in front of her. “Pappa’s upstairs, if that’s who you’re looking for.” Back to her nails and using her specs as magnifying glasses—which, after all, they practically were—she continued coating her nails. “Glad you stopped by. I’ve missed our talks.” Although she seemed preoccupied, as usual, and although they had barely spoken to one another—again, the usual—he knew she had meant what she said, a simple sentiment that meant more to David than Claire could probably ever know. Or maybe she knew more than she let on, a thought that had many times, in the past, led David to staring in her eyes, wondering what it was like to be her, definite and simple in her faith—in herself, in others, and in God.

Upstairs, through the studio’s long wide window, David watched Burt work. His bulk and his pudgy fingers belied a light-footed and deft-fingered manner. He plucked two cords from one end of an amp, and barely looking, inserted them a couple of inches to the left. Twisting a dial or two—David, not familiar with the station’s equipment, had little idea what was what—and finally satisfied, Burt sat gingerly in his office chair, without his usual Geronimo plunge onto a coach or recliner, to which even the sturdiest

creaked. Burt stretched toward the microphone in front of him, making eye contact with David, smiled, slipped a pair of headphones over his ears, and as Burt slid the microphone closer with one hand, he held the other up, one finger extended, as though to say, Just a minute. He mouthed one word: weather.

The studio's door had been left open a crack, and David could hear Burt's deep voice announce that a cool front, due this evening, would cause a dip in the temperature below freezing, with wind chills in the low teens, not rare in November in the Panhandle. As David listened to Burt's voice, to which he was now accustomed, he remembered the first time he had heard Burt speak at church. David had expected the short, squat man to have a heavily accented rasp, every now and then interrupted with a wet cough, but the voice that emanated did not grate; instead, it sounded like velvet, a voice that could calm and lull, one David had wished he possessed, when younger, one he thought he might grow into, after he towered over most of his high school classmates. But he retained a higher voice than most, a high baritone in a bass' body. Such was God's sense of humor.

The report lasted only a minute or two. Finished, Burt punched a couple of buttons and waved David in. "Good to see you, Dave," Burt said. "What brings you here?"

David scratched the back of his neck, uncomfortable and somewhat embarrassed. He hadn't spoken to his best friend in two weeks, and now here he was about to apologize for that in one breath, apologize for Marta in another, and turn around and ask for a favor while he exhaled. "Well, I came by to apologize."

Burt motioned David to a chair and said, "Really, there's no need. If anyone should apologize for what you've been though, why it should be—"

"Still, I feel like I should apologize for Marta because—"

"I mean it, Dave. No apology is necessary." Burt scooted forward in his chair and rubbed his knees with the palms of his hands, his eyes, bloodshot with bags under them, never leaving the floor as he spoke. "Leslie and I can't imagine what you and Marta are going through, but we thought it best to give you some room, so I'm sorry we haven't been there for you to help. I'm glad you came—"

"You don't owe me an apology either, Burt."

Burt laughed, it seeming painful. "Well, you just wait till you've heard me out." While letting out a deep breath, Burt scrubbed a hand through his hair, and more to himself than to David, said, "There's no easy way to say this, but"—and louder—"Josh has been asking for you, and he wants to see you." He explained that Josh, only allowed to have one visitor per week, wanted David to visit him and counsel him as his pastor. "I understand if you can't. I don't know if I could if I were in your position. I feel awful just asking."

David thought for a long moment and imagined what it would be like looking Josh in the eyes through plexi-glass—or would he see him, without obstruction, across a table?—and he remembered the boy who had unintentionally hurt Eric when he had been a boy: the first time, Josh had dared Eric to climb in an old maple tree, with brittle and rotted branches, and Eric did so, a branch breaking and Eric breaking his arm; later, Eric and Josh had been whittling sticks with their first pocket knives, sitting across from one another much as David and Burt were now, when Josh had accidentally sliced open one of Eric's fingers. Both times Josh had cried as he tried to explain what had happened. And David imagined, no matter how complicated the circumstances were, now that Josh

was a young adult, and no matter how arrogant and oblivious David had heard he had become, Josh was—David prayed and hoped, for Josh's sake—still the same boy who genuinely wished not to harm anyone. But David, even though he knew what had happened had been an accident, could not envision Josh without an expression of laughing and taunting menace. Because of this image, David knew that, as a Christian, he had to talk with Josh even though he'd rather not see the man Josh had become. It occurred to David that he wanted to strike Josh and pray for him simultaneously.

Burt placed a hand on David's knee. "It's okay. I understand."

"No, Burt. I don't know if you do understand."

"That's true. I guess I probably don't. But I'm still sorry."

"That's not what I mean. I don't understand either, but I'll do it."

Burt, confused, said, "I guess I really don't understand."

"The answer is yes."

Burt's chair creaked when he turned away to his desk. He grabbed a tissue and blew into it, honking loud. David asked, as an old joke, a habit he had of trying to comfort others even when he himself needed comfort, "Lord, Burt, do you fly south every winter?" Burt laughed, dabbed at his eyes, and turned a knob here and there and punched a button, resuming his work. "How's Leslie?"

"She's been wanting to talk to Marta for a little while now, but I've been telling her to give her some time and let Marta come to her." He straightened in his chair and wheeled back around, facing David. "Damn—I'm sorry—why didn't I ask sooner? How is Marta? How are you?"

"That's all right. Truth is, I didn't come here just to say howdy either. Marta's

doing as well as she can. You tell Leslie to march herself over when she wants. Marta needs the company." David cleared his throat. "Part of the reason I stopped by was to ask a favor."

"Anything."

"I'd like you to record Sunday's sermon, audio and video. Can you do that?"

Part III

Bryce

Bryce realized he was dreaming toward the dream's end. He strode down Lincoln Boulevard, heading south, toward the Capitol, surrounded by thousands of others like himself, angry and shouting, some holding signs. The more aware he became that he was dreaming, the more quickly everyone moved toward the Capitol, their acceleration and destination seemingly inevitable. The sun shone behind the building, casting a shadow on the street in front of them. Once the crowd reached the shadow of the Capitol's dome—on top of it stood the Guardian, a Native American statue that Bryce recognized as the supposed protector of rights of Oklahoma's diverse people—the crowd parted, the Guardian's spear splitting them down the middle. Bryce, however, didn't veer from his course, and when it looked as though the spear's shadow might pierce his chest, Bryce, in a blink, appeared at the steps instantly, as is possible only in dreams, when distances momentarily seem untravellable. After the brief climb up the steps, he could see no entrance into the structure—no doors, no windows. Thousands of people joined him, but there was no more room, not unless they could find an entrance. They found none, and still more people flooded behind him, pushing him against the building until Bryce was forced to hug the Capitol's outer walls, the weight of so many at his back crushing him.

His hands flattened and expanded against granite, then his chest and cheek, and the rest of him, too, and he felt his bones soften, his body as pliable as putty, and he

started, against his will, spreading around the walls and over the dome and upward toward the Guardian. The smell of thousands of people was overwhelming until all the scents merged at the building's tallest point, the Guardian's spearhead, as flesh merged with flesh, all the bodies overlapping and taking the shape of the building itself. Although Bryce couldn't see, in fact no longer had eyes and could not distinguish his flesh from others, he still somehow sensed himself thinning and stretching even more and sometimes contracting, momentarily, as though in a collective heartbeat. With each contraction, he felt the building crack and at the same time felt the anger of thousands of people who no longer sought entrance but destruction—destruction of the building in which some claimed the right to control others' lives. For once, anger frightened him, and he wanted to peel away and contract into himself, to feel the depth of his body, to see with his own eyes, to hear with his ears, to retreat to a quiet, calm sense of self instead of feeling vaguely defined by stone and anger and violence. As though the collective sensed his fear, it squeezed what little was left of him more tightly, unwilling to let go, the pulse becoming a vibration and hum and rattle, as fast as a jackhammer, the mass using the Guardian's spear to drill into the dome, its walls now a thin skein of skin collapsing under the crushing weight of humanity it was not constructed to hold.

The image began to fade as soon as Bryce woke, but for a moment he panicked, still feeling the vibrations of his dream. He exhaled in relief when he realized his cellphone was vibrating in his pocket against his thigh. In his living room, Bryce stood up from the couch to feel the weight of his body and pulled his cellphone from his pocket. The display read "Missed call: Nick Red River Alliance."

To calm himself, Bryce went to the kitchen and began to prepare supper. From the

refrigerator he pulled out two salmon filets, which had been thawing since morning, and a beer; and from the spice rack he grabbed garlic and onion powder, dried chives, and cayenne pepper—any spice he could think of that might jump-start his appetite, which had disappeared since Eric's death. Once the fish were seasoned and spritzed with lemon olive oil and his half-full beer lukewarm, he called Nick back.

"Bryce, just the guy I need to talk to," Nick said.

"Hey, Nick," Bryce said. "How are things?"

"Great, the protest is shaping up nicely." Nick, one of three organizers, was incapable of small talk and always interpreted questions about his well-being as having to do with whatever he was currently working on. "Hey, I gotta favor to ask you." That was Nick. Almost all business and almost all the time, his minutes measured according to how efficiently they were spent supporting the LGBT community.

"Why I'm doing great, Nick, thanks for asking. What is it you need?"

"You know David Wells, right? The reverend, Eric's father?"

Bryce knew that Nick knew the answer. "I wouldn't say I know him." Bryce wedged the phone in between his cheek and shoulder and shook more cayenne pepper on the salmon, more than Chance liked. Then again, Chance preferred his salmon baked, not that it mattered to Bryce, whom Chance called, passive aggressively, the Postal Griller because he grilled whether it rained, sleeted, or snowed, a supposedly testosterone-laden practice that Chance had trouble understanding. And tonight, in just an hour or so, right after Chance returned from work, that's what Bryce planned on doing: grilling in the wet and cold November wind and possibly getting magnificently drunk whether Chance liked his behavior or the food he cooked. "I only met him briefly at the funeral. Why?"

"Why?" Nick sounded exasperated. "Why? Because we've gotta have him speak at the protest, that's why." Bryce suspected that Nick was waiting for answer, and when Bryce didn't reply, leaning instead against the counter and chugging the rest of his beer, Nick cleared his throat. "I've sent you emails, Bryce, and posted links to your Facebook page. Any of this ring any bells?"

"I've been making it a point to avoid any kind of media, Nick."

Nick explained, as Bryce searched for red potatoes first in the fridge then the cupboards, what Bryce hadn't expected to hear for another five to ten years, if ever: a minister in Oklahoma, specifically Reverend Wells, had delivered a sermon to his church about homosexuality; Reverend Wells had claimed that the Bible said nothing overt about homosexuality, and even if it did, as so many people claimed, what believers typically claimed the Bible taught about homosexuals—that the acts they engaged in were abominations and deserved punishment—contradicted the Gospel. What was even more surprising was that the sermon had been recorded and posted online. People were talking about it. Online and on television.

"Bryce, before you ask him," Nick said, "you should watch the video. He might resist the idea, but he sure would legitimize our efforts in some people's eyes because of his popularity right now."

"I haven't even agreed to do it, and if I do, he might not even listen to me."

"You will after you watch it. And he'll at least hear you out. You were Eric's friend."

Bryce, somewhat disgusted with Nick, brusquely said, "I'll give it a look, but I'm not making any promises."

"Bryce, are you okay?"

"Just great, Nick, thanks for asking." Bryce hung up.

Bryce cut potatoes, bell peppers and onions, seasoned them, wrapped them in foil, and drank two more beers before setting his laptop on the kitchen table. It didn't take him long to find Reverend Wells' sermon, and he noticed that comments on the video had been disabled. He paused the video as soon as it began to play, noted its length, barely twenty minutes, grabbed another beer, and sat down, the chair screeching on the linoleum. The paused image showed Reverend Wells approaching the pulpit, sheets of paper in hand; six lengths of pews were in full view, five of them full. Bryce took a swig of beer, turned up the volume, and pressed play. A long single organ note sounded and receded, and Reverend Wells swung into motion as he walked to the pulpit, his head down, and set his notes on the pulpit. He turned to his right, thanked, presumably, the choir, and coughed into the crook of his arm.

For a moment, Reverend Wells looked directly into the camera, self-consciously. "I'm going to talk about something I've never before talked about," he said, "and I'd like to briefly say why." He leaned on the pulpit, setting his elbows down and clenching his hands, as though he were praying standing up and pleading for patience. But then he made a fist and rested his chin on his knuckles as though he wanted his audience to believe that this was a discussion, not a sermon. "I'm going to talk about homosexuality and what I believe the Bible has to say about it. Some of you may be offended by this topic, and that's why I think it should be addressed. I certainly won't be offended if any of you feel you have to leave, but if you do feel that way, I think that may be a sign that you should stay."

Many members in the first few rows shifted in their seats, and Bryce imagined that some of them probably did want to leave but felt as though they couldn't, not sitting so close to the pulpit where Bryce imagined that they could distinguish the color of their reverend's eyes. But there was a faint shuffling, and Reverend Wells' back straightened and he looked to his right, in response to a child, with an androgynous voice, say, "But it's time for Jesus, mama. We always go to Jesus on Sunday."

Laughter erupted, quickly stifled, and a few members of the congregation twisted in their seats, one or two covering smiles, to see who was leaving. Reverend Wells smiled, waved, and said, "Percy, Jesus will be with you outside, too."—"He will?" –"Of course, and Tom, Patty"—Reverend Wells turned to his left—"Melanie, Scott, Allie, Rob…well, all of you. God bless you. I hope to see you next Sunday."

Light bloomed, diagonally, through the church, with what Bryce assumed was the opening of the sanctuary's door to let the Sunday morning sun inside, and it stretched across the room and receded three times as Reverend Wells waited for families, who were not in view, to exit.

"This, of course, won't be a typical sermon, obviously in subject matter, because I've never spoken of it before. Instead of a sermon I'd like you to think of this as a Bible study session, so feel free to ask questions. I've tried to anticipate some of them, and here's the first: Why am I going to talk about this now? Is it because of Eric?

"Of course it is. Over the past couple of weeks I have asked myself many times: What if I had approached this subject before? Would Eric's life have been shortened? Would Josh have confronted a gay man only for being, as far as we know, a gay man? For being different from us? And would he have swung that bat? In order for me to have

faith in myself and in my vocation, in order for me to believe in our shared faith itself, the answer to these questions has to be no.

"Now you may believe that I'm being egotistical. How can one preacher have so much power? First, it's not mine. Second, if I, like anyone who preaches, don't believe that what I say changes how we view ourselves and how we view others and how we treat others, then I might as well never enter this pulpit, or any other, ever again. If nothing a man of God—and I do believe I am a man of God—says has made any difference to you, then why do you attend church? Is it for comfort? To feel safe? Or to be challenged? My job is to challenge and comfort you, and I don't think I've taken my first responsibility as seriously as I should have.

"You might also ask a similar question. Why haven't I talked about this in the past? It sounds like it's the same question, but it isn't. On the surface, the answer is simple: I saw no need. How many homosexuals live or have lived in our community? Few. There have been whispers here and there from our sons and daughters, who have confided in us of who they are, but they always do so well after they've moved far away." Reverend Wells cleared his throat. "I wish I could have had the opportunity to hear this from my son."

"But there's a deeper reason why I've never approached this topic. Fear. Yes, fear. Fear that you would abandon the church. Fear that attendance would drop, fear that our collection plates would lighten and we wouldn't be able to help the community as much as we should. Fear that I would be transferred from my home, where I was born, and where I raised my sons. No one should fear his home. And I wonder if this is why some of our sons and daughters choose not to visit us as much as we would like, and why

my wife and I will never see my youngest walk into his childhood home again. Because of fear and of misunderstanding."

Bryce paused the video to get another beer, thinking that if Reverend Wells continued to be as honest as he had been so far, he would try to find the courage to talk to him. What Reverend Wells had said already had touched him and spoken to Bryce's feelings of home, which he had avoided for much of his adult life. Rarely did he think of his hometown anymore—only on holidays, Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, when he called, hoping that his father wouldn't answer the phone. They'd had little to say to one another ever since his mother and father had driven through Norman on their way to visit family in Texas and had dropped by Bryce's apartment unannounced. Chance had greeted them at the door in only a towel, still dripping, his hair wet, and when Bryce walked into the living room, also dressed in only a towel, for he and Chance had just showered together, his mother had asked what was going on. His father, eyes glued to the carpet, said that he'd explain in the car on the way to Texas, where they were heading that very minute. That had been twelve years ago.

When Bryce resumed the video, Reverend Wells' sermon didn't keep Bryce's attention; he merely talked about some of the biblical stories and passages with which Bryce had already come to grips—Sodom and Gomorrah and the minutiae of Leviticus. Instead, Bryce heard his father's voice when he'd call for his mother and his father answered the phone. His father did still speak to him, but not for long and not about anything substantial, sports mostly, football in particular, which Bryce had played in late grade school and throughout junior and senior high. A punishing linebacker, Bryce had been a son any hardworking, beer-swilling, and God-fearing plumber could be proud of.

A part of Bryce missed the times when his father had felt comfortable slapping him on the back and giving him a bear hug, but the last time Bryce had visited home, at Christmas four years ago, his father had shaken his hand, offered him a beer and a seat in front of the television, where they watched basketball games on Christmas Eve and football games on Christmas Day, not discussing anything besides sports and work the entire night and day of Bryce's visit—as though Bryce were still miles away, on the other end of the phone, waiting for his father to say anything of meaning to him. Only when Bryce had made it to Chance's parents' house on Christmas night did he feel as though he were celebrating a holiday.

Chance had been lucky to be born to parents who didn't care about religion in the slightest and who had guessed Chance's sexuality before he had told them at thirteen-years-old. He had been encouraged to be himself, and though his father had rolled his eyes when Chance sometimes paraded around the house in his mother's makeup—a story Chance's mother enjoyed telling—Chance was undeniably supported. Bryce, whose parents dragged him along to church every Sunday for as long as he could remember, had felt persecuted ever since, at the age of fifteen, he had discovered who he was, but he hadn't felt persecuted by his parents and certainly not by his friends. Bryce had kept his identity hidden. He had, after all, learned over the years from his parents' Southern Baptist church service, bible study, and his youth group that there was little in the world more depraved than a homosexual. Evading detection had been lucky and easy: Bryce had dated, beginning in junior high, the most prudish and puritanical girl he could find, Genevieve Lemon, a stout volleyball player only a few inches shorter than he, whom he eventually found out, to his immense relief, was a lesbian, even though she had wanted

them to make-out and pet each other to convince Bryce that she was a girl just like any other. To avoid detection, Bryce had behaved too aggressively, and Genevieve shoved him away in disgust and slugged him out of fear, when she must have interpreted his terror of possible discovery as anger that she had rejected him. The conversation that followed the debacle of that evening in the back of Bryce's car was still one of his fondest memories of childhood.

A breeze tickled the hairs on Bryce's neck, and he turned around to see that the front hall light had been turned on. On the living room carpet, Chance's elongated shadow took off its coat and hung it on a rack by the door. Prompted by Chance's homecoming, Bryce paused the video and checked the time on the microwave, seven twenty-four.

"You're home a little early," Bryce called. Chance usually worked until eight, sometimes nine, the bulk of his business done either after four in the afternoon, after many people's work day ended, when they'd complain about their stressful, busy lives, or from six-thirty in the morning until nine, before his customers, bleary-eyed and sulky, headed off for a long day. Few of his customers, however, worked as hard as Chance. Bryce sometimes joked that, instead of a lover, he lived with a hardworking Protestant roommate whose only day off was, because of his work ethic, Sunday, to which Chance replied that he was a slave to the Christian schedule, and in more than one way. Even though Chance earned three times what Bryce did, he hardly ever enjoyed the fruits of his labor or his relationship, a sore truth for Bryce.

"You bet I am," Chance said. He crossed the living and dining rooms, smiling, before kissing Bryce. "Did you hear? Have you watched it?"

"You watched it at work? Wow, it really has gone viral."

"I did." Chanced opened the fridge and crinkled his nose. "Salmon. Really?"

"It's good for you," Bryce said. "So, how did that go over?"

Chance poured himself a glass of wine and laughed. "Well, Tiff—you remember Tiff, right?" Bryce nodded, remembering her, a brunette who enjoyed her hair frosted, who pretended to be vaguely liberal because she frequented a gay man's business but who discussed current affairs as though she only watched conservative talk shows on television. "Well, she started cyring near the end, and after it was over, she asked me how I felt about it. So I told her, and she left before I finished her highlights. At the door, she yelled, 'I can't believe you don't think there's a God.'"

Bryce laughed. "She just left? Just like that?"

"Yeah, I guess she doesn't know the difference between an agnostic and an atheist, but no worries. She'll only end up generalizing that all atheist gay men do great hair. Maybe she'll think I made a deal with the devil. Hell, she'll probably refer more of her friends to me."

For a moment, neither said anything. Bryce grabbed another beer; Chance poured himself a glass of wine. "Oh, look," Chance said, pointing to the laptop. "You haven't even finished. Did you already make up your mind?"

"About what?"

"Eric. Nick called me, and I told him that you were the man to ask."

"I don't know."

"Well, finish it up, and we'll go out to eat." Chance pointed at the fridge and nudged Bryce with his elbow. "Because I'm not eating that, and we should celebrate

anyway."

Chance retreated deep into the house, probably to take a shower, and Bryce felt a stab of envy when he resumed the video, still barely listening to it, Reverend Wells now talking about the Gospel. How easy it seemed for Chance to wash these experiences away—Eric's death, which Chance felt but not to the degree Bryce did, and the hold religion had on their lives. Chance, except for the power it exerted on secular society and the law, did not care about religion, just as his parents didn't. But Bryce, having been brought up in a religious household, still wanted to believe in the Gospel's message, which Reverend Wells over the last few minutes had talked about beautifully, but not any more beautifully than what he had already read over his years of coming to grips with being a gay and spiritual man.

"Treating others as equals and with love," Reverend Wells said, "is the fulfillment of Christ's law. I dare you to fulfill it, and I pray you do. Let us pray."

Bryce closed his laptop before reflecting on what he had heard. He didn't need to digest what Reverend Wells had said. Bryce had already read similar arguments, ones much more deeper and more scholarly. And he knew the only reason the video had gone viral was because of what had happened to Eric. For the same reason, Bryce knew he'd ask Reverend Wells to speak at the protest. But he did have to admit that he'd finally heard a local pastor speak with as much passion as a Southern Baptist minister—only this time, Bryce agreed with the message. Bryce hoped that Reverend Wells would say yes and that his sermon was not an anomaly.

Joshua

Josh had seldom felt intimidated, possibly a few times in early grade school, once bullied by a kid two years older wearing an OU T-shirt, who called him a fag and shoved him for wearing an OSU Cowboy sweatshirt; in response, Josh had kicked the kid in the groin and, without comment, returned to his place in line to play tetherball after the kid, on the ground and cupping his groin, said, through gritted teeth, that he had been only kidding; by eleven-years-old Josh had become the best athlete in his class and one of the best baseball players in the entire twelve-and-under league in the county, and people said he might be better than the majority of fourteen-and-under players, too; by his freshman year of high school, his skills on the field and his general popularity saved him from juniors and seniors who normally indulged in hazing. Josh, accustomed to the role of dominate male, swaggered into college, where hazing a freshman, especially in baseball, was the norm and where Josh, again, because of his bravado and size, escaped anything that resembled bullying, though he always warmed the bench. Now in jail, where his size carried some meaning, but not much, and where his ability and popularity as a baseball player at OSU meant nothing, he had to rely on appearances to avoid criticism and bullying, and he presented himself as an arrogant, violent man who hated homosexuals, a man easily accepted by his neighbors in the county jail pod, where—with over one hundred men, some of whom had not seen sunlight or a woman in months—Josh now awaited trial.

When a guard, though, told Josh that he had a visitor when he knew it wasn't visiting hours and when his lawyer had told Josh that he wouldn't see him again until

week's end, his stomach felt as though he had slammed his truck's accelerator to the floor just as it began to descend one of the few steep hills back home. During the walk to meet Reverend Wells, Josh's hands and brow began to sweat, his legs not as sturdy as usual, and he walked carefully, without his swagger, but he did manage to hold his head high. He told himself to calm down, that he was meeting with his old preacher, a man who had known him since birth; partly he talked to himself this way so that he could be as honest with Reverend Wells as he had planned, and partly because his minor celebrity in jail, he suspected, wouldn't protect him if he didn't carry himself with confidence. So as he was led by the elbow down a few hallways past a number of cells, hardened men staring at him through tiny windows, Josh pretended to be bored, a little sleepy, his eyelids drooping.

Once Josh and his escort reached a white door with a viewing window at head height, not only did Josh's hands sweat, they shook. Through the window Josh saw Reverend Wells facing away from him, and Josh became aware, for the first time as an adult, of the Reverend's size: while he was a couple of inches shorter than Josh, he was broader, outweighing him by at least seventy pounds. Reverend Wells' bulk had always seemed benevolent to Josh. He had tossed Josh in the air and swung him round and round by the arms when he was a child, as though he weighed no more than a doll. The Rev was the only man whom Josh had allowed to plant a bearded and wet kiss goodnight on his cheek when he slept over at Eric's house, partly because of the reverend's sheer size—How could he stop him?—and endless good humor, which brought to mind an image of a countrified Santa. He seemed gigantic in the small, white, plain room, the lone rectangular table in the middle appearing flimsy compared to the Rev's meaty breadth.

The guard turned around and said, “Treat this like normal visitation. The same rules apply: no yelling and certainly no touching.” With a hand on the door’s handle, the guard looked at Josh intently, probably noticing Josh’s anxiety and misinterpreting it. “I mean it.” The guard opened the door and motioned Josh inside. Josh obeyed instantly, taking a few steps inside the room.

Reverend Wells, who unclasped his hands which had been behind his back, turned and walked around the table, presumably to greet Josh, the Rev’s face anxious, perhaps as anxious as Josh thought he himself must appear. It was lined with stress and worry, and possibly anger, the same kind of expression that Josh had seen on a number of coaches who wanted their players to improve and who, after exhausting several strategies—patient explanation, hundreds of drills practiced by rote that focused on basic technique, motivational speeches, fake and genuine tirades—aged visibly, no longer confident in their abilities to reach down into their players to grasp potentials waiting in the dark to be brought to light; it was as though their players’ failures had become their coaches’, and Reverend Wells, Josh knew, didn’t know what to expect from him anymore. The Rev’s visible confusion caused the Rev to pause, and he leaned against the table and folded his arms, as though his disappointment would not allow him to take another step in Josh’s direction.

“Mr. Wells,” the guard said, “I’ll be right outside. Remember the rules.”

The door clicked shut behind Josh. Reverend Wells cleared his throat and said, “Please have a seat.” He pulled out a chair for Josh, drew a small Bible from his pocket which he tossed onto the table, walked around the table and sat, at first leaning as far back in the chair as he could while looking at the floor. The chair creaked. When Josh

didn't move, he raised his eyes.

"Sit, Tenney," the guard outside commanded.

Moving helped Josh overcome his fear. For a moment, frozen in fear, he had imagined the Rev, whom he had always thought of as a gigantic teddy bear, striking him, Josh unable to defend himself due to the handcuffs he wore. Josh, after sitting, spoke first. "I'm so sorry, I never meant—"

"I think it's best that we pray first, Josh." The Rev leaned forward and slid the pocket-sized Bible across the table. "I would've liked to have join hands. I think it would've helped…" He paused as though rethinking what he wanted to say. "I think it would've helped both of us, but perhaps me more than you. Maybe holding onto that, however, will do. Do you mind?"

"Sure, anything." With both hands, Josh gingerly reached for the book, and though he could have easily held it in one hand beneath the table, he held it in both, his wrists resting on the table.

The Rev closed his eyes. "Lord, when I first knew we would be given this opportunity to meet, I wanted to read Josh the following words, not out of love but to cause him fear and guilt: *'Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.*'" After saying this, Reverend Wells gritted his teeth, and Josh, frightened, closed his eyes. "But to only read that much would be to take the verses out of context. It continues: *'On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.'* And that is why I'm here—to give him spiritual food and drink—and I

pray that you give me the strength to treat Josh with the love and respect each of your creatures deserves, and I pray that you, O Lord, will allow me not to see Josh as my enemy and that Josh will know that I do not wish for his head to be marked. I wish no harm to him. Instead, I pray that we can lift up our hands in prayer without anger or dispute, that we may follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth we may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, that we may be, as Paul writes, '*imitators of God as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us*.' In Jesus' name, amen."

When Josh opened his eyes, Reverend Wells was smiling wearily, his hands folded in front of him. "I apologize, Josh. For now, that's the best I can do. Perhaps before we leave we can pray together properly, but I think this has already helped. At least it's helped me. But before you say anything, there are a few things you should know." He cocked his head to the side and squinted. "First, though I'm technically here as your minister, I'm really here out of friendship to your father. Second, I've always found you to be an arrogant cuss and a poor influence on Eric, not a terrible one, but a poor one nonetheless. Not that I could have done anything about that. No, not with how close our families have been all these years. But it's something you should know. Third, what you say here carries some weight in what might happen to you. The victim's family, as the assistant DA has told me, has some say about the severity of your sentencing if you're found guilty. More than likely, from what he says, you will be."

Wide-eyed, Josh stuttered, "I-I-I never meant to hurt him. I didn't even know he was there, I swear. I was defending myself."

"From what? And does that even matter? Whether you meant to or not, you killed

him. You killed Eric, Josh. How can you look me in the eye? Just tell me what happened. From the beginning."

Josh, not yet feeling up to talking after the Reverend's prayer about what had occurred outside The Slant, began at the beginning instead, at the party, where he had realized that his life had taken a wrong turn at some intersection he could not name, that he'd lost Amy, from whom he hadn't heard since, that he didn't have a job he had counted on waiting for him after knowing he'd never have a career in baseball, that his grades were a little below average, partly because he had assumed he'd had that job and could coast, that now finding a job would be a challenge, that he hadn't put forth effort into anything, not even baseball, except possibly chasing girls, and even then, he had only chased the ones he had known wanted to be caught. He said it wasn't until that night that he realized how consistently lazy he had always been, and after the old farmer had warned Josh and Matt not to drive, a part of him had hoped that he'd shoot him accidentally or that the man might end up being right—maybe he could die later that night on the road, and possibly, if Matt had not been with him, that's how his life would've ended.

"I'm not trying to make you feel sorry for me, Rev, I'm really not," Josh said. "I don't deserve it. I just want you to know how I felt, how I've had time to think about it. I was angry, really angry. At the time, well, angry at everything, until I saw that farmer with the gun. Then I was mad at myself." Josh, the Bible still in his hands, gripped it hard, the new leather creaking. "But when I saw those cross dressers, something happened. I'm not sure what. It's like they were to blame. I have no idea why now. My life could never be anyone else's fault, not even queers. But at the time, I wanted to take

it out on somebody."

"Hence the bat," Reverend Wells said impassively, crossing his arms, as though what Josh had told him had no effect. He looked down at the table, pursed his lips, and nodded.

"No," Josh said, his voice rising. "No, goddammit."

"Tenney," the guard outside yelled. "Cool it or you're done."

Josh leaned forward, the Bible still in his hands, held up in his line his sight, just above it Reverend Wells staring at him as though he had heard enough. "I'm sorry, Reverend Wells," he said quietly. "I wish I hadn't've brought it along. If I hadn't…" He leaned back. "Look, I was drunk. If it hadn't been for that bat, that freak would'a beaten the crap out of me and that would've been that."

"But you did bring it. Why?"

"I don't know."

"You've already admitted that you wanted to take your anger out on someone, Josh, and that little trick of yours that everyone's heard on the news…well, it's a ridiculous defense." Reverend Wells looked away toward the guard, and Josh sensed that the conversation was drawing to a close, the Rev's patience almost gone.

"I didn't plan on hurting him. I was just going to scare him."

"Come on, Josh. You're going to hold onto that Bible, and after everything you've told me, you're still going to claim innocence? How were you defending yourself if you were trying to scare him? You said your life is your fault. Look at where you are. Look at how improbable it is that you and your childhood best friend, who just happened to be gay, were at the same place, and you end up hitting him with a bat."

"I swung at that freak," Josh said, tears in his eyes. "I didn't know Eric was even there."

"I thought you didn't mean to hurt anyone?"

Josh dropped the Bible onto the table and raised his hands up in despair. "I don't know, okay? I don't know. Maybe I did want to hurt him. I sure as shit wanted him to shut his queer mouth. Hell, he acted like he wanted me to swing. But you have to believe me. I didn't know Eric was there." Josh, no longer able to fight his tears, let them fall, the first time he had cried since leaving The Slant's parking lot.

"Why should I believe you?"

"Because. Just because." Josh shrugged, not sure the conversation was worth continuing. He wiped away a tear, picked up the Bible, dropped it, and left it there. "Maybe because Eric and I were such good friends, and because you guys were so much alike. He always believed me when I got into trouble and said it wasn't my fault even when it was. This is all my fault, but dammit, I didn't mean to hurt Eric." Josh stood and called for the guard. He understood why the Rev had said what he had and why the Rev couldn't forgive or believe him, but he couldn't help speaking his mind, even though he knew that speaking his innermost thought might be unfair, that it might seem an appeal to guilt: "Maybe if you believed me, Eric would, too." When he was at the door, Josh called over his shoulder, without looking at the Rev: "I don't give a shit about my sentence, Rev." He found it surprising that what he had spoken was the truth, found relief in voicing it, and he felt something he could not name wilt inside him. "I just want you to believe me."

A chair screeched, and Reverend Wells asked, “Josh, would you like to sit down again and pray before you go?”

David

David, sitting in a booth and staring at a growing ring of condensation that his glass of iced tea left on the table, waited for Bryce at a busy Mexican restaurant. To curb his hunger, which stress aggravated, he munched on warm salty tortilla chips and mild watered-down salsa while he waited. Barely tasting his chips and barely aware of the smell of fajita beef and vegetables sizzling in a skillet, David thought of Josh and the changes his best friend's son had undergone in the short time he had been in jail. When Josh had entered the room, it occurred to David that Josh's signature walk, though hampered by ankle cuffs, might never return—that lazy, arrogant stroll that David could recognize from afar, from the bleachers where Burt, Leslie, Marta, and he had watched their sons take the field, loping, the players in their uniforms so homogenous as to be almost indistinguishable, even Eric whom David might not have recognized had he not been his son. But not Josh, who'd loaf to the mound, swaying from side to side, shoulders dipping, hips at a slight cant with each step, the strut of a boy who might not look for trouble but who would welcome it when it came. Josh had always exaggerated his gait during a game, David assumed, to rile his opponents or intimidate them. Off the field it was muted but still undeniably there, even in church, a murmur of it, as though each step had been a shrug when he had walked down the aisle to the altar for communion. In that tiny white visiting room, however, not a hint had remained. He had shuffled in, his body rigid, and he had shuffled out, slumped, exhausted from stifled weeping.

Bryce, also, was easy to recognize when he approached the hostess: a large man, not only tall like Josh but thicker, a former athlete if David had to guess, which he had

not quite registered at Eric's funeral, and running a bit to fat now that he was, David guessed, in his mid-thirties, more husky than muscular. But David could also see that Bryce had lost a little weight since first meeting him. Bryce, though, did his best not to draw attention to himself. Before he spoke to the hostess, he removed his sunglasses, slipped both of his hands in his pockets, and drew his shoulders together as though he were attempting to appear small and nonthreatening. Josh, had he been in Bryce's place, probably would have loomed over the attractive young lady and winked.

The hostess, after Bryce spoke to her, turned in David's direction and squinted, and David raised his arm and waved at Bryce, who smiled and thanked the hostess before walking down the aisle. Again David noticed a difference between Josh and Bryce. Bryce certainly didn't strut; instead, he nodded here and there and gave those he passed quick smiles, a self-conscious habit David knew other large men devloped to reassure anyone who momentarily gawked at their size.

David stood, shook Bryce's hand, and asked him to have a seat.

"How was the drive, Reverend?" Bryce asked. Seemingly nervous, he didn't give David a chance to respond. "Thank you for coming. I still feel bad that you drove all this way. We could've met in the middle."

"No, no, this is fine," David said. "I had other business to attend to and the drive gave me time to think." David looked at the detritus of chips on the table, apologized, brushed them away, and asked the waitress to bring more. "Forgive me, Bryce, but I always like to get any formalities out of the way so that we can talk as friends."

"Sure, I can understand that."

Except to order, neither of them spoke, and David waited patiently for Bryce to

speak up—the wait staff sang Feliz Cumpleanos at a nearby table—and when he didn't, David smiled and broke the uncomfortable silence a few moments after the singing and clapping had ceased. "Well, okay." He cleared this throat and spread his hands. "Let's start with why you asked me here."

Bryce broke a chip in half and stared at a sombrero mounted on the wall between them. "I've been asked to ask you to speak at a protest."

"By whom?"

"The Red River Alliance. It's an LGBT organization, one I belong to."

"I'm guessing because of the video?" Bryce nodded. "And what will you protest?"

Bryce gave him the details, explained where it was—the very parking lot where Eric had been struck—and why: as the authorities had always claimed in the past that they did not want traffic interrupted by protests in public spaces. "Besides," Bryce explained, "on private property we can protest as we please without fearing arrest."

"You do understand that this is an awkward request—to join you in protesting the charges against a young man I know quite well, a young man whose father I am good friends with? Actually, I spoke with Josh Tenney before meeting you. He's truly penitent, and I think for my peace of mind, spiritually and personally, I have to do my best to forgive him." David remembered the anguish on Josh's face, knew that he feared hell, and also knew that his fear had not been unfounded; Josh, already, was in hell, a personal one from which David was not sure he could save him.

Bryce looked at the ceiling and wiped his mouth. "I didn't know that. This is awkward. Maybe I shouldn't have asked you."

The waitress set their plates in front of them, a crispy, deep-fried chimichanga for David, enchiladas smothered with green sauce for Bryce. When Bryce only stared at his food, David recognized a torment in Bryce similar to the one he had seen in Josh. David smiled and said, "I've been asked to speak at many different functions over the years, but I think you're the first person who hasn't wanted to ask." David reached across the table, put a hand on Bryce's forearm, squeezed, and leaned back. "Please. Something's obviously bothering you. What is it?"

"It's something you said during your sermon. That you blamed yourself for what happened. You thought you could have prevented it."

"Yes?"

"It wasn't your fault. You only think you could have stopped it. I know I could have." Bryce looked him in the eyes, and for the first time David saw anger and disgust in Bryce that had turned inward. "I goaded him into swinging. Remember how you dared your congregation to be Christians?" David nodded. "I dared Josh to swing. I pushed him and pushed him, said things to provoke him. If I had just left him alone, none of this would have happened. So, really, it's not that I could have stopped it. Hell, I caused it."

David sighed and thought, I don't think Eric could have chosen a better friend. He could see that Bryce's guilt haunted him, had caused him to lose sleep and weight—Bryce's eyes bleary with bags underneath them, his face slimmer and more haggard than at Eric's funeral. David had always felt as though his first priority as a minister was to provide comfort to others, and here was Bryce, a man he barely knew, a gay man who, if the stories he had read online were true—he now suspected they were—had protected those whom he felt could not stand up for themselves, those two men that Josh had

initially frightened. Now Bryce was attempting to comfort him as though he felt responsible for David's guilt and self-blame.

"I don't believe that's true, Bryce. Are you responsible for the attitude our culture has toward gays? That's the culture in which Josh felt comfortable saying those things. You can't take any of the blame for that. Did you bring a weapon with you to the parking lot? Did you swing the bat? No. Were you angry? Yes. But should you take all the blame for that as well? Certainly not. Josh told me some of what was said between you two. But all of this—the anger, the guilt, the blame…it can't explain what happened. You aren't to blame for Eric's death. I think we should both forgive ourselves. We should move forward. Maybe we should do our best to create a culture of understanding."

Bryce blinked back tears and said, "Thank you."

"I can tell you don't quite believe me. But I mean it. I do have trouble forgiving myself. I do think I had a part to play. Many people played a part, I guess, many who weren't even there, some even long dead. But I know out of all the people I could choose to blame, and there are many I could if I allowed myself to become angry, I know that I don't blame you."

Bryce remained silent. It seemed as though all he could manage was to sit quietly so that he wasn't overcome with emotion.

"I will speak at the protest on one condition," David said, hoping that, if he returned to the immediate business at hand, Bryce would recover. "I'll have to say that I'm not there to protest what Josh is charged with. I'll need to be clear about that. But I will speak in support of gay rights generally. That's something I know I can do."

Bryce nodded and, before lifting his first forkful of enchilada to his mouth, said,

“I’m sure I can get that to work.” David could tell that something within Bryce had begun to heal.

Marta

Marta explained to Leslie, over coffee in Marta's kitchen, a long habit they had resumed this afternoon, that the looks had begun two weeks ago, and they had begun, Marta guessed, innocently enough: people stared at her a moment too long, expressions of sympathy, worry, or maybe blame or guilt, perhaps wondering what she might be feeling, perhaps staring at what they interpreted as a spectacle. At the time she had considered that her imagination might be running away with her and attempting to create any reason for her not to forget Eric, as though that were possible even if others had graciously pretended the tragedy had not occurred, which again didn't seem possible. But if those looks were not in her imagination, perhaps looking at her was natural; her neighbors should be concerned. She could no longer deny the reality that people, in fact, had stared at her yesterday, the day after David had delivered his sermon, and that the looks had changed: at the grocery store, the used bookstore, the dry cleaners, even at an intersection where she had waited for one of the three stoplights in town to turn green, a pimply-faced teenager, eye-balling her and revving his motor, behind the wheel of a late-sixties model muscle car primed but without paint—at all these places people had glared at her as though she no longer belonged.

Earlier at the grocery store, with a freezer door propped open with her hip, Marta had ogled a pound of King Crab legs, ridiculously expensive but perhaps worth the indulgence if their taste allowed her to forget her grief momentarily. She had heard familiar laughter at the end of the aisle, surely a couple of the gals from church, and grabbed the over-priced crab. Looking forward to talking to the girls, she closed the door

and wheeled her cart around in their direction, but their laughter, after she closed the door, stopped.

Christy, a frizzy-haired red head with the body of a match, and Tracy, a brunette shaped like a bottle of syrup, squinted, frowned, said their goodbyes too each other and headed in opposite directions, shoving their carts away as though they were determined to commit a hit-and-run to avoid speaking a word to Marta.

"They didn't," said Leslie, frowning. She took both of Marta's hands to comfort her and continued to listen.

The young cashier, too, had pursed her lips and hadn't responded to any of Marta's attempts at small talk. Though she'd had other errands, Marta went home, and after she tucked her groceries away but left the crab out to thaw, she reprimanded herself and went back out. At the dry cleaners, Allie had brought David's robes to the counter with a smile and asked Marta how she and David were. When Marta answered and explained that David was in Oklahoma City to speak with Josh—why she had told Allie that was still beyond her—Allie's smile crumpled. She pointed behind her to the machines in back and said that she had to get back to work.

"Until I'd mentioned Josh, it was like she had forgotten what'd happened," Marta said. "That was actually nice, but once she remembered—oh no, she didn't want a damn thing to do with me."

"Oh, hon, I bet after what happened at the store you were ready to knock her ass-over-tits, weren't you?" Leslie asked.

"Well, no," said Marta, wondering whether Leslie really thought she couldn't keep a lid on her temper. "I gave her the benefit. She was at work." Marta sipped her

coffee and continued. “So I leave, but she forgets the receipt, and I go back in to get it, and I hear Allie yelling over the machines: ‘So Marta said I was melodramatic in front of everyone, the whole women’s group, but after what’s happened, now we know what’s what and who the devil has by the sleeve.’”

Leslie gasped. “She didn’t.” Marta nodded and blew into her cup of coffee. “That sweaty bitch.”

“It was over six years ago when I dressed her down,” Marta said and shook her head. “So the devil has me by the sleeve….What melodramatic nonsense.”

The worst, though, had been Gladys, the owner of Gladys’ Used Books, a large woman, one of the widest in town, so introverted that she hardly ever spoke, but she did speak to Marta when she blew in, as long as she discussed books and books only. Marta had been a regular paying customer, not a browser like many people who wandered in, ever since she had moved to town and noticed how anemic the library’s selection was, and she regarded the musty shop as a refuge from the judgmental nonsense of David’s congregation and from the nitpicking complaints of her choir. But even Gladys, the butt of many jokes, whom Marta had defended, had turned her back on Marta when she walked through the door, and Marta knew well that Gladys had few customers and even fewer conversations. If a woman as ostracized as Gladys wouldn’t talk to her, who the hell would?

“Well, I’ll always be here for you, hon,” Leslie said.

“And I appreciate that. But I want to tell you something so you don’t get the wrong idea, and I want to do it in person. I may not get another opportunity for quite some time.”

"What?"

Her hands suddenly cold, Marta gripped her cup of coffee. "I'm going to Missouri to stay with my parents for a while."

"You mean just until all this blows over?" Leslie asked. As though the answer were obvious, she said, "Well, I'll miss you, especially since we're just now talking again."

"I'll miss you, too, but I don't know how long I'll be there. I might not be back."

Leslie leaned back and crossed her arms. "So you and David are leaving? Why didn't David mention that on Sunday?" Marta blew into her coffee and looked out the window at a male cardinal in the bushes. She heard his call and saw David's car pull into the driveway. "You're leaving him," Leslie said. "Have ya'all talked about this?" Marta shook her head. "I have trouble imagining how you two must feel"—Leslie looked toward the garage when Marta heard the garage bay door open, and Leslie leaned in close, whispering as though David might hear her through the wall—"but don't you two need each other more than ever right now?"

"I don't know what to say to that," Marta said. "I wish I had more time to explain."

When the door from the garage to the kitchen opened and David walked in, Leslie stood, greeted, and hugged him, David returning the hug with one arm, the other still holding his overnight bag. "It's good to see you talking again," said David, smiling. Leslie grabbed her jacket from the back of a chair and slid it on. "Leaving already? Heck, I just got here."

"Oh, I have errands to run." Leslie pulled up her sleeve and looked at her watch.

“And if I don’t start right now, then the stores will close before I’m finished. Marta, you give me a call, and soon.”

Marta remained seated to accept Leslie’s hug and watched Leslie kiss David on the cheek before leaving.

After the door closed, David said, “I wanted to tell her how my meeting with Josh went, but I guess I’ll tell her and Burt later.” He held up his overnight bag. “I’ll put this up and have some coffee with you. I need some after that long drive.”

Marta had grown so accustomed to David’s heavy-footed walk that she usually didn’t notice its reverberation through the floor clinking dishes in the china cabinet in the hall, but she noticed his footsteps now as they receded to their bedroom, where she had packed two suitcases and left them open for David to see. She had left them there because she’d had no idea how to broach the subject without sounding angry, and she hoped that the sight of her luggage would shock him into anger; if it did, she’d feel justified in becoming angry herself, which she knew well she already was—angry at herself for being oblique and less than honest, angry that she felt so guilty when she knew she had made the right decision.

For a moment Marta felt and heard nothing except for the cardinal’s song outside, but then she recognized David’s step, louder and approaching more quickly than usual. When David walked into the kitchen, he appeared worried, eyebrows furrowed. But his lips weren’t pursed, and he didn’t pace, both good signs that the conversation would remain civil, even though Marta wasn’t sure she wanted to be civil. He opened his mouth twice as though to speak, but instead of speaking, he poured himself a cup of coffee, topped Marta’s cup off, adding an ice cube to hers, and sat.

"So," he said, "want to tell me what you're up to?" He sipped his coffee and waited.

"I'm going to see my parents."

"Today?"

"Yes, today."

"When will you be back?" David shifted in his seat, squared his shoulders as though to absorb a blow, and looked around the room. Marta, now inexplicably calm, could tell that her calm worried him, and it worried her, too.

"I don't know. I might not."

David threw his hands up and let them fall to his thighs. "Is there anything I can do to change your mind?"

Marta hesitated, seriously thinking about his question and realizing she was unaware of anything he could say that would change her mind. David, though, could be persuasive, sometimes when she least expected it, and she decided she didn't want to leave any room for hope.

"No."

"So that's it then? Even after I've done what you've asked?"

"I didn't ask you to do anything."

"Yes, you did. You said that I hadn't educated our congregation…"

"It's so much more complicated than that, David. Besides, isn't that the problem—that I've had to ask you to do anything? You've always been so immoveable, so complacent. If I don't push you to act, you don't do anything. It's how everyone is around here." Marta curled her lip—she couldn't help it—and exaggerated her drawl in a

low voice: “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”—her voice returned to normal—“but we shouldn’t wait till something’s broken to act.”

“Well, I’m sorry, I really am, that the home we’ve made here is such a disappointment to you.”

“It’s more than that, too.”

“More than what?”

“Oh, David, it’s not just the place.” Standing straight, she threw her arms in the air, knowing that she appeared just as frustrated as David had, looked at the ceiling and said, “It’s a bit of everything. This can’t be all there is to it.”

“All to what?”

“To my life. I didn’t expect my life to revolve around church, though I don’t know why I didn’t. I should have. I should have known I wouldn’t have felt like anything more than a pastor’s wife, and I guess that was fine while raising the boys. Between the boys, choir, volunteering, I thought my life was full. You’d convinced me of that, and to be honest, I enjoyed a lot of it. But not anymore, not with all that’s happened. I’ve got to do something for myself. I don’t know what, but something. Do you remember me asking the other night, ‘What am I supposed to do now?’” David nodded. “I really don’t know. But whatever it is, I do know it won’t be here. I’ve been here too long. God, haven’t you?” When he didn’t answer, as she knew he wouldn’t, she continued. “I’m glad you stood up for what you believe in, but it’s not enough. Or maybe it’s too much with all this attention. I don’t know. I just know I have to get away from all this.”

David nodded, drank the rest of his coffee in one slug, which must have burned, stood, slid the keys off the hook on the wall, and opened the door to the garage. Marta

laughed and said, “Isn’t that a little childish, taking the keys?”

David didn’t turn around when he spoke. “Your car needs an oil change and the tires checked.” He closed the door softly behind him.

Marta let out a shaky breath and wiped away a tear, somewhat confused as to why she felt disappointed that he hadn’t fought with her harder or longer. But had she, really, expected anything else?

Levi

Levi stroked Freedom's calf, which was partially covered by a bed sheet. Music from the bar's jukebox downstairs trickled up, but only the prolonged notes of a deep bass and the highs of cymbal strikes and every now and then the screech of vocals, Janice Joplin's perhaps, were audible through the floor. Freedom withdrew her leg under the sheet and sat up, squinting at the clock on her nightstand.

"It's a little past three, Levi," Freedom said. "Time to kick you out. Grace'll be here a little before four."

Grace, Freedom's daughter, at thirteen already a replica of her mother and more ornery, had taken a liking to Levi. Though Levi still felt sleepy, though he didn't want to move and knew he had thirty more minutes before he needed to do anything but lie there and breathe deeply in relaxed satisfaction before Grace came home from school, he didn't argue. He wanted to remain on Freedom's good side. Besides, he had learned that if he dawdled, Freedom would literally kick him out of bed, using her feet to drum on his back. Without replying, Levi got up and dressed.

"Are you staying for supper?" Freedom asked. For the past few evenings, Levi had shared supper with Freedom and Grace—and the suppers had been a good time, much more relaxed than at home—before starting his shift downstairs. Grace seemed to enjoy as much as Freedom the novelty of having someone new with whom to speak, if not more. Grace's childlike excitement and her friendship with Freedom caused Levi to long for a playful childhood he had never experienced, not with a straight-laced minister for a father and a hard academic taskmaster for a mother, who had never been pleased

with his lack of interest in school. He had never viewed his parents as friends, while Freedom seemed to think that her main role as a parent was to be a friend first, which seemed to work: while Grace certainly talked back every now and then, she seemed more light-hearted than spiteful, and Freedom took it in stride, even more sarcastic then her daughter. Grace did whatever her mother asked without whining about it, a feat Levi had had trouble accomplishing as a child, though he had rarely challenged his parents about anything.

"As much as I'd like to," Levi said, "I better see how my folks are." Because of his hours—sleeping late at home and working late at the bar—Levi had seen little of his parents, especially after last Wednesday night when he'd worked up the courage to hug Freedom from behind as she washed pint glasses and kiss her neck. But when he had had lunch with his parents before shuttling off to Freedom's bed, the same tension that he had felt before his parent's fight had returned, perhaps never having dissipated. If anything, the tension had grown more palpable, and his mother had behaved as cordially with his father as she had with Levi, which didn't say much—or perhaps said too much.

"Okay, but I know a girl who's going to sulk and take it out of me when she finds you're not here," Freedom said. The look in her eye meant that she didn't care whether she was attempting to appeal to Levi's sense of guilt, if it meant he'd stay.

"If it's not busy when my shift starts…"

"Oh, it won't be."

"…then we'll see about getting her to play some shuffle board." Levi leaned over the bed and gave Freedom a peck on the cheek. "Kicking my butt seems to put her in a better mood, just like another girl I know."

"You mean Duane?" asked Freedom, who smacked him on the butt as he walked away.

Levi flinched and held his rear. "Thanks a lot."

***

Levi smelled his father's pipe tobacco through the storm door's window, which was cracked open a few inches. He loved the smell. It evoked memories as far off as early childhood, when the family camped close to the Petrified Forest, where Levi, in the light of a campfire, chased lizards with tails that would fall off in the dust after he caught them—and it evoked memories as recent as a few years ago, when his father had bought him his legal first beer after he had turned twenty-one. Remembering what he thought earlier, at Freedom's, Levi realized that his father had been a friend to him, just not as close as Freedom and Grace were, because his father spent so much time alone in his study, writing sermons and smoking his pipe, as Levi guessed he was doing now.

When Levi walked into the living room, his father surprised him and so did the strength of the tobacco's smell; the smoke burned his nostrils and filled the room, a large thick cloud, down to his shoulders, which Levi ducked under as he walked deeper into the cloud as though he were a stooped old man. While he enjoyed the smell and preferred the scent—but not its taste— to cigarettes, the reek was overwhelming. Levi might as well have walked into The Stables on a busy night when the fans weren't working, the smoke possibly thicker here.

"Lord, mom's going to chew you up and spit you out," said Levi, attempting to

wave the smoke away but only stirring it.

"No, she won't," said his father, who was sitting in his recliner beneath the haze. "She won't even know the difference."

Levi scoffed and sat on the couch. "You sure have grown ballsy lately, Pop. What gives?"

His father frowned, possibly uncomfortable with the way Levi spoke, and told him what had happened. As Levi listened to a short explanation—his father had never given many details about his marriage, and tonight was no different, the facts only—Levi got up and poured two bourbons on the rocks, which came second nature to him. If a stranger had told him a similar story at a bar, Levi would have slid a drink over and said, "On the house," the drink the man's first step to recovery and Levi's first step to comfort the man. But his father sat up, slid the drink farther away on the coffee table, and said, "Too early yet for me." Levi downed his and gladly sipped his father's, too, while his father finished explaining.

"I'm sorry, Dad," Levi said. "What now?"

"With your mother? I expect I'll hear from her in a few days, but I don't know. But I do expect at any time to get a phone call saying that I'm suspended. That's what frustrates me. If she's so sick of being a pastor's wife, well, all she has to do is wait a while, and she won't have to worry about that anymore. What she doesn't understand—and that's because I haven't told her, which makes me an idiot—is that I'll do just about anything she'd ask to stay with her, and that includes not being a pastor. Anywhere. I'm a little old to learn something new, but I'm sure I can." Levi, shocked, stared wide-eyed. "I'll always have my faith, whether I'm preaching it or not," his father added. "We can

move. I don't care."

"You think that's it, though? You think she's just tired of the church?"

"No, there's more to it than that. But you don't need to know, and I don't feel right complaining to you about your mother."

"I have a half a mind to say a few things about her…"

"Well, don't, Levi." For a moment, he appeared upset, maybe angry, and massaged his forehead with the heel of his hand. "She's my wife." His father got up, mumbling "Maybe it isn't too early," and poured himself a bourbon. "Levi, how about you tell me some good news. How's Freedom doing?"

Levi had no idea how his father knew about Freedom, and now he understood why his father hadn't wished to share much information about his marriage; Levi, after all, wasn't sure what to say about Freedom. His hesitancy prompted his father to speak: "People talk, even to a minister, but it's nothing to worry about. Humor me. If you two have any problems, trust me—they're small in comparison."

"Okay," Levi said. "Freedom's great. She's gotta wonderful sense of humor, works hard when she has a mind to…"

"Sounds like somebody else I know," his father said with a smile.

"…and Grace is a treat. She's a cool kid. I really like them both, and working there is mostly fun."

His father sat up, cocked his head, and studied Levi's face. "Your shiner is healing nicely."

While lightly touching the skin under his eye, Levi said, "Yeah, 3-D—Duane, I mean—apologized. He's all right when he's sober. No one really mentions it anymore,

which I appreciate."

"We don't either. Would you like to?"

"No, I guess not. I miss him though. I think I'd miss him more if I went back to Dallas."

"Fair enough. Is that why you're still here?"

"Yeah, and for you and well, mom, if she were here, and for Freedom, too."

His father slapped his thighs, stood, and stretched, exhaling deeply. "Well, let's open up some windows and take this party outside." He winked and added, "I've rebelled enough for one evening, and I think I should behave as if your mother'll be back soon. I don't want her angry with me as soon as she steps through the door. With any luck, she's changed her mind and already on her way back."

At the front door, he squeezed Levi's shoulder and said, "I'm glad you're here. I don't know what I'd do without you." He smiled, his eyes red, his expression exhausted. On the porch, Levi texted Freedom that he couldn't make it in to work and briefly typed why, to which Freedom replied to give his father a hug for her.

They spoke for hours on the porch, reminiscing, sometimes about Eric, memories they shied away from but eventually returned to, sometimes sipping bourbon, sometimes water, and for a while, when they laughed, Levi knew that anyone who watched them would not guess what they had experienced recently. They could have been anyone, a plumber and son, or a mechanic and son, or a man somewhat past middle age entertaining a young neighbor. But if people looked more closely, had they been on the porch studying his father's eyes, they'd see a pain return there, at first every few minutes, then more quickly, between breaths, then at each heartbeat, until it was constant, the night

growing late and the sky full of stars above them, and his father's eyes appearing more frantic as he searched for something down the dark road, headlights perhaps, that would bring what was left of his small family home to him. Levi hoped for the same thing. When he could no longer distract his father, they went to bed, where Levi, on the edge of sleep and a little drunk, fantasized that his mother had been driving to search for Eric and had found him, and they'd all have breakfast in the morning, Freedom and Grace included—coffee, orange juice, eggs, waffles, bacon, toast, the works.

David

Although David had been told that the protest's site was a parking lot on private property, the information had not quite registered until he slowly drove by the lot, studying it, where around one hundred people milled about, only a few individuals appearing as though they would participate in a protest. Instead, most were dressed and behaved as though the protest were a party, and perhaps it was a party: some were dressed in drag, some wore bright rainbow-colored clothing, and some were dressed business-casually. A few cars were parked in the lot, but most of it was open space. Banners lined the perimeter of the lot, and balloons blew in the wind, bobbing up and down, tied to a line both above and below the banners. A number of tables had been set up, with coolers and, he supposed, containers of food on top of them. Close to the entrance of the club stood a lectern, which seemed out of place at what appeared to be a festive event, perhaps the most colorful and diverse church potluck dinner he had ever witnessed.

David smiled as he drove past, feeling slightly less nervous than five minutes before. He had worried, and still worried, that what he had written wouldn't be well-received. While almost positive that nothing he had written would cause offense, he had little confidence in the secular speech he had composed, because he had never written one before, a fact he had found curious while writing, the task harder than he had imagined. Would his jokes work? Would he sound too formal in such an informal environment? He had no idea, but because the event, so far, seemed so relaxed, he felt a weight lift and briefly considered taking off his tie. But he rejected the idea. He had a job

to do, and perhaps he'd remove it after he spoke.

He parked around the corner, half a block away, and began the short walk there, remembering what Josh had told him and wondering whether he had walked the same route. He thought it likely and cleared his head, not wanting to think about what had happened to Eric but unable to dismiss him from his mind. Music played, nothing he knew, with a strong bass beat but not loudly. At the edge of the lot, he read handmade signs that some people were already shouldering and holding aloft, though the protest had not officially begun: "The Gay Agenda: 1. Equality 2. See Item One"; "How Can Discrimination Be Legal?"; "We Want To Be Miserable, Too." After David read, "If God Hates Fags, Then Why Are We So Cute?" he looked away, in the opposite direction. Across the street in a much smaller parking lot were another group of people, dressed as anyone he might expect to meet anywhere on a Saturday afternoon—in blue jeans and T-shirts, mostly black, white, or gray in color, drab in comparison. They also held signs: "Children Need a Mom and Dad"; "Two Men Are Friends, Not Spouses"; and "Homosexuality Is A Threat To National Security." Although he saw more signs, the last one he read was "God Hates Fags."

Placing both hands on his hips, David looked for someone to stare down, but no one across the street looked in his direction. The counter-protestors looked at and spoke to one another as though they were bored. So he turned to the protesters and noticed that they, too, ignored the counter-protestors. David wondered how often both groups saw one another and wondered how familiar they found each other's faces. Did their eyes meet at grocery stores, at malls, at the movies? If so, did they glare? Or was there no recognition outside the context of the protests, individuals from either group passing by completely

unaware of the other's existence? He then realized that there was no visible tension or anger, because they had protested and counter-protested so often, the fact evident in the signs they carried; there was no need for them to speak or recognize the other's existence except by carrying signs, their dialogue conducted on cheap cardboard that might be revised if someone happened to say something new—and two signs even recognized this, one for each group: "God Hates Signs" and "Gays Hate Signs," both in red lettering. There was, however, a difference: the protestors engaged each other with excitement and affection—laughing, smiling, hugging, kissing, dancing—whereas across the street, the counter-protestors looked as though they had started a shift at a job they found drab and meaningless, as though they had to show up but didn't want to.

"Excuse me," someone said behind David. David turned. A man, dressed similarly to himself, who had sandy blond hair, blue eyes, and a slim build, offered his hand. "Are you David Wells?"

"Yes," David said, shaking his hand. Self-consciously, he asked, "Is it that obvious?"

"Nick Barnett," he said and pointed to his own tie. "Dead giveaway. Also"—he leaned toward David and pretended to whisper—"you were staring at the enemy." Leaning back, he added, "Careful. You may turn into a pillar of salt." Nick placed a hand on his own chest. "Oh, wait. According to them, that's if they look over here. Ha!"

David smiled, not knowing what to say, and cleared his throat. "Is Bryce here?"

"Sure he is," Nick said, lifting up a line with a banner attached to it that read *Red River Alliance.* "Come on in and we'll find him."

David ducked under the line, now a part of the protest but somehow feeling

outside of it, a stranger to people who obviously knew one another well. Those near him, who didn't know him from Adam, smiled and nodded.

"I'm sure he's near the food," Nick said. "He usually is." He pointed. "Yup, there he is, chowing down." David didn't yet see him. Nick looked up at David, and as they walked around a large group of men in drag, Nick seemed to know what David had been asking himself earlier, as though anyone who first attended one of their protests had the same questions. "The protest is officially only two hours long, with a few different speakers, but we make it an all-day event anyway. Think of it as a tailgate party before a football game." David had never tailgated, and although the reference didn't comfort him, he still appreciated the effort—not that David needed comforting. He thought, perhaps, that he wouldn't have felt nervous at all, had he not had to speak later. "Hey, Bryce," Nick called.

David finally spotted Bryce when he stood. Bryce smiled and waved, a paper plate in his hand. When David shook Bryce's hand, he noticed that Bryce's plate was loaded with cubed cheese, sliced pickles, grapes, cantaloupe, and sliced deli meats.

"You're looking well, Bryce," David said. It had only been five days since they had met, and Bryce, his face fuller, had already regained some of his lost weight, and it looked as though he had been sleeping well, the bags under his eyes smaller and lighter in color.

"You, too," Bryce said.

David knew, though, that Bryce had lied. David knew how he appeared. Without Marta at home to keep him in line, he had stayed up too late, sipping bourbon and writing—both the speech he'd soon deliver and Sunday's sermon, perhaps the last

sermon he'd write for his church—still awake when Levi came home after the bar had closed. In bed, usually there by three or three-thirty in the morning after drinking more bourbon with Levi as a nightcap, he had tossed and turned, seeking the warmth of Marta's body, his stomach upset and his heartburn flaring up from eating too many ancient frozen pizzas and burritos that he had found at the back of the freezer. David had averaged four hours of sleep each night since Marta had left, and she hadn't yet returned David's calls. David certainly knew how he appeared.

"So are you ready to convince the masses that we deserve equal rights?" Nick asked.

Bryce laughed at Nick's blunt question, turning red. David scratched his head and gestured toward the group across the street. "Do you think anyone can convince them?"

"That's why you're here," Nick said, his face open, perhaps surprised that David suggested that he couldn't convince them of anything. He then elbowed him. "No one expects it to happen today." Clapping his hands, Nick added, "I'll let you guys catch up and hassle the other speakers. You know"—he made a fist and pumped it—"get them riled up." He offered his hand to David again, and they shook. "Thank you so much for coming, Reverend Wells."

"Call me David, Nick."

After Nick walked away, Bryce asked, "Are you nervous?"

Nodding, David said, "A little bit, yes."

"Maybe this will make you feel better: you'll be speaking last, and by the time you do, your delivery won't matter. Your content might not either. We'll cheer anyway."

"Because you'll be tired of listening and glad it's almost over, or because

everyone'll feel motivated?"

Bryce laughed. "Maybe both, and yeah, everyone looks forward to the after-parties."

Bryce

When Bryce looked at Reverend Wells, he thought of Eric and of how nervous Chance had said Eric had been while waiting for the show to begin. While Reverend Wells did appear nervous, Bryce suspected he was more confident than his son. The reverend's exhausted appearance, though, concerned him. A few days ago, the reverend's body had seemed natural to him, as though he carried it with ease, the heft of it comfortable to him and somehow comforting to Bryce. Now he appeared only fat and tired, reminiscent of Eric's face when he was drunk, his face bloated. Bryce suddenly wanted to show Reverend Wells that, while he and his friends held their beliefs with conviction, they also had a good time and a sense of humor, a sense of humor that the counter-protestors sometimes shared.

Across the street a red-headed and burley man holding an unamplified megaphone stepped out of a van that had just pulled up, and Bryce saw an opportunity to show Reverend Wells what he had just been thinking.

"Here, this is something you don't want to miss," Bryce said. He led Reverend Wells to the sound station, about ten feet away from the podium. To Kirby, the disc jockey at The Slant, a freckled and balding man in his early-forties, Bryce said, "It's close to time. I saw him pull up."

Kirby whistled, and some of the people spread out so that, from the table, Kirby, Bryce, and Reverend Wells had a clear line of sight across the street. And, sure enough, as soon as a path cleared, as Bryce expected, the folks across the street perked up, waved their signs, and the man with the megaphone raised it.

"Hit it, Kirby," Bryce said.

The music grew in volume, thunderous, and the counter-protestors gestured emphatically, cupping their mouths and yelling, or waving their arms, or pumping their signs up and down. The red-head spoke through his megaphone; he could tell by the way the man had leaned back, seeming to bellow through it. But Bryce couldn't hear anything he said.

"Give 'em a little more," Bryce yelled to Kirby.

"I know what I'm doing better than you do, Bryce," Kirby yelled back. He turned the knob farther to the right, and the counter-protestors appeared to yell even louder, their faces turning red, and Bryce, far-sighted, which was the reason why he served as a lookout every now and then, could see veins in their necks now, swollen with the effort to be heard over the music. But they stopped shouting and gesturing after a moment. Some smiled, shook their heads, and looked at one another; others covered their ears and faced away from the blaring music, and the red-head with the megaphone snapped his fingers as though to say, "Oh, shucks." The volume then returned to normal, one yell following the relative silence: "Gay music sucks!" to which Kirby responded with one more short blast of music.

Astonished and with a pained expression, Reverend Wells said, "That was really loud." Bryce explained that they had more than one set of speakers, and the set Kirby had cranked faced the counter-protestors, not the event. "They're still way too loud."

"What I really wanted you to see was that they don't seem to have hard feelings about all this," Bryce said. "It's really strange. Did you notice?"

Bryce watched Reverend Wells absorb the information. "I suppose you're right."

"So in case you're nervous about them…"

"Oh no, not at all, but thank you, I do see your point."

"Right, but you should know that we can't keep the music that loud for long because the police will cite us, and when the speeches begin, even if we did keep the music on, it would disturb us, too. So what I'm saying is…" Bryce nodded in the direction of the counter-protestors, shrugged, and smiled. "Well, you may hear some nasty comments from across the street during your speech. Don't let them distract you."

Reverend Wells nodded, appearing determined.

Chance wove through the crowd toward them and put his arm around Bryce's shoulders. "You remember, Chance, don't you, Reverend Wells?" Bryce asked.

"Of course," Reverend Wells said, shaking Chance's hand. "And please call me David. This isn't church."

Nick and the first speaker of the day, Thalia Thompson, a woman Bryce had heard speak several times over the years, approached the podium. The crowd became louder and hurried to grab food and drink, knowing that they would need to be quiet.

"Would you rather stay close to the podium?" Chance asked Reverend Wells. "It's about time."

"No, I think I'd like to be in the thick of it," Reverend Wells said.

After Reverend Wells grabbed a bottle of water, Bryce and Chance led him to the middle of the lot, where he looked perfectly at ease, his held high while he waited for the first speech to begin. As soon as Nick introduced Thalia, however, Reverend Wells lowered his head and cocked it to the side, listening to the hollers from across the street which had begun when Nick spoke. Their hollers, though, were muffled by the welcome

Nick and Thalia received—claps and whistles—and became background noise. Bryce usually pretended that the counter-protestors' objections were the roar of a crowd that supported gay rights instead of one that mocked them, and if Reverend Wells had not been standing next to him, Bryce probably wouldn't have heard them at all. But he did hear them, not the individual words but the collective sentiment, which distracted him from Thalia's speech. Bryce knew that, if he was distracted, then the reverend must be, too. After thirty seconds, though, the reverend straightened up, and smiled. Bryce knew that he had found a way to ignore them.

Although Bryce hadn't heard Thalia speak in over a year, her story was familiar, one many older gays and lesbians could have told themselves from experience. Thalia's life-partner, Tina, had eventually had health problems and had to stay in a hospital. Because they weren't allowed to marry, sometimes Thalia had been refused visitation. She spoke of the injustice, telling the crowd how she had felt at the time, but she did conduct her speech fairly: she explained that some nurses had never asked what Thalia's relationship was to Tina, and others who did ask allowed her entrance nonetheless, as though they were protecting Tina from unwanted visitors, and, of course, Tina would want to see Thalia.

But Tina hadn't recovered. After her death, which Thalia had expected yet still found devastating, Thalia described what were slaps to her face, insult to injury, whise she attempted to recover from her grief. The hospital demanded that Thalia pay the exorbitant bills—because Thalia had been Tina's life-partner. Why she had been expected to pay them had been beyond Thalia, because, after all, her insurance had never covered Tina in the first place, and if she had been refused visitation, as though she and

Tina had no binding relationship, then on what basis could the hospital determine that their relationship, which the hospital didn't recognize, made her responsible for Tina's medical bills? Thalia also described the benefits a widow or widower would have enjoyed after the loss of a spouse, benefits that were of little comfort but were descipable when not extended to gays and lesbians: the loss of all of Tina's social security; her retirement as well as all of her possessions, which she had left to Thalia, taxed as though Thalia had been a stranger. Thalia then read a list of benefits that married couples enjoyed, a list that Bryce knew by heart and paid little attention. Instead he studied Reverend Wells' face, which had turned hard.

After Thalia's speech, Reverend Wells said, "I thought you were protesting what Josh was charged with."

Bryce shrugged and laughed. "Not everyone here thinks alike. Some see it as an accident, too. Besides, that's a narrow platform. We really do play it loose here, and we should. There are so many issues we need to address."

"I can tell," Reverend Wells said.

The next two speakers were inexperienced, young and new to the cause. One spoke about his experience of bullying, about how schools did little, if anything, to stop it, and how teachers in the school he attended were not allowed to take sides or reprimand students who spouted their religious beliefs, even if those beliefs terrorized other students. He began his speech meekly and with a shaky voice, but as the crowd across the street became louder, so did he, eventually focusing more on his material than on either crowd's reaction, speaking with more conviction and confidence than Bryce had thought possible when he had begun. The other young speaker started with confidence but slowly

lost it. He talked about the perception of bisexuals—how bisexuals were sometimes scorned by straights and gays and lesbians alike. As he spoke, it was as though he couldn't handle the scrutiny of both the crowd in front of him and the crowd across the street, who heard his doubt and became louder because of it. Only near the end did he regain his confidence, when the crowd cheered him to drown out the noise from across the street.

"Reverend," Chance said. "You should start making your way to the podium."

"Good point," Reverend Wells said.

Reverend Wells took a few steps forward but had trouble negotiating a path to the podium. Bryce watched him say, "Excuse me" a number of times and shook his head, thinking, Just tap them on the shoulders, and if they don't move, shove your way through. Bryce realized that Reverend Wells was incapable of rudeness and did the job himself. As he forced his way through the crowd, looking behind him to make sure the Reverend followed in his wake, the counter-protestors voices rose, the loudest they had been so far, obviously angry that a leader of a church would support the LGBT community publicly here in Oklahoma. They had probably been reserving their energy for this moment.

The crowd roared in response, and both Bryce and Reverend Wells shook hands with those surrounding them during their last few yards to the lectern as though they were popular politicians. Because of the crowd's energy, Bryce remained with the reverend, standing next to him. Getting back to Chance would be a chore.

Reverend Wells stepped up to the lectern, smiling. "Thank you," he said. "I didn't expect such a warm reception, and I'm grateful for your invitation, hospitality, and generosity." The crowd whistled and clapped, doing their best to drown out the yells they

heard from across the street. “I’m also honored yet saddened that you’re holding this protest, in part, because of what happened to my son, Eric, and I hope I have the opportunity to protest with you under different circumstances in the future.” Reverend Wells turned to Kirby and asked him to increase the volume. After Kirby nodded, Reverend Wells leaned down close to the microphone. “Because we’re here”—he boomed—“partly to protest violence against you, I’d like to extend an invitation to those people across the road, who I’m sure, because they are Christians, wish no harm to anyone, to please join us.”

Some in the crowd cheered, but many more appeared wary, if not confused or angry or appalled by the suggestion. But Bryce could tell that Reverend Wells didn’t notice their expressions. Instead, he was looking across the street defiantly, and no one there moved. Bryce would have been shocked if one person walked across the street.

“No?” Reverend Wells asked. “Then please, if you are able, be respectful and do not protest that I’m protesting the violence done to my son and the violence done to any of this community’s friends or family members.”

The crowd cheered again, all of it this time, as Reverend Wells continued to stare at the counter-protestors, who were now yelling back. Once the crowd settled down, one lone voice called from across the street: “Hey, screw you!”

Laughing, Reverend Wells motioned for Kirby to lower the volume. “A future member of the LGBT community, I’m sure, don’t you think? He just doesn’t know it yet or perhaps he does. Who knows?” From his jacket pocket Reverend Wells pulled a pair of reading glasses, which he put on, and some folded pages, which he smoothed out on the podium.

"I'd like to begin with a joke," he said. "When my wife, years ago, asked me what I thought of gay marriage and what I thought that it might do to the institution of marriage, I turned to her and said, 'Marta, as soon as gays can marry, I'll suddenly, as if by magic, love you exactly twenty-three percent less.'" Reverend Wells paused, probably to gauge the success of his joke, which, while a few people smiled, mostly fell flat. Quieter, he said, "Note to self"—he lifted his hands, pretending to write in his palm—"never open with that joke ever again."

"My point is," he said, ignoring his notes, "that the success or failure of a marriage depends on two people whether man and woman, woman and woman, or man and man. There is no institution of marriage in brick and mortar, and our love determines many things in life, including our successes and failures.

"But this isn't what I'd like to talk about either. You see, in Oklahoma, a productive conversation about gay marriage, which it seems many of you want to have, cannot take place until, first, Oklahoma's legislature can agree that you are deserving of equal protection. But our legislature can't even do that. As my friend Bryce here has pointed out to me the last time we spoke…"

Embarrassed at the attention, Bryce looked away from the crowd and couldn't believe his eyes. Sailing through the air across the lot was a glass bottle, followed by two more, and before he could warn the crowd, the first bottle landed and broke in their midst. He heard glass break, screams, tires pealing, and saw a car speeding away. Two more bottles broke, and Bryce could see blood flow from a head wound. The crowd scattered in all directions, and Bryce jogged to where he had last seen Chance, shoving past anyone in his way. Finally, he found Chance, lying on his stomach, covering his

head with his hands. Bryce helped him up, turned him around, and stroked his hair looking for blood. Seeing none, he held Chance's face in his hands, and asked whether he was all right.

Chance spat on the ground, the first time Bryce had seen him do anything remotely masculine in months, and brushed off the dirt from his clothes. "Yes," he said. "Just waiting till it was safe to get up. I almost got trampled."

Bryce looked across the street at the crowd, some of them pointing and laughing, but most of them appearing shocked. Two police cars, sirens blaring and lights flashing, sped down the street, presumably in pursuit of the car that had peeled away. Bryce knew the counter-protestors were responsible; they had most likely planned this and had waited until Reverend Wells began speaking to disrupt the protest.

"Those goddamn assholes," Bryce said. "I'll fucking kill 'em." He took a few steps in the crowd's direction, but Chance grabbed his arm and held him there. "Let me go," Bryce said and tried to jerk away, but Chance held him. He pointed to between forty and fifty protestors who had obviously come to the same conclusion as Bryce and were crossing the street. He heard them taunt the counter-protestors, half of whom fled to their vehicles. The other half, however, walked to meet them, pointing and laughing.

Bryce jerked his arm again and tore loose of Chance, only to feel two hands on his shoulders after he had taken a step. He was whirled around against his will, and Reverend Wells shook him violently by the shoulders, staring at him intently. Through clenched teeth he said, "Why don't you stay out of this, son." He looked sad, angry, worried, and disgusted. For a moment, Bryce remembered what had happened to Eric and why—and much of his anger faded. He turned around, only to look, and Reverend Wells'

arms wrapped around his body from behind, pinning his arms down in a bear hug.

"You're not going anywhere near that," he said.

Bryce could have easily broken Reverend Wells' hold by squatting and extending his elbows, but he stayed put, entranced. The fight had already begun, and the counter-protestors, the ones too stupid to leave, were outnumbered three to one. They must have assumed they could win a fight against gays and lesbians and bisexuals, but Bryce's friends and acquaintances had already overpowered them. The counter-protestors who had the opportunity to flee did just that. But there were six knots of activity left, people taking turns kicking, hitting, and slapping the counter-protestors, whose arms were pinned behind them. Bryce had the feeling that if the roles were reversed, the counter-protestors wouldn't have treated them as kindly. Sure, they were being roughed up, but they'd survive it—at worst, with broken ribs or a broken nose. Bryce had seen worse fights in high school.

Their anger fizzled quickly, and most of the groups released their victims once the first group its victim go, smacking his butt to motivate him to speed his escape, which worked—he took off at a full sprint east toward a cluster of fast food restaurants. Most of the protestors walked back across the street, their arms around one another, looking tired but proud of themselves and perhaps relieved, looking around and seeing no one seriously hurt. The bottles, from what Bryce could see, had only struck one person, Steven, who was sitting by the tables, holding a cloth to his head, and watching the spectacle. One group, Bryce just now noticed, hadn't let up, and Bryce saw a shock of red hair and knew that the man with the megaphone, who had yelled at them for years, was taking a beating. The protestors left behind who had stopped fighting noticed them, too,

and tried to intervene, only to be shoved back. They called for help.

"Oh my God," Bryce heard someone say to his right. It was Raul, covering his mouth in shock. "Someone should do something. They're really hurting him."

Bryce shook off Reverend Wells, whose grip had slackened, and had an idea after looking at the fire hydrant. The group was directly across from it, and although they stopped beating the man, they wouldn't let him go and were unwilling to let anyone near him when anyone suggested they let him loose.

"Come on, David," Bryce said. "Guys, come on."

He jogged to the tables and lifted one of the coolers, but set it back down. Full of water and ice, it was heavy, too heavy for one person to carry any distance without help. Without a word of direction, everyone near the tables emptied nearby coolers of pop and bottled water and beer, and soon David and Bryce, along with Chance and Raul, Kirby and Nick, even Steve, whose scalp still bled, and one of The Slant's bouncers, carried coolers across the street, where they dumped them over the group of men standing guard over the redhead. The freezing water shocked them. They cursed and walked around in all directions, stamping their feet and rubbing their arms. Bryce and David helped the man, weak in the knees, walk to the tables. They tried to make him lie down, but he insisted on sitting up.

Both of the man's eyes were almost swollen shut, his bottom lip split, his nose broken, and there were two gashes on his left cheek. David dabbed at his injuries with a damp cloth and asked his name.

"Clarence," he said.

"I think we should take you to the emergency room," David said. "You might

need stitches."

"Does someone have a mirror?" Clarence asked. Four men in drag opened their purses and offered him compacts, three pink, one blue. He chose the blue one and looked at his eyes, his lip, and rubbed his tongue on the inside of his cheek where the gashes were, expanding the skin so he could see their depth. "Those cuts should be okay." He sighed. "If someone'd hold some ice to my eyes and hand me a beer, I sure would appreciate it. A few more minutes and we'll know whether I should see a doctor."

"We have whiskey inside," the bouncer said.

"Even better," Clarence said. "But don't forget the beer."

A siren whooped twice and a police cruiser pulled up to the curb. "You might want to block their view," Clarence said. "They see me, they'll be real curious how I got this way. Make it snappy with that beer, would you? My head's killing me."

Everyone looked grateful, even David.

8th of March, 2010

The Story

Welcome back to The Story. If you've just now tuned in, we've been speaking with Reverend David Wells and Bryce Haslett, who have been sharing with us the effects that the death of Eric Wells has had on both of their communities and their lives.

After hearing both of your versions of what happened, I'd like to ask you, Bryce, what you think of Joshua Tenney's sentence. Do you think it's fair? And what was the LGBT community's reaction to the deal he accepted?

Bryce: First off, I can't speak for the entire gay community or even the gay community in Oklahoma City. That's just absurd. The reactions differ from person to person. Because of my involvement and because—you know, everyone just heard about the guilt I'm still struggling with—well, because of that, I think it might be fair. Another part of me feels that it isn't. On some days it just seems like a slap on the wrist, and on others it doesn't. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I have little confidence that I can be objective. Sometimes I think it's all Josh's fault and sometimes I think I should take a lot of the blame, but the charges of assault against me were dropped. Sometimes I feel like they shouldn't have been. But there are many activists who think that the District Attorney never should have offered Josh a deal of any kind. My partner is one of them.

Has that disagreement affected your relationship negatively?

Bryce Haslett: You'd think it would, but it hasn't. I think the entire tragedy has brought us closer. The reason it has, I think, is because I've always been spiritual and drawn toward Christianity. He hasn't. He's never really understood why I have, because many churches don't want gays in their membership, but as we talk about punishment and forgiveness, and especially when we talk about intent, it seems like we've come to an understanding. In a way that he hasn't before, Chance seems to understand my desire to forgive Josh and how I view that as a spiritual need, because I've been so angry in general. More than that, Chance knows from speaking with Reverend Wells that Josh feels like he needs forgiving, too, in a similar way that I do. So, strangely, and I know I'm not making myself very clear, Chance understands now why I've wanted to be involved in church, even when many churches don't want gays involved with them. Prayer and a sense of community help curb my anger, even though Christianity has been the cause of a lot of my anger, and that's something Chance has always wanted—for me to be…well, simply put, happier. So now he's more supportive than ever.

And Reverend Wells you've had something to do with that, haven't you?

Reverend Wells: Yes, Bryce and I have talked a lot about his anger, anger he's carried for a long time, some of it directed at the church and understandably so. But our talks certainly aren't one-sided. We've also talked about my passivity. I think we've learned much from each other, and I know I still have a lot to learn from him. I'm proud of Bryce, as a friend and maybe even as a father would be. He's learned how to make his anger more productive, I think, and he's taught me, in just a few short months, how to keep being assertive. I don't think I'd be talking to you right now if we hadn't helped one another. He's one of the reasons I've remained active in supporting equal rights for the

LGBT community. If it weren't for his friendship, I might not have.

And you had something to do with Josh's sentencing?

Reverend Wells: Right. I spoke with the DA on Josh's behalf. From my point of view, it's clear that he had no intention of hurting Eric. It was an accident, and a victim's family does sometimes have a say in recommending sentencing.

But did he intend to harm Bryce? Isn't that what's so confusing?

Bryce: No doubt he did…sorry to interrupt…

Reverend Wells: No, I think you're right. Go ahead.

Bryce Haslett: There's no doubt in my mind that he meant harm. He just didn't mean to harm Eric. I know anger when I see it, and I think we all know violent anger when we see it. But I saw Josh's reaction to what he had done, too, right there in the moment. His reaction, though, didn't even register with me until maybe a month after Eric died, maybe longer. And still when I remember it, I get so angry, at Josh, at the ignorance of so many people. So twelve years on one hand seems really light, more like an insult, which all gays in Oklahoma are used to, unfortunately. But on the other, it seems like, as more time goes by, when I remember that moment, even though my initial reaction was—it still is—disgust, when I see the horror on Josh's face, I can't help but feel sorry for him. But there are still days that I don't even see his expression. I can't. I can't get past my own anger to see it, and I don't even see him as a person. Just some animal. What's strange about my struggle with trying to forgive Josh is that I wonder if many Christians have the same struggle with the gay community. They're initial reaction may be disgust, and they can't get past it to see that we're human beings just like themselves. The comparison stops there, though. Josh's act was violent. It's his action

that angers and disgusts me. For some Christians, though, it's not just my behavior that disgusts them. It's my existence. And here's another difference: I have to get past my anger to forgive Josh. But some Christians have to get past their emotions toward us, not to forgive us, because we don't need it. We have nothing to be sorry for. They have to get past their dogma and their fear and their disgust, to accept who we are. They don't or can't recognize that my existence is just as valid as theirs. They can't—because of anger, fear, whatever it is they feel. That used to make me angry, too, and really it still does, but now I feel something else: a little empathy, a little sympathy. Maybe I see Josh in a similar way that some people see me and other gays. So I can identify a little with someone who might be struggling with their religion and struggling with how gays fit in to it. I somewhat see their confusion in accepting us. Still, they're generalizing about an entire group of people who've done nothing to them, whereas I'm struggling with this with one person, who…well, we know what he did. Here's what I'm driving at: I think all of us, gay or straight, struggle for our humanity in finding what's human in others. I can now see how difficult that can be when confronting someone so different from yourself. To go back to your earlier question, I think that's why Chance and I are so accepting of each other and why our differences haven't driven us apart. We have far more in common than we have differences.

Reverend Wells, Bryce mentioned how this tragedy affected his relationship. Has it affected yours?

Reverend Wells: I'd like to say that Marta and I have grown closer—and maybe we will yet—but.... I don't think I should talk about it, not in any detail. We're together, and that in itself is miraculous. Not many marriages survive the death of a child or a

crisis of faith, far fewer both, and I'm grateful ours has. To be honest, I wish our relationship were as stable as Bryce's and Chance's. I'm rather astonished by them. They are so different, and they disagree fundamentally on some things, such as religion, but they don't require each other to share a worldview, which I think is quite healthy.

Earlier we learned that you left the United Methodist Church, but you didn't give us much detail. Do you care to tell us more about this decision?

Reverend Wells: There's not much to say. But it's untrue, strictly speaking, that I left the church. I had the option of being transferred, and because of my views I would have had to move far away to lead a more liberal congregation. But neither Marta nor I could imagine living anywhere but Oklahoma. We don't want to leave the region. We have family and friends here, and I think we're needed here. So I didn't really leave the church. Instead, locally, I feel like the church has left me. Or perhaps the split, for now, is mutual.

Because of my next question, it's lucky that you used that word, "split." There is a movement growing to split the United Methodist Church because of gay rights. What's your opinion about what might happen?

Reverend Wells: I really don't know what will happen, but I can tell you what I hope generally, and I hope my answer isn't too oblique. The purpose of church, generally I think, is to promote a sense of community in a spiritual context. If that's the case, then to split a church because some people feel that some members of their community do not spiritually belong in the church when, in fact, they view the world in much the same way, except for a point or two, like Bryce here…well, I think the answer is obvious. Splitting the church will not promote community. It will only provide the opportunity for further

spiritual divisions. Churches will continue to divide and divide if they fail to speak to modern life. One of a church's functions is to bridge the gap between tradition and modern life and, I think, to be as inclusive and loving as possible while bridging that gap, not exclusive and intolerant. I think we have enough divisions already, more than enough, obviously, from denomination to denomination. And I've always thought that if a church is divisive, then the surrounding community will be as well. Spirituality, if it does nothing else, should bind people together, not separate them. Some might say that I chose to leave the church because I chose to speak about homosexuality, that speaking out created divisions. But the division was already present without my saying anything. The fact remains that, if I were invited to lead a Methodist Church in my area, I'd jump at the chance. But I don't expect to be called any time soon. Until then, I'll live in Oklahoma City. I'll volunteer at hospitals and at a local Unitarian Church, where I feel surprising challenged and comfortable, and I'll keep fighting for equal rights for the LGBT community.

You've organized another protest, one that takes place only two days after this show is scheduled to air. You'll be protesting that the Oklahoma Legislature is attempting to block the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act. Do you care to comment on that?

Bryce: I certainly do. It's the same old song and dance. Some state senators are claiming that Oklahoma does not protect any special class of people. They're flat-out lying. The law already protects people on the basis of religion, race, nationality, and disability. They say that they're doing it because the federal government shouldn't have any authority to investigate hate crimes in Oklahoma. But LGBT individuals aren't

protected under state law anyway. They say that the Hate Crimes Act will prevent free speech and that people will be jailed for voicing their religious beliefs about gays. But the Hate Crime Act explicitly covers free speech. Let me read it: "Nothing in this Act shall be construed to prohibit any expressive conduct protected from legal prohibition by, or any activities protected by the free speech or free exercise clauses of, the First Amendment to the Constitution." They aren't concerned about free speech. They're lying and trying to convince people that the act takes away rights when it doesn't. The truth is that this state views all LGBTs as second-class citizens. They want to keep us that way, and they do so because of narrow religious beliefs. It's bigoted and hypocritical. It's that simple, and it's the first time I know of that the legislature has ever been so blatant about it. This protest is also the first time we've sought to protest at the State Capitol itself. Our request was approved, which shocked me, and it will be the largest and most meaningful protest the Red River Alliance has ever conducted. The LGBT community will be there, and so will hundreds of our straight friends.

Bryce

Bryce observed that, despite its beautiful architecture, the State Capitol couldn't be more austere than The Slant's parking lot, where he had always dressed as he pleased, danced, hugged, kissed, drank and smoked, music the backdrop to it all. But today didn't seem to be a celebration. Even the unrelenting Oklahoma wind had died, the air unusually still, as though the weather itself had become tentative and uncertain. Most members of the Red River Alliance, Bryce and Chance included, even Raul, who interpreted almost everything as a joke, had dressed conservatively. Never had they done so during a rally, the point being always to embrace and celebrate diversity. Then again, never had reporters, except for the occasional local gay student writing for a college paper, covered their rallies, and not a single one had ever come with news cameras ready to roll. Until today.

The media's unexpected presence should have perked up Bryce, but the good mood he had brought with him, despite his constricting blue tie, had soured when he saw that the steps to the Capitol had been blocked off, a yellow barricade—a wall, the most colorful object on the Capitol grounds, drawing everyone's eyes—preventing anyone from approaching the building. Behind the barricade stood five police officers who scanned the crowd. The crowd, two hundred at most, a much smaller turnout than Bryce had hoped for, huddled together in knots of four to a dozen people, which made the crowd seem even smaller than it actually was, as though they were pressed together as homeless beggars to fight a chill when it was a warm, bright morning in mid-March.

Where was their confidence, their fire, their joy? Bryce asked himself. For over

twenty minutes, he had been waiting for the subdued whispering to stop, for whistles to sound, for shouts, for a hand-held radio to play, for colorful handwritten signs to rise above the crowd's heads. Bryce asked himself whether everyone had assumed what he had earlier: to be taken seriously, they had to tone down their behavior, play the game, and act in a manner the majority would respect. Today's rally, after all, was the first granted to the Red River Alliance. But who respected timidity? Certainly not conservatives who fear-mongered at every opportunity. Chance, Raul, Reverend Wells, and a few others had been just as concerned earlier, and they had left forty-five minutes ago to buy as much coffee as they could carry to bring back to the crowd, which certainly needed some energy. Bryce had told them that what the crowd needed was a good kick in the ass, but Chance's reply had only been a smile and a kiss on the cheek, as though the protest was already a success.

A shadow now passed over Bryce and the crowd, a cloud obscuring the sun, and not knowing why, Bryce shivered, fearing that the rally would have no effect. And maybe it wouldn't. But, dammit, they had to try.

Bryce walked to the podium and asked Nick whether the microphone had been turned on.

"It shouldn't be," Nick said. "Why?"

"We're asleep," Bryce said. "Look at them. I gotta try to snap 'em out of it."

Nick, terminally optimistic, smiled and clapped Bryce on the shoulder. "Everything's fine."

"What? It isn't—"

"But hey, if you want to say something, go ahead. Warm them up for me." Nick walked to Kirby, who was at a table thirty feet away near the bottom of the stairs. After speaking with him, Nick shouted, "Bryce," and gave him a thumbs-up.

Bryce stepped up to the lectern, leaned down to the microphone, placed his index and middle fingers on his lips, and whistled as loud as he could. Feedback howled through the speakers, and most of the crowd covered their ears and turned to Bryce, some glaring and others staring wide-eyed in fear.

"Listen up," Bryce said, suddenly nervous. While he had found speaking into a microphone easy just two days ago in a radio booth, his only audience in the room Reverend Wells and three other people who rarely looked at Bryce but studied the mixing board, the crowd here, all eyes on him, intimidated him—until he imagined what could be happening right now beyond the barricade behind him. "Don't you realize they could be voting right this minute? What if they'd looked out the window just a moment ago? What would they have seen? What if they were looking right now?"

Bryce clapped his hands. Hard. So hard that his palms stung and that he could feel his chest, shoulders, and biceps flex with each clap. He whistled again and resumed clapping. The knots broke apart, spreading in lines wider across than the stairs. They, too, clapped, and a few people yelled. Although Bryce couldn't distinguish their words, he didn't care. He had accomplished his goal, and now that he had awoken them, he had nothing else to say. With everyone staring at him and clapping, he felt he should say something. So he spoke one word three times. Equality. The crowd chanted it back to him—E-QUAL-I-TY—clapping in rhythm, and he yelled into the microphone, hoping the legislators, tucked safely away inside, heard their voices through the walls.

Nick squeezed his arm. “Nice work,” he said. “I can take it from here.”

“Where the hell is everyone else, Nick? Stop pretending like this is going like we thought it would.”

Nick frowned, tucked his chin, and held up a hand, palm out. “Bryce, I have to take the microphone now. I’ll explain in a minute.” When Nick faced the crowd, he smiled. “Before we get started, I’d like to personally apologize for the confusion.” Nick winked at Bryce. “Well over half of you received emails that listed the wrong time, so I apologize for the wait.”

While Nick spoke, explaining the protest, the politics behind it and who would speak, Bryce heard voices, a buzz growing into a roar from the east, chanting E-QUAL-I-TY just as Bryce had just moments ago. The voices grew louder and louder, and another crowd came into view, hundreds of people whom Bryce didn’t recognize carrying colorful signs and marching behind a rainbow banner, which Chance and Reverend Wells helped to carry on each end. Their voices joined with the crowd in front of the steps, which had taken up the chant again.

Bryce knew they’d be heard within the State Capitol’s walls. How could they not?