

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA
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**Crocus Albiflorus
& Other Short Stories**

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
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By
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Edmond, Oklahoma


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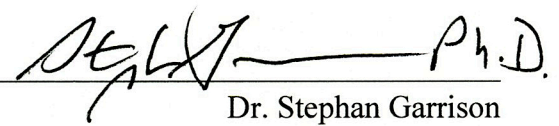
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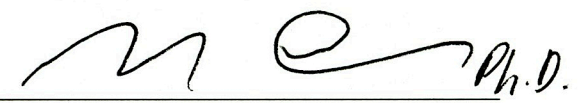
A THESIS

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Crocus Albiflorus and Other Stories is a collection of 10 literary realism short stories. The collection is set in a broad scope of countries throughout the world, but all stories share the commonality of basic humanistic instinct, passion and flaws. Beginning in the Russian occupied zone of Vienna directly post WWII, the collection follows the theme of a post-war setting before making its way back to the United States with similar threads of conflict spawned by multiculturalism. While the situational settings have been largely inspired by conflicts faced by my direct family members in various countries, eras, and political and social climates, the characters' struggles are universal, ranging from the testing of individual's morals to the longing to find a significant other or passion in life to the conflict spawning from the false belief that certain people are more superior than others based on nationality, race or beliefs.

Crocus Albiflorus
& *Other Short Stories*

“The old rules are no longer binding, the old truths no longer true. Right spills over into wrong. Order blends into chaos, love into hate, ugliness into beauty, law into anarchy, civility into savagery. The vapors suck you in. You can’t tell where you are or why you’re there and the only certainty is overwhelming ambiguity.”

Tim O’Brien
“How To Tell a True War Story”
The Things They Carried

Crocus Albiflorus

1946. Kazimir already had about half a pint of vodka in him when he followed Viktor to the third apartment door of the evening to steal more booze. Viktor, easily twice the size of Kazimir, had consumed nearly three times that amount of liquor and was therefore no longer knocking on doors but banging on them belligerently.

“Mein Herr und Dame,” Viktor said through the door, using German that was almost completely drowned in the slurring of his words. “Open up!”

Kazimir stood behind Viktor with two other Russian comrades, who were still shaking the February snow off their boots, and silently begged Viktor to stop banging on the door. The knocking echoed through the marble stone hallway of the apartment building, making the drunken Kazimir feel as if he were about to tumble over in his full-length wool, army coat.

“Come out, come out,” Viktor said, now leaning against the front door of the Austrian apartment. “I can hear you stirring in there.” Guarding the occupied Soviet

section of Vienna during the day and getting drunk off locals' booze during the night had become a sort of routine. Kazimir couldn't tell if the pit in his stomach was from some sort of guilt or a result of the night's drinks. Sure, it was legal that he and his comrades go door to door and take whatever they wanted from any Austrian apartment. The Austrians must have even been used to it by now. But still Kazimir knew it wasn't right, a sort of morality that Viktor would have brutally snarled at had Kazimir ever voiced it.

Viktor began to sing some Leonid Utyosov, the first man to introduce jazz to the Soviet party. "Be healthy, live well!" Victor sang happily and loudly. "Chase those damn fascists away from your huts – chase those bandits, shoot them, beat them! Spare neither bombs nor weapons for them." The other two comrades who were with Viktor danced around the hallway and whistled.

Kazimir hoped that the song would distract Viktor from remembering why they had come there in the first place. But once Viktor had finished his song, he went back to banging on the door even harder. "Auf! Auf! Open the damn door," Viktor yelled. He gave the wood a swift kick, leaving behind a crack and a black smudge from his boot.

Kazimir heard footsteps and what sounded like a cane on the other side of the door and already felt remorse for whatever might come next. An older gentleman opened the door, his face as wrinkled and worn as a Soviet jacket after combat and his eyes the same color of the black ash that rises toward the sky after a bombing. Viktor must have taken none of this into account – nor did he take into account that the man only had one leg – as he greeted the man with a dominating hug and a spin which forced the amputee onto the floor. Kazimir quickly rushed inside the apartment to help the older man up.

“Oh well there, you see,” Viktor announced. “We Russians are gentlemen, too.” Viktor gave Kazimir a hard slap on the back which almost made Kazimir fall back onto the old man. Kazimir helped the man to the dining room table where the rest of the man’s family sat – a wife, son and daughter, Kazimir assumed – around a worn, wooden table.

“Meine Frau.” Viktor looked at the wife. “What’s for dinner?” He then laughed as if he had made a joke.

The son at the table, a handsome man perhaps seventeen, a little younger than Kazimir, stood up. With perfectly squared shoulders, piercing blue eyes and ash blonde hair parted to the side, the son was an image of Hitler youth. “What can we do for you gentlemen?” His polite manners could not hide the disdain in his voice.

“We’re a little thirsty,” Viktor responded, straightening up his back as if to mock the son’s posture.

Once Kazimir had gotten the old man with one leg back into his seat, the daughter helped the man smooth his clothes, which had wrinkled from the fall. “Are you okay?” she leaned in and whispered. The motion forced the daughter’s coarse, brown peppered hair to flap against the front of her shoulders, reminding Kazimir of a sparrow attempting to flap its wings.

“We don’t have any liquor,” the son said firmly.

“No liquor?” Viktor snarled. “I don’t like being lied to.”

“I’m not lying.”

The sparrow did not have the same strong bone features as the blonde man who spoke so courageously to Viktor, nor did she have his bright eyes. Her complexion was

ghostly white and her cheeks frail. Even though she was probably not much older than the son, she looked aged. But Kazimir couldn't help finding her attractive, oddly beautiful. White sparrows, according to Russian tales, were believed by the superstitious to possess some sort of magic. Maybe she knew the secrets of the world and could help Kazimir escape from the cruel, inhumane ones.

Viktor directed the other two comrades to search the house as Kazimir continued to stand by the now-sitting amputee and stare drunkenly at the woman he felt so drawn to. Once Viktor disappeared into another room, Kazimir felt he had an opportunity to apologize for Viktor's actions. But one hateful look from the blonde boy made Kazimir swallow his words.

Viktor returned moments later, chugging a perfume bottle with one hand while he held onto three half-full perfume bottles in his other. Once Viktor finished his bottle, he hiccupped and then threw a perfume bottle to Kazimir and his other two Russian comrades. "One for each," Viktor said. His hiccups smelled like lilies.

Kazimir looked down at the perfume bottle hesitantly.

"It's the only thing in this entire house that had any alcohol in it. Better a little than nothing at all." Viktor stumbled towards the door.

Kazimir looked up at the sparrow and then back down at the perfume bottle. What if this was hers? She wouldn't reveal to him all the secrets of the world if he stole her perfume.

"Come on. There's got to be someone else in this dump of an apartment building that has a real drink."

Kazimir fell into line behind Viktor, just like he always did since being drafted a year and a half ago. His scrawny fingers, which had only fired a gun a handful of times during the last months of the war – although he'd convinced himself that he had never killed a soul – were now caressing the smooth glass perfume bottle as he placed it in his coat pocket.

That night, after the comrades were back at the barracks and Viktor was loudly snoring, Kazimir pulled the perfume bottle out and gave it a spray. He imagined the sparrow smelling like the scent of dew-kissed roses. Kazimir lay in his bunk and imagined her as a Russian from Moscow and that it had been love at first sight and that they often held hands and walked up Petrovka Street, past the coral painted theater and up to Sadovoye Koltso, the Garden Ring. Memories of home always put a burning pressure behind Kazimir's eyes. He had hoped that after the Germans surrendered, he would go back home. Sure, when he was fresh out of training during the summer of 1944, he had been ready to fight as he watched more than 50,000 German captives being paraded through the streets of Moscow. Since the German-Soviet Boundary Friendship Treaty had been broken in the summer of 1941, he'd only heard what a blessing it would be to get to kill a German. But the first time he watched a young German soldier bleed out from a gunshot wound to the throat just outside Warsaw, he realized that he didn't have the stomach to kill. From that day on he only shot his gun in the air and never actually aimed it at anyone. He cried almost every night during the war when he was convinced no one was watching, and he filled himself with hope that once the war was over he could get on with life, meet a girl and raise their children in Moscow. How cruel and tricky

hope was, Kazimir thought as he spent another sleepless night in his bunk, now nine months after the war had ended, with a pistol still by his side.

During the mornings, Austrian women cooked the Russian soldiers' breakfast. It was a conscripted service women of the country were drafted into at random. Local butchers and bakers and farmers would drop off the Russians' free rations of food and the women would cook, without pay, the day's meals – a duty to those who had liberated them. Viktor and Kazimir's current assignment had been to provide security for the reconstruction of the Rotunden Bridge. The Soviet Kommissars were adamant about swiftly rebuilding all the roads and bridges bombed during the war, as it was difficult to travel from one side of the Russian zone in Vienna to the other. After breakfast, Viktor and Kazimir put on their uniforms, strapped on their weapons, and went to watch about a dozen Austrians perform the backbreaking work of resetting concrete piers, lifting steel beams into place and welding everything together with blinding fire. Viktor and Kazimir made sure that the Austrian men, also on conscripted service and working without pay, stayed on task and that no materials went missing. For the most part, it was just an opportunity for Viktor to stand around, looking plagued with yet another hangover, while Kazimir fantasized about home and his new obsession. He imagined going back to her house, returning her perfume – which Kazimir kept in his coat pocket – admitting his love and then whisking her off to Russia.

“Look at these pizde,” Viktor said about the Austrian men as he and Kazimir sat on sacks of cement. “Walking around with sticks up their ass while they get to participate in the rebuilding of their country.”

Kazimir looked around at the conscripted service men who showed up every day, emaciated, broken, but on time. “They’re just tired. Everyone’s just tired.”

Viktor narrowed his eyes. Kazimir studied all the little scars that had collected on Viktor’s face. Even if Viktor was a brute, he was looked up to by any new army recruit. He could reload a Tokarev STV 40 faster than anyone else in the platoon and knew the most comfortable ways to sleep in piles of rubble.

Kazimir had heard rumors that Viktor was from Leningrad and that his family had all starved during the winter of 1941 when the Germans had encircled the city and cut off all food supplies, while Viktor was off getting wounded by mortar shells during a Soviet counterattack.

Kazimir spent the next several days trying to imagine that he and Viktor actually had something in common, that despite Viktor’s rough exterior, inside all he wanted to do was go home as well. Maybe he also dreamed of a family and raising a son to be a proud member of Soviet Society. Maybe he wished to live in Moscow, a city that the Germans had never advanced far enough to attack. But the more Kazimir watched Viktor barge into Viennese homes, drink his evenings away and boast about the guy he’d beaten to death in Sevastopol, all the kills he’d got at Caucasus, the flesh wound he’d received at Kotelnikovo and all the women he’d taken during the war, the more Kazimir believed there could not be a man more the opposite of him than Viktor.

Winter seemed to pass slowly, and every now and then Kazimir caught himself wandering by the sparrow’s neighborhood, but never quite making it to her apartment

building. Finally, spring came and the bridge was finished. Viktor and Kazimir spent their last day on the job rather relaxed.

“Did you hear about the new policy?” Viktor said as he sat on a pile of stones.

“No,” Kazimir said, catching a glimpse of a woman walking a street over and entering the local grocery store. Could it really have been his sparrow? What if his eyes were playing a cruel trick on him or what if his memory couldn’t correctly hold her image after the past five months?

“It will make damn sure no Nazi lover ever fucks with a Russian again,” Viktor continued but Kazimir couldn’t pay attention. He had to see if this was his white sparrow.

He straightened up his uniform and excused himself. “I have to take a piss.” He tried to remain calm as he crossed the street and entered the grocery store. He looked up and down the aisles of the shop, past the fruits, vegetables and canned food, before making his way to the tiny section of flowers sold in the far back corner. There she was, surrounded by carnations and roses, his sparrow. Her face still looked gaunt but her skin tone seemed more alive, and around all the flowers, Kazimir could almost imagine her as his bride walking down the aisle.

Kazimir had to approach her. If he was lucky, she wouldn’t remember him as one of the Russian soldiers who had charged into her apartment. She would just see him looking handsome in his uniform and immediately fall in love.

The sparrow looked up and noticed Kazimir staring at her. She quickly averted her eyes and walked over to the small floral selection of *Crocus albiflorus*. Kazimir had

to say something. He couldn't let this one, big opportunity pass him by. "What a lovely color of white," Kazimir said, a little louder than he had expected.

The sparrow looked at Kazimir once again, and he thought how inane he sounded. Was white even a color? She nodded her head politely, but as she was about to turn away from Kazimir again, she glanced back his way. It wasn't a gentle, loving glance, but one of disdain.

"I still have your perfume. I never drank it. I've been wanting to give it back to you. I'm sorry about what all happened that night. I'm not like Viktor." Kazimir stood completely still as the words poured from his mouth.

"Excuse me sir, but I really should finish up my shopping and get home." Even though it was obvious her voice wasn't meant to sound affectionate, it still had a musical ring, a softness that Kazimir longed for.

He followed her as she gathered her small sack of potatoes and loaf of bread. "I can't apologize enough, but really I think you're beautiful and lovely and I'd like to get to know you." The more Kazimir talked the faster the sparrow walked. "I'm not trying to scare you," he said. They both made their way to the counter. The sparrow pulled out a ration card to pay for the potatoes and bread. Her hair lay wavy along the sides of her face and Kazimir noticed how the peppered dark color matched her hazel-speckled brown eyes, which currently looked frightened. "I just want to make sure you get your perfume bottle back." He stood there a second longer. He would need another plan to win her over. "I hope you have a lovely day," he said and nodded before walking out of the store, defeated but not yet ready to give up.

“That was a long piss,” Viktor said, as Kazimir made his way back over to his job site.

“So what about that policy?” Kazimir couldn’t have Viktor asking any questions about what just happened.

“Oh yeah, listen to this.” Viktor sat up straight on the pile of stones and mimicked an announcer’s voice: “To ensure the safety of the Soviet soldiers who have liberated Vienna, any soldier found dead will be answered immediately with ten Austrian lives in retaliation.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes.” Viktor slumped back into a comfortable position. “See what happens when you try to fuck with big dogs. They bite. They bite hard.”

Kazimir let the image of ten shadows against a wall occupy his mind for a few minutes before his thoughts returned to the sparrow. He was going to need more than just her bottle of perfume.

“Come on, project’s over, now we drink,” Viktor said. “I heard one of the Kommissars say next we’ll be providing protection to a new road that’s to be built. Same shit. Oh well, at least we can enjoy the evening with some vodka. To the tavern.”

“I don’t feel so well. I think I’m just going to sleep tonight.”

Viktor gave Kazimir a steady look. “You’ve been quiet since that piss. What’s going on? Your dick hurt or something? Have you been sleeping with any women I don’t know about? Catch one of those diseases, maybe?” Viktor laughed and slapped Kazimir on the back. Kazimir played along. He couldn’t even imagine what Viktor would do if he found out Kazimir was actually trying to win over a lady.

“God, I hope not,” Kazimir joked.

“If there is one thing I can pass on to younger men, it’s to stay away from dirty women.” Viktor laughed again. “To the tavern I go.”

Kazimir arrived at the sparrow’s apartment building with her perfume bottle in his pocket and an extra food ration card he’d sneaked from the Russian camp in his hand. He kept his visor cap tucked underneath his arm and styled his flattop haircut into a comb-over in hopes of looking less militaristic. However, to ensure that his lax appearance wasn’t misinterpreted as unkempt, he made sure his boots were shined, his army greens wrinkle free, his brass buttons polished and his red belt free of dust.

He could feel himself sweating underneath his uniform as he stood in the hallway trying to gain confidence. He hoped his nervousness was not noticeable. “You can do this, you can do this,” he whispered to himself before politely knocking on the door. He moved away from the peephole, afraid that if the sparrow or her family saw a Russian soldier standing outside, they’d be hesitant to open the door. Kazimir heard footsteps on the other side: footsteps that were not accompanied by a cane. The door unlocked and Kazimir was greeted by the Hitler youth. Kazimir choked on his words before he was able to say that he was looking for the young lady of the house.

“What business do you have with my cousin?” Hitler Youth asked.

“I thought she was your sister,” Kazimir said, not that it really mattered. “I have something to return to her.” He hoped the blonde man didn’t remember him, although Kazimir couldn’t tell whether the man did or not.

Hitler Youth excused himself but left the door open. An Austrian would not disobey the request of a Russian soldier. Seconds later the sparrow came to the door. She wore the same navy blue shirt and skirt from earlier that day, except she looked even more beautiful. “Your perfume.” He grabbed the bottle from his pocket.

The sparrow just looked at him. Neither her eyes nor her facial expressions showed any signs of joy or happiness as she took the bottle from Kazimir, so Kazimir extended to her the ration card. “I also picked you up one of these from my barracks.” Her eyes perked up a little. “It’s a full week’s worth of rations.”

The sparrow looked up and down the hall before accepting the card. “Why are you giving me this?”

“Because I thought in return you’d tell me your name.”

The sparrow called back into the apartment that she’d be right back, then stepped into the hallway and shut the door behind herself. “Sabine.”

Her name was lyrical, rhythmic and beautiful, just like herself. “Would you like to go for a walk, Sabine?” Kazimir extended his arm, like a gentlemen, and although slightly hesitant, Sabine accepted.

Kazimir, accustomed to being the follower, guided Sabine towards one of the more romantic parts of the second district he could think of – the Danube Arm. Only slivers of ice were left in the river from the harsh Austrian winter as the water rippled against the brick walls which served as the base for the sidewalk. Conversation started out slowly as the two walked alongside the row of tarnished-teal light posts that lined where the sidewalk ended and the river began.

“Are you originally from Vienna?” Kazimir asked.

Sabine nodded.

“You like living here?”

Sabine looked at him suspiciously before nodding again. Kazimir thought about what “here” was for her: a city half-bombed and split up into four separately occupied sections. He wondered if his comrades often broke into her apartment and took things as they pleased. He wondered if she had seen any of her country’s men killed under the policy that Viktor had mentioned earlier that day. Kazimir needed to change the subject as none of this could bring about pleasant conversation.

“So, your cousin lives with you?”

“I live with my cousin.”

“He seems nice.” Kazimir was getting desperate for something to say.

“He’s not.” Sabine looked straight forward and said this matter-of-factly.

Kazimir had a hard time distinguishing her emotions.

“Yeah, I have a cousin back in Russia I don’t much like either.” Kazimir let out a laugh and was not quite able to tell whether Sabine had smiled, but he continued talking. He talked about his cousin, about his aunt, about his mother. It felt good, almost liberating. He hadn’t really talked about them much within the last year. Kazimir had felt like if he’d talked about his memories of home out loud, he was giving someone else the opportunity to snatch them away from him. But he didn’t have that anxiety with Sabine.

Kazimir continued to show up at Sabine’s apartment whenever he could sneak away from Viktor. He arrived with gifts, such as loaves of bread or special sugars and coffees that only the occupying forces could get. They’d go on walks. Kazimir talked

about his childhood in Moscow, his family, how he was an only child. Although Sabine kept rather quiet, she was a great listener. She gave Kazimir reassuring nods when he'd talk about his father fighting in the Great War and small smiles when Kazimir told of all the tricks he used to play on the cousin he didn't like too much. Kazimir could picture them an old couple: Sabine cooking borscht for dinner, while Kazimir would entertain her with all sorts of stories about his life.

Every now and then, Kazimir asked Sabine questions about herself or her family. She kept her answers short. She seemed a woman of few words. Her parents were dead. Killed early in the war. Her uncle lost his leg during the Great War. Her favorite meal was gulasch. She liked piano music.

"Chopin in particular," she said one afternoon as the two stopped under the awning of the Apotheke to enjoy some shade.

"Do you play the piano?"

"My mother did."

"Do you play any instrument at all?"

Sabine shook her head.

"So what do you do for fun?"

"I used to paint." Sabine paused as she looked at the postcards in the Apotheke's windows. "I would to listen to the music, my mother playing, and paint what I imagined the sounds would look like if they ever took on a form."

This was the longest response Kazimir had ever heard from Sabine and it absolutely elated him.

“Are you familiar with the Viennese artist Klimt?” Sabine asked. “He once locked himself in a white room for days and painted on the walls what he imagined Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony looked like in canvas form.”

“That sounds lovely,” Kazimir said sincerely. “Does anyone left in your family play an instrument or paint? You’re uncle maybe?”

“No. His bad back won’t allow him to stand or sit up straight for very long.”

“So does your cousin have to fulfill some of the patriarchal duties of the household?”

“My cousin is no leader,” Sabine said sharply as she averted her eyes back to the street, the daze she had a moment ago gone.

“Are you against all followers?” Kazimir felt slightly insecure as he asked.

“I’m against sheep who blindly followed and believed in the Nationalist Socialist Party.”

Kazimir knew Sabine couldn’t come right out and say that her cousin had been a Nazi. That sort of thing was not discussed. He always imagined that all those who weren’t prosecuted as war criminals had hidden their swastikas the second Hitler was found in his bunker in Berlin: a cyanide capsule in his mouth and a bullet in his head.

Sabine continued. “That’s one of the things I cannot seem to get over. Not just that it was Nazis versus Jews or the National Socialist Party versus everyone else, but that it was Austrians versus Austrians. It was people like my cousin versus people like my uncle, whose own brother was shot for helping Jews. Son versus his family. A civil war yet not given the title.”

Kazimir was stunned. Not only was it enchanting that Sabine had opened up, but also that she was eloquent when she cared to be. Her words resonated with Kazimir that night as he lay in his bunk. Music in a canvas form. A civil war yet not given the title. War. He'd thought about every aspect and level of that word since that afternoon he and some of his platoon had stumbled on the German soldier bleeding to death from a neck wound. Being fresh out of training and from a city that was never attacked, it was the first time Kazimir had a front row seat to someone dying as a result of this war. Kazimir hadn't known that blood could actually spray from a carotid artery. That soldier's eyes: scared and helpless. His pupils: dilated from his body's own adrenaline trying to sustain itself. His dirt covered hands trying to catch the blood that was shooting from his neck. And the sound he made: choking and gurgling. Kazimir knew the humane thing to do would have been to shoot the soldier again. Kill him quickly and put him out of his misery, but Kazimir couldn't even do that. All his training, all the patriotism he should have had for his country, and he could never shoot the enemy.

Kazimir heard stomping. "There's my little wienerschnitzel," Viktor said as he jumped into Kazimir's bunk. Viktor's breath smelled like vodka, and his elbow landed right in between two of Kazimir's ribs. "Tell me my wienerschnitzel, where have you been hiding these last few weeks? I rarely see you out anymore. I've had to drink my share of the liquor plus yours."

"I've been taking a break from the hangovers." Kazimir mustered up a fake laugh.

"To hell with hangovers. Russians don't like to drink alone. This weekend, after work, we'll drown out this city. Just like old times."

But when the weekend came, Kazimir didn't go out with Viktor. Kazimir was becoming spoiled by Sabine's soft manner; he couldn't imagine having to subject himself to a night of roughness with Viktor anymore. He showed up at Sabine's apartment with a sack of potatoes, and the two went for another walk. Sabine let Kazimir hold her hand when they'd turn down an empty street. Kazimir talked about how he wanted children and a family. And that night, he even worked up the courage to kiss her goodnight on the hand once he'd walked her back to her apartment building.

He then walked to the Russian barrack, rerunning the simple kiss in his head over and over again. He wouldn't allow himself to think that she might not have found the moment as exhilarating as he did. He could only think about how special the consummation of their wedding would be.

While Kazimir was brushing his teeth for the evening, Viktor stumbled into the bathroom. "So tell me Kazimir, what is it that now all of the sudden makes you too good to keep some Russian company, uh?" The slurring of words was heavy.

Kazimir tried to tell himself that this was just what Viktor always did, got drunk and aggressive. That despite the fact that it was just the two of them in the lavatory, Kazimir shouldn't feel scared.

"You're not going to answer me, you little bitch?" Viktor gave Kazimir a shove to the shoulder that made Kazimir take a step back. "I always knew you were a little girl trapped in a man's world, but even now you can't find your balls. You still have a cunt when confronted with a simple question?"

"I think you've had too much to drink tonight." Kazimir tried to stay calm and ignore the insults even though he could feel his pulse speed up.

“I have had too much to drink.” Viktor’s voice boomed. “I told you I’ve had to drink your share of the vodka. So, you’ve brought this on yourself.” Viktor was standing merely inches away from Kazimir at this point, making Kazimir wonder if Viktor was going to hit him.

Kazimir took a few more steps back. He knew that if Viktor wanted to kick the shit out of him, he easily could. And that fact infuriated Kazimir. He imagined telling Viktor off then and there. He even considered that it might be worth the beating. But Kazimir couldn’t open his mouth. Instead he quickly walked out of the bathroom and back to the sleeping quarters where men would be able to testify if Viktor stepped out of line.

Kazimir didn’t mention to Sabine his confrontation with Viktor or his cowardly lack of response. Nor did he mention how scary it was to sleep in the same barracks with a man angry with you while both of you were armed. He tried to think only positive thoughts while with Sabine.

As the summer began to end and it was obvious that the cold would soon kill all the flowers, Kazimir decided to bring Sabine *Crocus albiflorus* directly after work one afternoon instead of ration cards or food. It would be romantic, like an inside joke the two had from when they first met.

Sabine answered the door wearing a brown dress that stopped just above her ankles. Her hair was pulled back into a tight conservative bun. Kazimir always found her to be even more breathtaking than the day before.

“Thank you,” she said, taking the flowers. She didn’t immediately put them in her apartment, like she’d done with the food and ration cards Kazimir had brought her, but instead kept them in her hand as they went for their walk. “So I can look at them,” she explained.

Kazimir talked about how the new road project he was assigned to protect was coming along. How he was really growing to admire the conscripted men who broke their backs building the thing. “It’s great, how fast they work no matter how hot it gets or how bad their joints and bones must ache, don’t you agree?”

“Of course,” Sabine said.

The two walked past a backstreet that looked rather empty. Not about to turn down an opportunity to hold Sabine’s hand in private, Kazimir said, “Let’s turn here.” So the two did. They made it halfway down the street before a back door slammed open a few feet away and interrupted them. “I can hold my liquor just fine,” Kazimir heard an all-too familiar voice say. Viktor stumbled out of the door and onto the street.

Kazimir stopped. It wasn’t too late to turn around and walk in the other direction. Maybe Viktor wouldn’t see him and Sabine. Kazimir grabbed Sabine’s hand and turned around quickly.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” Kazimir heard Viktor say from behind as he heard footsteps running up on him. “If it isn’t the little Kazimir, with a woman of all things.” Viktor grabbed Kazimir by the shoulder forcing him to stop. Kazimir squeezed Sabine’s hand tight before letting it go and turning back around. Kazimir wanted Sabine to think he had this under control, that everything would be fine, although he knew the truth.

“Hello, Viktor.” Kazimir had to concentrate to keep his voice from shaking.

Viktor laughed. “Why didn’t you just tell me you were busy getting laid? I would have understood that. A man’s got to get off.” Viktor looked Sabine over. “And I’m guessing that she’s better than your hand.”

Kazimir felt his face redden. It was one thing to run away when Viktor insulted him, but it was another to have Viktor insult Sabine. “How about you share a good lay with an old war buddy?” Viktor took a step closer to Sabine. “She’s not one of those dirty women I’ve warned you about, is she?”

“Viktor, stop.” Kazimir positioned himself in between Sabine and Viktor. Viktor jerked his head as if startled.

“Growing balls now, are we?” Viktor, with wide eyes, looked at Kazimir. “Come on, there’s no need to be greedy. We all get an equal amount, right? We’re comrades.”

Sabine took a few steps back, like she was going to run off, but Viktor grabbed her. “Let go of her.” Kazimir tried to tackle Viktor but instead was greeted with a right hook that sent Kazimir to the ground. It felt like his jaw had been knocked out of place, and from the ground Kazimir could see Viktor hold onto Sabine with one hand and grab the flowers from her with the other.

“Did you buy her these? What are you, some romantic now?”

Sabine struggled with Victor. “Don’t touch me,” Sabine demanded but was ignored.

Kazimir felt completely off balance as he stood back up. He charged at Viktor again and found himself on the ground, again, this time with blood seeping out of a new cut under his right eye. He was no match for Viktor, and he knew it. “I’m warning

you,” Kazimir said, his entire body now shaking as he stood back up. Everything felt surreal, and his head was ringing and pulsating from the two punches.

“Piss off,” Viktor said as he advanced on Sabine. Even when threatened, Viktor still sounded authoritative.

All of Kazimir’s inadequacy came to the forefront. Being unable to fight during the war. Being unable to stand up for himself after the war. And now this, watching Viktor grab at Sabine’s dress as she tried to fight back. Kazimir had to stop this. Despite the warm August air that enveloped the narrow back street, Kazimir’s legs felt as if they’d just been frozen into a block of ice. His arms felt as if they were being cranked up by some external force into the firing position, the pistol from his holster in hand. Everything went silent for Kazimir. He couldn’t hear the ringing in his ear or Sabine’s screams or his own heartbeat. He could only hear his finger pull the trigger and the bullet cracking Viktor’s skull.

Reality stayed suspended even after Viktor’s limp body hit the uneven pavement and Sabine ran off, terrified. Kazimir took a step back so the red that now covered the Albiflorus on the ground and encircled Viktor’s head wouldn’t get on Kazimir’s boots, and that was when it hit him. He had killed Viktor. He had killed. Without another second of hesitation, Kazimir started running. He realized the pistol was still in his hand, so he holstered it. He didn’t want to run down a street waving a pistol, but the gun seemed to gain the weight of a thousand pounds once back at his side. It was almost as if it was too heavy to run with, but he ran with it anyway.

He couldn’t go back to the Russian barracks. Whether to prevent a rape or not, Kazimir had shot an esteemed soldier of the Soviet Army, a man who had risked his life

for his country for years. Viktor had won medals for his acts of courage and duty during the war. No one would listen to a word Kazimir had to say. So Kazimir continued to run. It was as if he'd never stepped foot in Vienna before, like he hadn't spent the last year occupying the city. Everything seemed unfamiliar to him. Even the idea of home in Moscow seemed unfamiliar to him.

What should he do now? Get out of Vienna. Out of Austria even. Burn his uniform. Change his name. Grow a beard. He just ran. And ran. Once he was completely out of breath, he decided to hide, at least until the sun had fully set and he could think straight and figure out what to do next. He slowed down to a fast walk and tried to take in his surroundings. He wasn't sure which district of Vienna he was in, he just knew he had to get off the streets. What if someone had seen him shoot Viktor? What if that someone was identifying Kazimir to the Russian Kommissars right now? What if Sabine was testifying against him? Kazimir spotted an abandoned, half-torn-down shop only a few feet away. Kazimir waited until an old man carrying groceries passed down the street before sneaking in through the shop's side door.

Rubble and dust covered the abandoned building's floor, and black ash on its walls made it obvious that this old shop had suffered from a fire. Kazimir stayed close to the ground – dirt getting all over his once perfectly clean uniform – trying not to be seen through any of the broken front windows. Kazimir found stairs at the back of the shop and climbed up until he found himself in an attic. The beams of the attic looked rotten, like they could collapse at any moment, so Kazimir took a seat against the building's frame, hoping it would be sturdier. He took his pistol out of its holster and placed the horrible thing on the beam in front of him.

He stared at the gun until he started to cry. How had he gotten here? How was it that he couldn't shoot the enemy during war but he could shoot a comrade during peace time? Russian versus Russian. Had he done the right thing? Was this all Sabine's fault? Kazimir thought of Sabine screaming. He replayed the image of the bullet ripping through Viktor's head. He tried to imagine the two times Viktor had been wounded during the war. He pictured Viktor lying in his own blood from multiple mortar shell wounds, hundreds of miles from Moscow in the winter of '41. Kazimir thought about Moscow. All the imaginary images he held dear of him and Sabine having their own apartment next to the Khamovniki District were now covered in the same black ash as these shop walls. His fairy-tale dream had ended, killed alongside Viktor. Kazimir had to get out of Vienna.

As the sun set, Kazimir paid close attention through the thin attic walls to every sound that came from the streets. He listened to see if he could hear someone from the sidewalk talking about a dead body being found. He listened for any commotion, thinking he might be able to make the distinction between the sound of Russian footsteps and anything else that might pass by. This was worse than any paranoia he'd felt during the war. Was it because he was guilty? Guilty of a horrible crime. Guilty of not taking responsibility for what just happened. He heard a couple cars pass by, followed by several loud booms. He curled up even more into himself. Kazimir couldn't tell if his mind was playing tricks on him or not. He couldn't tell how many booms he'd heard. Ten? Was that the sound of a car backfiring or a rifle being shot? His eyes darted around the attic. He imagined shadows of Austrian men against one of the seared walls. There was a strong knocking in his head, but he could not let in the fact that he was guilty for

the death of more than one. Kazimir tried to rekindle the thoughts of Sabine, his white sparrow, but he couldn't.

Blue Waltz

1949.

When a rifle surrounded by four concrete walls is fired, it's sometimes hard at first to tell which direction it's coming from. The sound of the spinning bullet, forced out of a gas operated chamber at a speed of 2,411 feet per second, can ricochet off hard surfaces ten times, each sound wave hitting the core of an individual's eardrums. Even as Martin Telarik felt the splatter of a warm and wet sensation against his cheek, his brain didn't want to see the image of the man right beside him falling into his own pool of blood. Martin's brain tried to blur the image of the SKS 45 now being pointed directly at him. He could not process the reality that he was next to get shot. Nor could he process the irony behind the fact that he'd survived the war and now was going to be killed during peace time. His brain hadn't digested the last fifteen minutes, the Russian soldiers gathering him up with nine other Austrians. Putting them all in a line in front of a firing squad.

“*Gotov. Napravtye. Strelyat,*” one Russian said. He wore a grey double breasted coat with a gold hammer and sickle pin on his collar.

Living in the Russian occupied zone of Vienna for the past four years, Martin had picked up enough of the language to know the officer had just given the young private in green orders to fire the rifle pointed at Martin. Martin scrambled through his brain for one last thought. He told himself not to focus on the noise of the trigger being pulled or the bullet spinning or the sound of his chest being ripped open by a single 7.62x39mm piece of lead. Instead, the last thing he heard before he died was the memory of his best friend, Joachim, playing the second violin in Mozart’s opera, *Don Giovanni*.

1948.

Martin’s back hurt as he sat on the only dining room chair he owned and stared at his oblong violin case. Worse than his stomach growling was knowing that he’d missed his chance for the day to appease his hunger. There’d be another opportunity tomorrow, he tried to hope. Another freelancing gig for him and his violin, where payment would probably be food, as being paid in actual money was quite the rarity these days. But his hope was miniscule. What external forces, he wondered, might prevent him from being able to make it to whatever job he might get tomorrow?

He’d woken up that very morning with every intention of making it to the casino gig, a one day deal of playing upbeat music in a quartet while the casino hosted its second anniversary of business. But Martin had been late leaving his apartment. There’d been quite the commotion outside his window as he got ready. A Russian had been found

dead in the streets that morning. From what Martin gathered as he stuck his head out the window to look at the corpse on the stone pavement four stories below, the man had fallen to his death. The deceased Russian could have very possibly gotten drunk the night before and stumbled off one of the balconies of an adjacent building. That sort of thing happened every now and then. But whatever the man's cause of death, whether the deceased was at fault or not, didn't really matter. Martin knew Austrians would still be rounded up, placed in the front of a firing squad and shot in retaliation. That's just how the Soviets controlling the Viennese zone ruled. One Russian dead equaled ten Austrians dead. A Machiavellian society run by fear, although to Martin, the men in red were still better than the ones who had worn brown. At least now, Austrians were no longer being killed by Austrians. However, the dead Russian still meant that Martin didn't leave his apartment in time to go to his job. The fear had worked. He didn't want to be caught in his apartment hallways or out on the street. The risk of being rounded up and shot in retaliation was too great. So he waited under the retaliation period was over. And by then, Martin only had fifteen minutes to make it to the casino on the other side of the city. Walking was no longer an option and the mass transportation system had stopped running halfway through the war. So, Martin's only hope was hitchhiking. But that damn violin case. No one would pick up a hitchhiker holding such a case, and because of that he'd missed his gig.

Martin stood up from his wooden dining room chair and went over to the sink in the kitchen for a glass of water. Remnants of wallpaper dangled from above the kitchen's countertops. Bits of dry wall had been shaken out of place from a bombing that occurred in the first district a few years prior. Any paintings he once had hanging throughout his

apartment had been bartered for food. The only decoration left was a small photograph of his grandfather and grandmother. Occasionally, Martin felt badly that he couldn't provide his apartment with proper maintenance, but having the extra cash for such upkeep wasn't always a priority in Martin's mind. Today, his only thoughts were hunger, his back pain and his oblong violin case. People had warned him before: No one will pick up a hitchhiker holding a case like that. People are just too scared of what might be in it. If only Martin had gotten a violin case that was actually in the shape of a violin, then drivers' minds would be more at ease, more willing to trust a man holding what was obviously an instrument versus a man just holding a case. But Martin hadn't been able to afford one. So he drank his glass of water, hoping it would fill his stomach. In a few hours he'd be required to do more conscripted labor for his country, an unpaid community service to clean up remnants still left over from bombings three years ago. An abled body thirty-year-old male, one still having all his limbs, was a first pick for service. The country had recruited him to help with the cleanup even when he still had a steady job, working part time in the Bühnenmusik.

Martin rubbed the sore parts of his back, which hurt from all the heavy lifting of conscripted service, as he downed four more glasses of water, still feeling the hunger growl in his stomach.

1946.

Udo Wolf, the personnel manager of the opera house, called Martin into his office on a Thursday, exactly one year after the city of Vienna was liberated from Hitler and

officially divided into four zones amongst four different countries: France, Britain, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Martin was in the midst of unpacking his instrument, taking out his bow, tightening the hair and applying rosin. “It’ll just take a moment,” Udo said.

Martin placed his bow back in his case and followed the older gentleman into an office which smelled of fresh Viennese coffee and rich chocolate.

“Please,” Udo pointed a wrinkled hand with callused fingers at the seat directly across from his desk. “Can I order you a cup from the canteen?”

Martin shook his head no, more concerned with what the manager wanted to talk about than the dark syrup of Krönung that Udo was beginning to sip from a ceramic mug.

Udo quietly smacked his lips underneath his mustache after he set his mug down and let out a sigh. “If there are two things we Viennese still have, it’s great coffee and music.”

Martin nodded and let a beat pass before asking, “So what did you want to talk to me about?”

Udo laid his elbows on his desk, crossing his forearms and leaning forward, a stance which made Martin nervous as this looked rather serious. “You’ve been with this opera house for a long time. How many years now? Ten?”

Martin nodded again.

“We’ve all been through a lot together, losing the Staatsoper last year.” Udo removed his arms from his desk and relaxed back into his chair. Martin stayed tense. “But having the opportunity to move the operas and their productions to the Volksoper, it really shows that the music wasn’t killed in the war.” Udo swung slightly from side to

side in his swivel chair as he ran his index finger just under the bottom of his lip. “This temporary opera house, this is our hope, us showing survival.”

Martin wished the optimism Udo had was contagious. He wished he’d had the same sense of pride everyone else in the opera house did, both the stage orchestra, the Bühnenmusik, and the pit orchestra, the Vienna Philharmonic. But Martin’s chest didn’t swell up from Udo’s words, nor did his back straighten with confidence. Instead he just stayed crouched in the chair.

“Martin, I would hate to see you go, but the director has noticed your performance deteriorating.” Udo’s bushy eyebrows hung slightly passed his lashes. But even underneath the thick peppered brow, Martin could recognize the look in his manager’s eyes. It was that same look that was floating through Vienna. That look of people who were trying to regain their pride while still trapped under massive piles of rubble.

Martin finally leaned forward in his chair, rubbing the knuckles of his right hand with the fingers that had run over the fingerboard of his violin billions of times. “I’m sorry, Herr Wolf. I’ve been trying, it’s just —“ Martin paused. What was it exactly? What was still dropping tiny bombs in the center of his chest? “Where are you living these days?”

Udo looked a little taken back by Martin’s question, but with a simple shrug of his shoulders he said, “The 19th district. Why?”

“An American zone?”

“Yes.”

“We’re all still so divided.” The words stumbled out of Martin before he had a chance to restrain them.

“All of Austria’s problems can’t go away overnight.”

“I know.”

“This city’s trying to recoup.” Udo’s voice sounded more like a plea than someone who’d been offended.

“I know, I know. I’ve just been recruited for conscripted service. When I’m not playing here I’m lifting concrete bricks from destroyed buildings.” Martin detested the whining he heard in his own voice. He didn’t want to complain that the manual labor was taking a toll on his back, which in turn made it troublesome to sit up with his violin in the playing position for multiple hours. He knew giving voice to such a petty thing when most of the country’s men were walking around with missing limbs would almost be childish. So he tried to compose himself before he opened his mouth again. “I’ll step it up,” Martin said. He had probably just told a lie.

“No one can honestly say that this country isn’t still divided, but we, with this opera house, have a chance to restore some of its unity, Martin. Lend Vienna’s ears your talent and craft. People need it now more than ever.”

The words *people need it now more than ever* reminded Martin of what his grandfather Wilhelm had said when he had given Martin his very first violin when Martin was only six. Martin felt a little flicker of his grandfather’s passion rekindled in him for a second, and he tried to make that second last as long as possible, but it was immediately destroyed with the memory of the Staatsoper, the old state opera house, on fire.

“Well, I won’t keep you any longer.” Udo stood up and opened the office door for Martin. Martin walked back to the dressing room and picked up his violin, surveying every grain of his instrument’s wood. He felt a level of anxiety grow inside him. He

couldn't tell if it was because he finally realized his job was on the line or if it was just another jolt of panic that had swept over Martin so often in the last eight years. He tried to regain that flicker of passion that the remembrance of his grandfather's words had sparked. But that passion just seemed to be one more thing that had been incinerated.

1945.

The air raid sirens started going off as Martin was in his apartment practicing his orchestral excerpts from *Die Götterdämmerung*, the fourth opera of Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. The pitch of the sirens that spread over the city clashed intensively with the low somber music of the "Funeral March," immediately forcing Martin to stop playing.

Within moments, Martin felt the fourth floor of his apartment begin to shake, and the sound of explosions hit his ear drums far worse than just the noise of the sirens. He could hear yelling outside his apartment window. The sirens had gone off before. Martin knew where to run, how to hide, but this time the ground was shaking rather violently underneath him, causing his mind to mimic the same instability.

In a hurry, he grabbed his instrument and bow in one hand, his oblong case in the other, and tucked his music stand, to which he had his music clipped, underneath his arm. He then took off full speed down the hallway and four flights of stairs, hoping to make it to his apartment building's basement as fast as possible. But an image through the main entrance window caught Martin's eyes, immediately forcing him to a halt. The first district was covered in pillows of smoke. Martin knew that throughout the war, the allies had avoided bombing certain areas of the city, like Stephans Dom and the Staatsoper, but

now, Martin could see that area engulfed in a black haze. He could no longer bring himself to go down to the basement, but finally took a second to pack his violin in its case as he waited in his apartment entryway, the ground still shaking. Once the sirens wound down and no more explosions could be heard, Martin walked outside his building and down the stone paved streets, his mind so consumed with the sights and sounds he didn't even notice the objects he still carried, his violin in its case and his music stand. There was a collision of people both running toward the smoke covered first district and those running away from it. As Martin neared the Staatsoper, the number of buildings which had fire roaring through their windows began to increase drastically. The smell of explosives and burning concrete hit his nose strong enough to make Martin feel like he could taste tiny scolding pebbles in the back of his throat.

By the time he made it to the Staatsoper, the glass of its windows had been replaced with blazing red flames. Martin, his hands still occupied by both his violin and his music stand, had no free hand with which to wipe the tears that welled up in his eyes. Suddenly, it was like the commotion in the streets and buildings slowly turning into ash were nonexistent, and the only thing that was real was the dying Staatsoper. The thing he loved the most, his opportunity to play in one of the most beautiful, poetic opera houses in the world was disintegrating right in front of him. The tarnished green roofing was barely visible below the flames and smoke that mounted above it. The ornate rows of archways that once seemed the entrance to relief now seemed like the gates to hell. And Martin couldn't even wrap his mind around what was being cremated inside the building. His place on the stage, Joachim's old spot in the pit, the seating for the audience to come share the passion of music with the musician. It was all up in flames.

Martin finally sat his music stand down to wipe the tears that flowed over his cheek and noticed the large crowd that had gathered around him, all of them, he imagined, watching as the soundtracks to their lives were massacred right in front of them. One lady with a brunette bun neatly tucked just underneath her small cartwheel hat looked over at Martin. “You used to play in there?” she asked, her voice quivering, as she pointed at Martin’s music stand. Martin stood still. “Will you play something for us now?” the woman said as she pulled a handkerchief from her purse and blew her nose. Martin thought about the “Funeral March” he had just been practicing. He thought about *Don Giovanni*, the first opera Joachim and he ever played in the opera house. Martin just remained still, unpacking neither his bow nor his instrument for the lady’s request.

1939.

Even though the house lights were only dimly lit during rehearsals, Martin could still see the grandeur of the opera seating. Rows and rows of comfortable looking red velvet chairs and five stories of balcony seating, each balcony framed by ornate candle holders and watched over by elegant statues of goddesses that rested just below the ceiling. The chandelier, a dangling crystal extravaganza of lights and reflecting hues, seemed larger than Martin’s entire living room, and the fresco paintings on each individual panel of the auditorium’s ceiling were far more elaborate than any painting Martin hung in his apartment. The Bühnenmusik mostly played back stage, so when he did make it around the production backdrops, the sight was normally breathtaking. But not today. Martin was preoccupied.

He stepped to the front of the stage, looking over at where the Vienna Philharmonic sat. It didn't make sense to Martin, why he hadn't heard from his best friend in three days. So Martin surveyed the pit area and found Joachim's seat empty, no sign of him or his violin case in sight. Martin couldn't believe it.

"Martin." He heard Udo's voice behind him and quickly felt a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Have you heard from Joachim at all?"

"No, not a word." Martin turned around to face Udo.

"Neither have we."

"I have no idea where he could be." Martin heard the panic in his own voice as he watched Udo's face sink, giving Martin the feeling that Udo knew something he did not. "What is it?"

Udo shook his head, an irritating response for Martin, who wanted an answer. Martin understood that, at only twenty-one-years-of-age, he was one of the youngest musicians in the house, but he didn't need to be babied. He just needed Udo to let him in on whatever cruel secret this was.

Udo gave Martin a few pats on his shoulder and very quietly said, "I just hope it's not what I think it is," before walking away, leaving Martin with more fear than he had before. What if Joachim had been right?

No, Martin argued with himself. There had to be a logical explanation. Martin straightened the collar on his shirt, hoping the action would help straighten his thoughts. His hands were still soft, as were the rest of his mind and body. His back hadn't once felt a single pain, and his brain refused to believe the truth, that he would never see Joachim again.

1938.

It was Martin's turn to buy a round, so he ordered two more drinks from the waiter as he sat in the wooden booth next to Joachim in the Augstiner Keller. The ceilings of the tavern were a collection of stone archways and the lighting came from a hanging wooden chandelier and small candles at each individual table.

"You look so down, my friend," Martin said to Joachim. "Please, let me buy you some food."

"I'm not hungry," Joachim said. Although a year older than Martin, Joachim was the smaller of the two. His shoulders were not nearly as stout and his arms always seemed to dangle by his thin sides.

"I don't see why you're so worried," Martin said.

"Have you not heard all the anti-Semitic speeches that the party preaches?" Joachim eyes were shifting under the bangs he wore parted right down the center of his scalp.

"I don't support that aspect any more than you do. But, these Germans aren't bad people. They're just like us. We're all trying to rebuild our livelihood after being stripped of it during the treaty."

Joachim went silent again.

"Please friend," Martin said, his compassionate eyes quietly begging Joachim to have some hope. "Drink your beer. See if it won't lift your spirits."

Joachim remained still.

"So what if the referendum is coming? I don't see what's so bad about Austria uniting with Germany and gaining a steady government."

“Of course you don’t see.” Martin was startled by how loudly Joachim spoke.
“You’re not Jewish.”

Martin threw his arm around Joachim and tried to give him a little shake to lighten the mood. “You’re just stressed. We’re all stressed. This production of *The Merry Widow* has everyone in the opera house stressed.”

“This isn’t about the opera house.” The darkness in Joachim’s voice unsettled Martin, but Martin still tried to put his friend in higher spirits.

“What do you think about Hans’s violin solo in the second act,” Martin asked. “I personally think he’s using too much vibrato. How would you play it?”

Joachim didn’t answer Martin’s question, nor did he say another word the rest of the evening.

1936.

Joachim was full of words as he and Martin sat in the Augstiner Keller, celebrating the good news. “We’ve done it, old pal. We’ve really done it.” The two friends clinked their beers together, said prost, and took gigantic gulps.

“To the two newest members of the Wiener Staatsoper!” Martin said, as the two cheered and gulped their beers again.

“To the first opera we will play in the house, *Don Giovanni!*”

They set their beers down but kept the large grins on their faces. “Joachim Löwenstein, second violin section of the Vienna Philharmonic,” Martin said in an announcer’s voice.

“And Martin Telarik, violinist of the Bühnenmusik,” Joachim mimic Martin’s tone.

“We’re finally on top of the world, you know that.”

“Yes, we are old pal, yes we are.”

Other men that shared the long communal table with the two musicians looked over at Martin and Joachim as they continued to share their excitement.

“We’ve earned this,” Joachim said in a slightly quieter voice as he ordered another beer from the waiter for himself and for his friend. He let out a laugh. “Do you remember how clumsy we played when we first met each other, what was that, six years ago?”

The memory forced a laugh out of Martin that almost made his stomach hurt. “God, we were amateurs. Herr Reinhart harshly critiqued me on every aspect of my performance when we first started together at the Akademie.”

“You would play with your shoulders raised almost up to your ears.” Joachim joked. “It looked absolutely exhausting.”

“I was just out of grammar school, what could you expect?” Martin finished the rest of his beer.

“You had a good ear for the music, though, even back then.” Joachim, falling slightly behind Martin with the amount of beer he’d drank, made an effort to finish off his drink as well, but failed, allowing a small stream of Ottakringer to drip down his chin.

Martin nodded at the compliment and reached for some napkins across the table. His friend always got a little sentimental when he was tipsy.

The two continued chugging beers until they were both drunk. Martin felt he should walk his friend back home to the Hoher Markt since Joachim was not quite as good at holding his beer. Joachim slurred out a thank you as they arrived at Joachim's doorstep. "Get some sleep. Tomorrow the real work begins." Martin was slurring a little himself. "We need to constantly remind the Staatsoper's music directors why they hired such talented gentlemen in the first place."

"Exactly," Joachim said as he stumbled into the door of his apartment complex.

Martin laughed. "You drunkard. Do you need me to walk you up to your apartment as well?"

"No, no, no. I'll be just fine." Joachim hiccupped. "I'll see you and your violin bright and early tomorrow."

"Bright and early tomorrow," Martin repeated as he waited for Joachim to shut the door behind himself. Martin debated whether he should take the street car back to the second district, but decided instead to take a stroll. It would help with the hangover tomorrow, he thought, if he walked off some of the booze tonight. He circled Stephans Dom, his arms at his sides with hands open so he could feel the breeze as it ran through his fingers.

He noticed that the pacing of his walk slightly mimicked the rhythm of Johann Strauss's "Blue Danube Waltz." He gazed at the mosaic roofing of the cathedral which rested a good thirty feet underneath the ornate steeple that pierced the starless sky. The outer walls of the cathedral were covered in statues depicting the triumph of good over evil, stone bodies of demons being crushed, their faces in absolute agony, at the feet of saints and angels, whose every wrinkle in their garments were dimensional thanks to the

artist's chisel. Martin could not tell if it was just because he was drunk, but he felt he could relate to the victories of the saints. He held in him an optimism as gold as the plated structures surrounding him.

Martin continued his stroll down Kärntner Straße until he reached the Wiener Staatsoper, a marvelous building lit up to showcase stories and rows of windowed archways, each twenty-feet tall and topped with circular carvings in the stone. Even as a child, this building had been Martin's favorite. And now it was his place of work. Martin continued up the Ring Straße, this time, consciously matching each step he took with the waltz that played loudly in his head. With each crescendo and decrescendo of the violin measures he'd either speed up or slow down his pace, recreating the teasing rhythm of the musical piece he adored. He passed the Hofburg, a full-block-long winged structure that encased a sea green statue of Prince Eugene of Savoy, one of the most successful military commanders of modern European history. The masterpieces of the architecture seemed to amplify the lyrical melody that rang in Martin's head.

The climax of the waltz hit as the Parliament came into sight to Martin's left. In the classical Greek structure, two rows of eight pillars held up the buildings port. Behind the pillars were frescos, impeded with golden flakes, depicting various scenes of beautiful women with their children. This was life and Martin would have his chance at it soon.

Martin imagined people clapping and cheering, giving a standing ovation to the waltz his mind had just played, as he passed the last few building of the Ring Straße, the Rathaus and the Universität. Martin said a goodnight prayer for the first district before making his way back to his apartment.

Once inside he took off his shoes and relaxed onto the couch. His violin case rested on its side next to the dining room table, and Martin couldn't help but feel a sense of pride as he drunkenly stared at it. The picture of his grandfather Wilhelm and grandmother Amalia he kept tacked on his wall seemed to be looking at Martin, sharing the same level of joy.

1924.

Martin had just blown out the candle on the birthday cake his grandmother had baked. "Zum Geburtstag , meinem Enkel." Amalia stiffly leaned down to give her grandson a kiss on his forehead.

"Danke, Oma." Martin smiled as Amalia hovered over the table and cut the small cake into slices so Martin, herself and Martin's grandfather could all have a piece.

Wilhelm, sat at the dining room table, watching his wife affectionately. Once all the slices were cut, Amalia took the cake back into the kitchen, leaving the two gentlemen at the table.

"Six years old now." Wilhelm's voice was raspy from years of smoking a pipe, yet it still sounded compassionate to Martin. "You seem to grow even faster than your father." The old man scratched the wrinkles on his chin, his hand void of a trigger finger. All Martin knew about his grandfather's missing finger was that he'd lost it, and his son and daughter-in-law, to the Great War.

Amalia came back into the dining room, carrying with her a small oblong case wrapped in scrap ribbons she must have saved from an old shirt. "For you, mein Enkel,

from your Opa and me.” She sat the case down in front of the six-year-old so he could untie the ribbon, unsnap the buckles on the side of the case and open the top.

“It’s beautiful,” Martin said, pulling out the miniature violin.

Martin plucked the strings that were badly out of tune. His grandfather reached for the bow latched inside the top half of the case and turned a knob at the end of the bow to tighten the bow’s hair. Martin watched as Wilhelm pulled from the case a circular lump, about the size of a small stack of coins. “This is rosin,” he said as he applied the lump to the bow’s hair. “It makes the hair of the bow sticky so the hair can better grasp hold of the violin’s strings.

Wilhelm turned to his wife. “Will you play me a D minor chord on the piano?” Amalia walked to the living struck the chord requested while Wilhelm tuned the instrument.

When Amalia came back to the dining room, she showed Martin how to rest the base of the violin under his neck and how to hold the neck of his instrument with his left hand. “Just like that,” Amalia said.

Wilhelm gave Martin a huge grin as Martin attempted to glide the bow over the strings. “This can be your salvation,” Wilhelm said. “Your shot at immortality.” Martin shifted his attention from the violin to his grandfather.

“Everything concrete in this world will disappear. Eventually be taken away from you,” Wilhelm continued. “But people that have music living in them can’t die. It keeps their souls alive.”

Wilhelm glanced over at his wife, who stood next to the table, a look of sadness in her eyes. “Not only does it keep the living from dying, but it can bring the dead back to

life, in a sense. Remember that, okay.” Martin’s grandfather placed his hand with its missing finger on Martin’s shoulder. “People need to know that now more than ever.”

Martin again placed the violin underneath his neck and the bow just above the bridge, slowly pulling the bow across the G string until the noise finally became a full sound that resonated through his grandparents’ apartment. He played the same note again as he looked at the open window in the living room. He imagined the sound of the note he played as an immortal entity being caught in the Viennese breeze and whisked down the stone paved streets.

Drawing Lines

The nurse sat by the bedside of one of the soldiers as Dietrich, at the table, hesitantly laid down his winning hand of Rummy. He was cautious of how the young man sitting across from him would handle losing. This was the first time Dietrich had ever played cards with Konrad, ever talked to him really. Konrad just looked at the cards, his face twitching a little, and asked, “So I shuffle now?”

Relieved wasn't the right word for Dietrich, but he was excited to get to play another round of cards. The last soldier who'd sat at the table with Dietrich got really upset when he'd lost at a round of Sixty-Six. So upset that the nurse had to help calm the man down. Winning and losing is a part of life, Dietrich's uncle would always say when Dietrich was a child learning how to play Tarock, Schnapse and even a little poker, whenever Dietrich's mother wasn't around of course. But such a comment would never come from the mouth of a frontline soldier.

The table was on the far south wall of the elongated room. The east and west walls were lined with headboards of beds, each a few feet apart. A German flag with three horizontal strips – black, white and red – hung over the door. It was obvious that this “hospital” had originally been a house here in the French countryside, and Dietrich couldn’t tell whether he liked that fact or not. Konrad dealt ten cards as Dietrich looked around at soldiers lying in the room’s ten beds. Most of the soldiers brought here were done bleeding, had survived the stage of red soaked gauzes.

Dietrich picked up his cards and watched as Konrad clumsily organized his hand. Konrad reached down to scratch his right calf before remembering there was nothing below his knee. Konrad’s amputation had gone well, from what Dietrich could tell. It was the twitch in Konrad’s face that had landed this soldier a longer stay in this particular room.

The two played cards until the afternoon, when the nurse tried to round up all ten patients for a walk outside. This had become one of the daily fights between Dietrich and the nurse – whose name Dietrich didn’t care to learn. Dietrich didn’t like the nurse. He didn’t like her porcelain skin or her soft hair. He didn’t like her constantly calm voice or her dainty waist. It was like she was trying to remind Dietrich that he no longer belonged in the society she’d come from. He wanted the nurse to be a brutish, large-boned woman who spoke in a heavy voice. To be foul-mouthed and offensive, not quiet and sweet. Most importantly, though, he did not want to go outside.

“Look how pale your skin is getting,” the nurse argued. Dietrich refused to move from the table even after Konrad had put on his coat and was out the door with the rest of the men. He was going to break this nurse. He was going to teach her that just like

Rummy, you can arrange and strategize the cards you've been dealt, but you have no control of what you will draw. He was going to make her raise her voice, make her curse him. If he was lucky, he might even be able to push her to violence. But today, she would not give him the satisfaction. She stayed that petite, grotesquely sweet being and left Dietrich alone in the room while she walked with the rest of the men outside.

Outside, Konrad convinced himself that it was the brightness of sun that made his face twitch. He used a crutch to substitute for his amputated right leg, as his left leg felt the cold French breeze just under his pant cuff. He believed all the sensations were now stronger in his left leg. He believed he could feel every muscle tighten and contract as he walked, doubling in strength as it stood alone.

Conversation was almost nonexistent outside the small house. Men walked around the half acreage of land and kept to themselves while the nurse, Frau Gall, walked amongst the patients and intermittently asked questions.

"Joseph, is your stomach still upsetting you today? Peter, aren't you cold simply sitting on the grass? Konrad, it sure is bright today, isn't it?"

"Yes," Konrad said politely.

"If only it would get as warm as the sun is bright."

Konrad smiled. He was having one of those mornings where he felt normal, or at least what he imagined normal felt like. He thought about why Peter sat in the grass on a cold day and didn't walk around and try to warm up. And he wondered if the nurse was nice in an attempt to boost the men's moral or if she was nice just as a way to try and keep herself sane. It seemed wrong, her having to work day and night in such a dreary

place. He thought the nurse should be out dancing, in a lovely gown with her face painted, instead of in a white uniform without the slightest hint of color on her cheeks. He thought she should be wearing nice shoes, like the shoes he used to make on his father's farm before getting drafted. But the nurse's shoes were battered, as were Peter's.

"Your feet hurt?" Konrad walked up to Peter. "Is that why you're sitting down?"

Peter didn't respond or even acknowledge Konrad's presence. Most men weren't well spoken or mannered after leaving the trenches, and Konrad easily recalled the times and days when he didn't feel the need to respond to anyone, either. That's why Dietrich had caught Konrad's attention when Konrad had arrived a few days prior. Dietrich seemed more aware than the other eight guys who lay around all day. Yet the other eight guys would actually leave the hospital room and Dietrich wouldn't. Odd.

He felt his face twitch again as he looked down at Peter, sitting in the grass with a rolled cigarette now a flimsy cylinder of ash as it burned almost down to his fingers. "I used to make shoes," Konrad said to the seemingly lifeless man. "I could make shoes that would ensure no man's feet hurt, not even if he'd been plowing the field since before the sun rose. It's what I'm good at."

Konrad kept his eyes straight forward and imagined that he was talking to Dietrich. "I used to work in the fields," he continued. "But around the time I was a teenager, my father realized my real talent was shoes."

Konrad didn't look back down at Peter. He saw images of Peter with his face mutilated. One gash the width of an axe just underneath his right eye and another taking off most of his upper lip. The oral wound bleeding the most. It would be the one to kill

him. Konrad spoke of life in southern Germany – shoe making, days on the farm – a time before he had been drafted and sent to fight in France. He spoke about how durable he made the soles of his shoes and tried to not let his imagination run wild.

He looked at Dietrich through the window. He tried to focus on Frau Gall. Anything but what he imagined of Peter's face. He tried to muzzle the nerves that seemed to suddenly be getting the best of him. His fingertips were going numb but he couldn't blame it on the cold, and his face was twitching rapidly but he couldn't blame it on the sun.

Once Dietrich had the room to himself, he lay on his bed and pulled out the postcard he'd received from a courier in his Bavarian 16th Infantry regiment. On the front of the postcard was a colored drawing of a town square similar to one where he'd grown up in Austria: the buildings a dull brown yet grand with ornate statues on their rooftops and balconies, people merrily crossing the street and a carriage pulled by handsome horses happily trotting down the road. The image made Dietrich's chest ache almost as much as the fact that the back side of the postcard was completely blank. Not a drop of ink of what he wished to express to his family. Rumors were spreading that the war was almost over and that the Austro-Hungarian Empire was going to pay the price. He'd already begun to hear that the border lines of the Empire were to be redrawn. That his country was going to lose most of its land.

As a map maker, he'd dedicated years of his life to drawing the country's boundaries, lining its cities, shading its terrains. And now that was all going to change, to be as irreversible as his feelings towards the outside, the dirt. As irreversible as his

hatred towards the normality he feared he could never regain. Now all those old lines would mean nothing.

Those who were outside walked back through the front door, a line of men whose offensive and eventually defensive lines couldn't protect the lines of the empires and countries they had fought for. Everything was in vain, pointless.

He hoped Konrad would be willing to play another hand of Rummy, but Konrad now looked paler. "Some of your men look a little worse than they did before going outside, nurse. Your methods seem to be failing quite badly." Dietrich made sure to put emphasis on the word failing. The nurse did not stir at this rude comment; she just politely helped the men back into their beds.

Konrad awoke with his shoe still on, which wasn't out of the ordinary. Sleeping in his shoe gave him a sense of home and life on the farm. What was out of the ordinary – or at least had been for a few weeks – was the burning smell which woke him. He looked around the room as the other men began to stir, and for a moment he couldn't remember where he was. Was this a German field hospital or a camp just outside the trenches? Had a grenade been thrown?

A man screamed "Fire!" and Konrad noticed Peter standing right next to a burning bed. Frau Gall directed the men to evacuate the hospital. A few men were using their blankets to try and smother the fire on Peter's bed. The hospital's doctor ran inside with a bucket of water and flung it on the flames. But the fire had already spread to the wooden floor.

"Everyone outside!" Frau Gall ordered, grabbing Peter.

Konrad noticed Dietrich standing by his own bed with a card in hand. “Come on.” Konrad went into auto-mode, grabbed his crutch and then Dietrich’s shirt collar. Konrad dragged Dietrich outside, catching a glimpse of the German flag being snagged by flames.

Outside, the doctor ran back to the water spout anchored in the ground and pumped more water into the bucket. Konrad imagined himself trying to carry the bucket of water with one hand while the other held onto his crutch. He imagined losing his balance and tumbling over in front of all the men while attempting a simple task.

“You crazy fucking lunatic,” a patient shouted at Peter, who stood next to Frau Gall. “You could have killed us all.”

“That was probably the point,” another said underneath his breath.

Frau Gall looked a little frightened, but her voice remained even. “Joseph, we need to stay calm for the moment. We don’t know what happened yet.”

Peter looked lost as he stuttered that he must have fallen asleep with a cigarette in hand. Konrad imagined the same lifeless Peter as yesterday, not moving as his cigarette burned down to his fingers, lying on top of his bed sheets.

“Fuck this lunatic,” Joseph yelled.

After pouring another bucket of water on the house now engulfed in flames, the doctor gave up trying to extinguish the fire and returned to Nurse Gall’s side.

“We’ll need to send a letter to the army. We’ll need a new place to stay.” The doctor seemed to be talking to himself more than Nurse Gall.

Joseph, however, continued to stalk Peter. Konrad looked over at Dietrich, curious what he thought of the situation, but Dietrich remained still, frightened.

Two more patients gathered around Peter, who looked oddly apathetic to the fact that men were hostilely approaching him. Frau Gall kept her voice steady as she continued to tell everyone to remain calm. The doctor tried to reason with the men by telling them what their next actions should be: There was a town about five miles away where they could get word out about their predicament. They could probably rest there for the remaining of the evening. But Konrad couldn't help wanting to side with Joseph. Peter's sloppy actions could have cost Konrad another leg. His face twitched as he imagined hacking Peter in the face with an axe, but the loud sound of Dietrich gasping for air took the thought out of his mind.

"The smoke get to you?" Konrad looked over at Dietrich, who was ghostly white. Konrad realized this was the first time he'd seen Deitrich outside. "Are you okay?"

When Deitrich didn't answer, Konrad went back to wondering what the men should do to Peter. They couldn't risk losing their lives now, after everything they had already been through.

"I'm not carrying that nurse if she can't handle a five mile walk," Dietrich finally spoke. It startled Konrad both that Dietrich said something and that his concern was for the nurse.

"I'm not walking next to a man who almost killed me," Joseph boomed.

"We're not going to just stand here outside in the cold without a place to sleep," the doctor said.

Outside it seemed as if the dirt surrounded him. Dietrich could smell it through his nostrils, feel its coarse texture underneath his bare feet. He imagined its graininess

grinding against his teeth, seeping underneath his pant legs, weighing on his stomach, pouring over his arms. The dirt. It made it hard to breathe. Overpowered any sense of cold. He had to get inside. He needed a wooden floor between him and the ground. He needed brick walls as shelter. He looked back at the house now engulfed in flames and got even more panicky. He tried to rub his fingers against the postcard he still held at his side, feeling its soft smooth texture and attempting to tell himself to stay calm.

“Everyone just stay calm,” he heard a soft female voice say. It soothed him, but only for a moment. He still felt the coarse dirt underneath his feet, rehashing vivid memories of his trench collapsing on top of him. Why couldn’t the nurse’s voice just keep him relaxed? Why couldn’t he feel comfort in the tones of a lovely woman like he once had?

“Peter will walk with us to the next safe town,” the doctor said to the men huddled outside. “Once we get in contact with the army, they will discipline him, not us.”

Joseph continued to protest and Dietrich watched as Konrad took Joseph’s side, but finally a patient who outranked Joseph agreed with the doctor, and the men began to walk to the next town.

Dietrich’s anxiety got the best of him the entire five miles. He couldn’t focus on the cork oak trees afar or the ice-tipped grass that lined the road or the iridescent clouds that covered the stars. He could only focus on the dirt that made the pathway. He had to remind himself to keep breathing, keep strumming his postcard, keep projecting all his hatred on the nurse, but it was still difficult to hold onto a single thought that was not absorbed with fear. He was nervous at how nervous he was. Scared at how much it

scared him to be outside. Would he never be straight, never be normal? Worse than a prisoner of war, he was a prisoner of his own mind. And how could anyone ever be released from their own mind? Answer me that, nurse. Walk along the sides of men as if their guardian angel and admit that it's all bullshit and that all the beauty and all the tenderness in this world can't do a thing to help us.

Dietrich continued to stumble through his thoughts as the doctor tried to strike up conversation. "You were an infantry navigator, right?" The doctor's bottom lip stuck out as he spoke.

Dietrich nodded.

"You don't happen to have your compass on you to make sure we're going the right way?"

Dietrich shook his head.

"So, how'd you get that job title?"

"From mapmaking."

"Excuse me?"

"I was a mapmaker before the war."

"Really? Interesting." The doctor breathed easily as if a five mile walk was common for him. Unfortunately the nurse was breathing easily as well and showing no signs of exhaustion. Konrad looked like he was having a little difficulty, hopping along on his one leg as he walked next to Joseph.

Just before sunrise, the men arrived at a quiet little French town that was supposedly neutral ground. They stayed in a barn with cots that only rose a few inches above the dirt floors. Dietrich lay down and immediately thought of the ground opening

its villainous mouth and swallowing him whole. He tried to be distracted by the barn-owner who spoke.

“You can only stay here for one day and one night. The French soldiers are going into towns and forcing captured Germans to parade in front of the entire town’s people.”

Dietrich told himself not to look down at the dirt, but he did anyway. Maybe it would have been better to not have clawed and crawled his way out of the buried trench. Was the alternative he chose better than death? What if he no longer had to worrying about the dirt? No longer had to worry about the outside? It would be so nice. He let these thoughts cradle him to sleep while the sun rose, and when he woke up Peter was dead and Dietrich couldn’t help but wish it had been him to go.

While all the other men drifted to sleep on the scattered cots alongside the barn’s empty stales, Joseph sat on the red linen and whispered to Konrad, “We cannot fall asleep next to Peter, it’s too dangerous, we’ve survived this lunatic once, the next time we might not be so fortunate, we’ve used up all our luck.” Joseph went on and on. Konrad had heard sleep-deprived men talk crazy before.

“I’m sure they confiscated his matches. We’ll be fine. What are the chances of the same incident happening twice?” Konrad remained lying down. His leg was tired. The walk had taken all his strength. But it was nice to have Joseph walk beside him the entire way. Joseph spat in anger, which made Konrad almost feel normal. Anger was a part of life and healthy in some cases. Joseph made it seem so natural, just like Konrad’s father had. Now the two just needed to get some rest.

Konrad closed his eyes for a moment, letting them go heavy. He opened them once to see if Joseph had lain down, but he hadn't. Joseph continued to stare at Peter's cot. The sun seeped through cracks between the barn's wooden panels and casted streaks of light across the sleeping men. Nurse Gall had been the only one invited to stay inside the house, which seemed fitting. Konrad, however, liked the opportunity to sleep in the barn. It reminded him of the barn on his dad's farm where Konrad used to sit for hours, sewing the hems around the heels of shoes. Konrad almost thought he could smell the leather. Feel its thick and sturdy texture in his hands.

Busy reminiscing, Konrad didn't first notice Joseph had quietly stood up and walked over to Peter's cot. "What are you doing?" Konrad softly asked as to not disturb the others. But Joseph didn't respond. He just quickly jumped onto Peter's cot and began strangling him. Konrad sat up. Should he stop this?

Konrad's face began to twitch convulsively; Peter struggled and kicked helplessly; other men woke up to the commotion, half of them going to Peter's aid, the other half remaining still. Did Joseph have the right to kill Peter? Had Peter's fire really been an accident? The Feldwebel-Leutnant tried to restrain Joseph, but in those few moments, Joseph had amassed the strength of a lion, holding onto his prey as if his life depended on it. By the time the Feldwebel-Leutnant grabbed his gun and shot Joseph, Peter was already lifeless.

The nurse claimed to have heard the gun shot and was by the doctor's side as he kneeled over Joseph. With all the hospital's materials destroyed in the fire the night before, there was not much the two could do, and Joseph bled out within a matter of hours.

The eight patients left remained absolutely quiet. Konrad's face was twitching so badly he couldn't keep his eyes open or his mouth closed, but still no words were spoken. Death seemed to engulf the barn the same way the flames had engulfed the hospital. Konrad had lain next to dead men before, but it was never something you got used to, especially if they were fellow German soldiers.

A truck arrived to take the men back to Germany that following evening, but first they had to dig graves for Peter and Joseph. Dietrich and the nurse were the only ones not to help.

After the dead bodies had been packed six feet under, the men crammed into the bed of the truck, their backs resting on the wooden railing, a canvas top over their head insufficiently blocking the wind that flew off the truck's metal cab as they made their way back to Central Power soil. No one talked to Dietrich the whole ride. Of course he felt guilty, like less of a man as he sat back and did nothing while amputees had helped bury the two dead. While he could feel a divide between the men who had tried to save Peter and those who didn't, he felt a communal hatred towards him for not helping dig.

The truck bounced along the dirt road, the sun setting in the west while they drove east. Dietrich tried to imagine a slightly lighter spirit after hours had passed and the men crossed into Germany – it being their first time back on Central Power soil in months, years even. Yet the mood stayed the same.

The truck finally pulled off a dirt road onto pavement. Dietrich turned around in his seat and peeked underneath the bottom of the canvas top. A sleeping city came into view in the night underneath street lamps, the buildings intact and the roads smooth,

without craters caused by grenades. It'd been a long time since Dietrich had been in a city that wasn't destroyed. But while the city looked whole, Dietrich could sense the poverty.

The truck stopped in front of a large concrete building. The nurse, who'd been riding in the cab of the truck, quietly ushered the men inside. They walked down a hallway where Dietrich watched as one of the hospital attendees counted the men as they passed. Dietrich turned to the doctor and wondered how he explained there only being eight men instead of ten.

At the end of the hallway was a large room where a handful of bunk beds stood uninhabited in a sea of a few dozen occupied bunk beds. Dietrich could see with the help of the exterior lights that shown through the room's windows that most of the men were asleep, so Dietrich quietly took his place on a lower bunk bed, as did Konrad right across from him. The two lay facing each other. It had been a sad sight, watching Konrad help dig that grave with only one leg while Dietrich, who had both his legs, stood back and did nothing.

"Do you want to play a game?" Konrad whispered, the first person to speak to him all day.

"I don't have any cards."

"What's that you held in your hand when we left the hospital?"

"A postcard."

"May I see it?"

Dietrich reluctantly pulled it out of his pant pocket. More embarrassing than if the card had contained Dietrich's most personal, intimate thoughts was the fact that the postcard was blank.

Konrad stared at the drawing on the front. Dietrich remembered what it was like to watch people stare at the maps he had made. It used to give him the greatest feeling of accomplishment. He used to enable people to know where to go. To give people a sense of where they were. To provide a sense of where everyone stood in relation to one another. He missed that feeling.

He watched as Konrad stared at the drawing until he fell asleep with the postcard in his hand. Dietrich wanted to stand up and take his postcard back, but he thought if he moved it would shatter his memory. He felt relieved to be back inside of somewhere, and he felt comfort in remembering what he had once done.

Konrad woke to a man in a robe standing over him. "Hey Adolf," the man yelled. "This looks like one of your postcards." Startled, Konrad quickly sat up, the postcard on his chest now falling onto his lap. He felt his face twitch.

"It's not mine," Konrad quickly said and shot Dietrich a glance.

Dietrich sat up and looked at the man in the robe and then in the direction that the man had yelled. Dietrich's face lit up. "It is one of his postcards!"

Konrad still didn't understand what was going on. He picked up the postcard from his lap and handed it to Dietrich. Dietrich grabbed it as he walked over to a man across the room.

"Adolf," Dietrich said, but the man only oddly looked in Dietrich's direction.

“He’s blind,” said the man in the robe.

“It’s me, Dietrich Hitzig.” The two hugged.

Konrad was curious to see how Dietrich acted around this old friend, but he felt too shy to wobble over and join the two. He waited until Dietrich returned to his bed before inquiring about the man.

“He is the corporal who drew this postcard.”

“Really?” Konrad looked over at the man with dark hair whose eyes drifted aimlessly. “He drew that beautiful town square?”

“Yes.”

“He’s quite a good artist.”

Dietrich nodded.

“And now he’s blind?”

“Appears so,” Dietrich said. “It was a gas bomb.”

Konrad studied the friend and pitied him. An artist gone blind seemed worse than a shoemaker who only had the need for one shoe.

The friend had the same soft face as Konrad’s brother and Konrad longed to go talk to him. He looked over at Dietrich, who had slid underneath his covers, and wished Dietrich would introduce the two.

The men were sent to a mess hall for lunch. Konrad looked around and saw that all the men had recovered as much as they could from their battle wounds. He came to the conclusion that this floor was also dedicated to nerve damage patients who Konrad had heard Nurse Gall refer to as shell shocked.

Konrad stood in line for potato soup and then searched for Adolf, hoping to sit down next to the man. He spotted Adolf across from the Feldwebel-Leutnant who'd shot Joseph. The Lieutenant reached across the table and pointed at the Iron Cross medal Adolf wore before massaging a similar medal on his coat.

Konrad was anxious about sitting next to the Lieutenant as the two had been on opposite sides of the Peter situation, but Dietrich walked up and took a seat next to Adolf thus making Konrad feel more comfortable inviting himself to the table. The Lieutenant was telling Adolf what happened yesterday at the barn. "No one gives a damn about the value of a human life anymore," the Lieutenant said, shoveling a spoonful of soup into his mouth.

Konrad knew this comment was aimed toward himself and Dietrich. He felt he should explain himself. He wished that Dietrich would chime into the conversation and add their side of the story, but Dietrich was staring off at something behind Konrad.

"We must look out for our German-speaking comrades." Adolf nodded in the direction of the Lieutenant. "There must be unity amongst us."

There was something about the way Adolf spoke so confidently that made Konrad feel guilty for having sided with Joseph. Konrad broke off a little piece of bread and nibbled on it. A man at the end of the table mumbled bitterly underneath his breath, "There's nothing left to unite," before grabbing his tray off the table.

"It is weak minded, those who chose to do nothing but pity themselves," Adolf said, loud enough so the man could hear as he walked away. Konrad paused from eating his bread. Did he simply pity himself? Konrad heard the bitter man slam his bowl into the water bucket.

“How can one not pity himself in a time like this,” Konrad asked sincerely, looking over at Dietrich who still seemed not to be paying attention.

“We are all struggling, of course,” Adolf said. “But we as Germanic people cannot succumb to the struggles.”

Konrad looked around the mess hall as Dietrich excused himself from the table. He noticed a man eating his food underneath another table instead of actually sitting at the table. Konrad let Adolf’s words digest alongside the bread. The blind artist was right. No matter how uncomfortable Konrad often felt, he couldn’t succumb to hiding underneath a table.

Dietrich took a seat at the mess hall table which gave him the best view of the nurse. All morning he thought about her and how they were now in Berlin, an allied city that mirrored his own home in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, instead of simply being in the presence of one woman, he was in the presence of multiple women. There was a nurse serving the potato soup. A nurse helping gentlemen wash their plates. Two other nurses eating breakfast beside his nurse. In the trenches, this was the moment men waited for. A one-woman-to-every-five-men ratio was the best odds any of these men has seen since their service first started. But Dietrich couldn’t view the situation this way. His mind seemed unable to view any of these women as possible companions, nor did his mind seem able to join in the conversation with an old friend. Dietrich’s only concern was proving once and for all that he could bring his nurse down to his level. That he could break her softness and make her relatable. He watched as she daintily ate

her food and then returned her dirty dishes to a water bucket before heading back to the hospital floor's main room where all the men slept.

He followed her into the room. Most of the beds were empty as the majority of the men still ate in the mess hall. The few men who were in the room were those who never moved and never spoke, so Dietrich didn't worry about holding his tongue around them. "So who were you more sad to see go?" He asked the nurse as she made one of the beds. "Peter or Joseph?"

The nurse turned to face Dietrich. He searched for a beaten, disgusted look in her face, but was only greeted by an almost blank stare. "It's sad when anyone dies, Herr Hitzig."

"Of course, of course, but there has to be one who you feel a little more upset, more guilty about rotting in the ground, serving as a feast for maggots and other insects. Have you ever seen a body decompose? Or do doctors normally just toss the corpses after you fail to save their lives?"

The nurse took a steady breath and bent down to tuck in the bed's sheets underneath the mattress. Dietrich anxiously waited for the nurse to stand back up, her eyes moistened. But she didn't cry. Instead she looked at him directly and asked, "Are you feeling guilt for one of the men's deaths yesterday, Herr Hitzig? Do you want to talk about it?"

What a clever little bitch. "It wasn't my job to protect Peter or to keep the men calm enough to not kill each other." Dietrich let the words slip out of his mouth and immediately felt remorse. Why had he assumed it was the nurse's job? It was one thing not to be man enough to dig a grave, but it was another to expect a woman to protect men

or keep them in order. What was wrong with Dietrich? He felt his face go warm and was angered at the idea that he was turning red. The nurse's face remained still and Dietrich felt defeated. It was over. Just like the Central Powers were losing the war, he was losing his sanity. The nurse had won the battle and Dietrich felt that there was nothing else to do but surrender. "Never mind." He turned to walk away, catching one last glimpse of the nurse as she watched him walk over to his bed. For a second he thought she looked a little more pale than usual, a little green, like she was about to be sick, but Dietrich didn't hold on to the thought.

Konrad got along great with Adolf, more so than he had with Dietrich or with Joseph. Both men were still in their twenties, and Adolf had a great deal of pride in Germany. That night after dinner, the two sat at the mess hall table and talked. Normally the nurse who had traveled with Konrad from France would have ushered the two back to their bunks, but she was nowhere to be seen, so the two conversed for over an hour. Konrad talked about his father's farm in Southern Germany. "I grew up tending the fields." And how he really enjoyed making shoes. "It's always just relaxed me. I think providing people shoes is just as important as providing them potatoes." During the entire conversation, his face did not twitch once.

Adolf spoke of Germany's economy and what was to become of his homeland now that the Central Powers seemed destined to lose the war. "We cannot go home to no jobs at all." Konrad wished he could suggest Adolf return to artistry, tell him that his postcard was quite good, but how could a blind man draw?

Once the men were both back in their bunks, Konrad wondered if maybe he could offer Adolf a job on his father's farm, but with no sight, what tasks could Adolf complete? Konrad looked over at his new friend who tossed and turned in his bed. He wondered if Adolf was having a nightmare. Konrad had plenty of nightmares while at the field hospital. He couldn't help but dream about the man he had stabbed to death in the face with his axe. It was one thing to kill men with one of those new tanks. It was another thing entirely to feel a body lose its soul at your fingertips.

Konrad debated getting up and waking Adolf from his dream, but as he threw back his bed cover, he stopped and wondered what it was like for a blind man to dream. Could you visualize and see things in your dream as if you weren't blind to the world? Surely you could. Was seeing a nightmare better than seeing nothing at all? Konrad decided to let Adolf dream and when the two men woke in the morning, Konrad had decided that the best way he knew how to help Adolf was to offer to make him a new pair of shoes as soon as the war was over.

Dietrich could tell Konrad was trying his best to hold his face still and not twitch as the two sat at the mess hall table and played a round of Rummy with a deck of cards one of the doctors at the hospital had given them. "I'll make you a pair of shoes too," Konrad said. "You can just have them. I'll give you a free pair of shoes and Adolf a free pair of shoes. Maybe that's what I'll do. I'll get myself out of here, find my family and then start making shoes again. Sell enough shoes to provide a decent income and then give the rest of the shoes away for any German veterans who need them." Konrad eagerly drew his next card.

“Why would you do something like that?”

Konrad didn't respond. He didn't have to. Dietrich knew damn well why Konrad would do something like that, a mixture of guilt and an uncontrollable desire to feel normal again. He watched as Konrad drew another card before laying down his winning hand of Rummy. Just because Dietrich hadn't been successful in breaking the nurse, who he hadn't seen since yesterday, didn't mean he should now focus his energy on breaking down Konrad instead.

The men played a few more rounds of cards before Dietrich retired to the main room and Konrad went outside for a walk around the courtyard. Dietrich stopped by Adolf's bunk. “So where do you think you'll go once they release you from the hospital?” he asked Adolf.

“Probably Munich.”

“I heard it's beautiful up there. Do you happen to have a pen?” Adolf didn't, but the man who stayed on the bunk next to him did.

Dietrich went back to his bed and pulled out the postcard he kept in his pocket. He thought about all things he had wanted to write on the postcard and then came to the conclusion that he never would. So instead he wrote down three addresses: his own, Adolf's, and Konrad's. He then closed his eyes and visualized all the maps he'd made and where those places were in relation to one another. He began drawing a map of both Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He was meticulous with his lines, making sure to produce only his best work. He drew tiny stars that referenced approximately where each address was. He wrote on the far right hand corner of the postcard, “For

Konrad.” He then forced himself out of bed and very hesitantly walked out onto the courtyard, where he could hand Konrad the postcard.

Three Potatoes

Onkel Karl struck a match from the box he always kept in his knitted cardigan pocket even though he hadn't been able to afford pipe tobacco in months. The small flame illuminated the scar that ran from the left side of his upper lip to his cheek bone, courtesy of the same mortar shell that took his leg during the first Great War. The light startled Sabine for a moment as she stood cramped in a ten-foot-by-five-foot cellar with all thirty people that occupied their apartment building.

“Is everyone okay?” Tante Maria whispered hastily, as if the enemy was on the opposite side of the cellar door, not dropping bombs overhead, or as far as Sabine was concerned, standing right next to them in the cellar. Onkel Karl moved his match toward Tante Maria who stood with her hand covering her mouth, her ring finger missing her wedding band, which she had traded last week for a sack of flour to feed herself and her family.

Everyone in the cellar was eerily quiet, leaving Tante Maria with only the response of air raid sirens that whirled above ground. Even though Vienna had already been bombed nineteen times in the last month or so, all the bombs had targeted oil refineries on the outskirts of the city. None had targeted the inner city, until now.

“Are there any candles down here?” Sabine heard her cousin Nicholas’s voice.

“No, we haven’t needed them before,” one woman said.

“This is the first time the electricity has been knocked out,” another said.

“This is the first time the bombings have been so close,” Tante Maria added.

The match Onkel Karl held in his hand burned down to his fingertips, forcing him to blow it out. The cellar went dark. With no visibility, Sabine’s four other senses heightened. The sirens seemed instantly louder, as did the explosions and the hunger growling in her stomach. The rumbling of the dirt underneath her feet grew in strength as did the musk from the condensation on the cellar walls that thickened with the heavy breaths of thirty occupants. Such close quarters reminded Sabine of the Jewish girl who had hid, packed underneath coals in a bin many years ago, before Sabine’s mother and father had gone missing.

Onkel Karl lit another match. A few people shuffled around – everyone looking skinny, slightly starved – until Nicholas became visible in front of the flame. His freshly pressed brown shirt was illuminated as well as the red stitching around the epaulette, the black scarf that knotted in the center of his breast, and the Third Reich triangular patch and red arm band. The perfect fifteen-year-old Hitler Youth puppet, Sabine always thought.

“Well, we just need to be patient. No one’s been hurt, right?” Nicholas said. Sabine looked at the anguish that lay heavy in Onkel Karl’s eyes. Who could blame him? His own son had been indoctrinated by Nazis. “I’m sure the Luftwaffe are shooting down all those bastard planes right now. Idiots have been bombing during the day, making themselves easier targets. Stupidity is a natural consequence amongst nations who breed mixed races.”

Whenever Nicholas made such ridiculous comments, Sabine would fix on her uncle. Even though Onkel Karl always appeared more beaten, her father and Onkel Karl shared brotherly characteristics. They had the same nose, a narrow bridge with small nostrils, and the same squared jaw. But Sabine’s father had had fuller lips that stretched in the most radiant smile. Sabine had never seen such a comforting smile from Onkel Karl, for Onkel Karl very rarely smiled, but Sabine was still grateful that his face helped her hold a clear memory of her father.

The women greatly outnumbered the men in the cellar but not one of them could rekindle the beauty of Sabine’s mother, although Tante Maria held tight to the optimism the deceased Pauline was well known for. “Nicholas is right, we just need to stay calm until the noise quiets, then we’ll get out of here,” Tante Maria said.

The words “Nicholas is right” sent a flame of rage through Sabine’s muscles as the cellar was once again consumed by darkness.

“We should save the rest of the matches until after the sirens wind down. We’ll need the light to direct people to the door.” Nicholas’s voice was distinct.

The explosions were no longer as rapid but the frantic breathing of the cellar occupants still came at an accelerated speed. With each sound of hyperventilation,

Sabine wondered which breaths came out of the lungs of those who supported the Nationalist Socialist Front and which breaths belonged to those who were in opposition but remained silent. She wondered who found Nicholas to be as hideous and ridiculous as she. Surely Tante Maria knew her own son was a monster, but Sabine could never tell which of her aunt's optimistic statements were motivated by self-preservation and which were motivated by truth. The line between the two had become so blurred in the last few years Sabine was not even sure it still existed.

Sabine strummed the wall to her right as she waited for the sirens to wind down. With years of no upkeep, the lack of plaster left exposed bricks underneath her fingertips. Sabine was more hungry than scared. Food was sparse. In the past, Sabine would have distracted herself from the pains in her stomach and the siren above by pretending that it was her mother's breath that she felt on her neck and her father's body warmth that she felt to her left and that her cousin was not an avid supporter of the Nazis. But such thoughts seemed cruel now. After four years, the reality wasn't going to change. Her parents, who had gone missing after being accused of helping hide a Jewish girl in their cellar, were not going to return, and the fact that her cousin now blindly followed the same party that had enforced her father's, his own uncle's, death could never be erased. So Sabine strummed the exposed brick and tried not to think, although shutting off all conscious thoughts never stopped all the subconscious hatred, and she hoped Onkel Karl felt the same way. He was her only ally.

The air raid sirens finally wound down, leaving only the sound of feet shuffling on the cellar's dirt floor. "Do you think it's safe to go up?" Tante Marie asked.

"I'll check it out," Nicholas said.

Onkel Karl lit a match, bringing into view a cramped cellar with fearful faces that for once made Onkel Karl's agonized eyes not stand out. The papers had been full the last few weeks with images of the firebombing of Dresden. The possibility that Vienna could have just succumbed to a similar fate shone brighter on the faces of the cellar dwellers than the match.

Nicholas took the match and climbed the stone steps to the cellar door. As he cracked the door open, a beam of light slashed through the darkness illuminating the dust that had been stirred into the air. He slowly continued to push the door until the light flooded through the front half of the cellar.

"What do you see?" a woman asked.

"Has our building been destroyed?" asked another.

Nicholas paused for a second and turned his head in all directions. "No." There seemed to be a unanimous sigh of relief throughout the cellar. "But everyone should still be careful. The walls might be unstable." Nicholas spoke with a tone of authority. He stood outside the cellar door and helped all the occupants out one at a time like he was some war hero and not actually a fifteen-year-old child with no independent thoughts of his own.

Sabine didn't take Nicholas's hand as he offered it to her, an either courageous or stupid move. He could turn her in to the Gestapo if he wanted to, claim that she stood in opposition to the party, to the ideals of the Führer, and then she too would go missing, be stripped from her aunt and uncle's custody. Maybe her actual true feelings overruled her motivation for self-preservation. Maybe such a line still existed.

“Thank you for your brave efforts.” Tante Maria quickly followed behind Sabine as if trying to distract Nicholas from Sabine’s rude actions. “Come upstairs, maybe if we’re lucky, our potatoes are still waiting for us on the stove.”

Through the freshly broken windows that lined the staircase, Sabine could see that the apartment building next door now lay in complete ruins. Although luck was a word she never used, it was a wonder that the neighboring building hadn’t fallen into their apartment building, leaving all the occupants barricaded in the basement. Onkel Karl seemed more focused on the effort it took to walk up a flight of stairs covered in glass than on the view outside the window. With the outage of electricity, the elevator the staircase wrapped around was certainly out of use, forcing Onkel Karl to climb the flight with one leg and his cane.

As they neared their apartment, the aroma of three boiling potatoes still lingered from underneath their door. Tante Maria had been cooking the potatoes before the sirens sounded, potatoes that Nicholas had provided. Sabine, Onkel Karl and Tante Maria had not eaten since yesterday afternoon, yet it infuriated Sabine that the food came from Nicholas, that he had brought it from the Hitler Youth camp and shared it with his family, as if he had a code of morals.

Inside, four plain white plates sat on the worn circular table that fit four people. Onkel Karl and Tante Maria once had a beautiful rosewood dining table that sat ten guests at dinner parties, but those days were long gone and this tiny maple table stood in its stead.

“Good, we still have gas,” Tante Maria said as she walked into the kitchen and turned the stove back on. “Nicholas, have a seat. Papa can have a potato, you can have a potato and Sabine and I will split one.”

“My help is probably needed around the city.” Nicholas followed Tante Maria into the kitchen and gave her a hug. “Bombings or not, we still have to remember that it’s a beautiful day to be German.” Sabine stood in shock that Nicholas didn’t choke on the enormous amount of ignorance he had just thrown up. As if believing himself to actually be German, not Austrian, was not stupid enough, he now chose to ignore the fact that the allied forces continued to advance in Europe and that the German lines retreated daily.

Even Tante Maria’s slightly contorted expression revealed that she too found the statement to be utterly ridiculous. However, once her face resumed its typical loving manner, she kissed Nicholas on the cheek. “Be safe.”

“Enjoy lunch.” Nicholas released himself from Tante Maria’s embrace and looked at Onkel Karl. Someone who hadn’t lived with Nicholas for the past four years would not notice it, but Nicholas showed his customary disappointment that his father remained silent, no wish for safety, no “I’m proud of you son.” Nicholas saluted Onkel Karl by extending his arm and hand straight out at a sixty degree angle and clicking his boots together. He stood in salutation for a beat longer than usual – maybe wishing that for once his father would salute him back, soldier to soldier, but that didn’t happen and Nicholas eventually left.

Tante Maria removed one plate from the table and placed a potato on the three that remained. “Let’s just be thankful for our food,” she said in an attempt to disarm the

tension that lingered in the room like smoke after a fire. She went back to the kitchen and filled three glasses of water from the sink. “And also thankful for the running water. I’m sure after today’s bombings, half the city has probably lost its running water.” She took a seat at the table and raised her glass. “Prost, to having only lost electricity.” She sipped from her glass and then cut into her potato. Sabine and her uncle sat still.

Sabine didn’t want to eat the plated potato in front of her, but her hunger overwhelmed her. Looking down at the food, she tried to think of all the reasons why she should eat it. She tried to convince herself that she was not taking food from a Nazi, but taking food away from a Nazi. She peeled a slice of the potato and scooped a bite of its delicious insides with her fork. She repeated her justifications as she ate, but the guilt still remained. She felt too ashamed to look at either her aunt or her uncle as she demolished her share of the food, but she could hear their forks and knives greedily scraping against their plates as well. She could even hear sniffled breathing that sounded like her uncle’s crying. She ate her potato quickly with the hope that the guilt in her stomach would be squashed by the digesting food, but it wasn’t. As soon as she finished eating, she hurriedly left the table. She needed fresh air.

“I’m going to the Tabak Trafik,” Sabine said. The only reason she went to the smoke shop was because the owner had a short wave radio – a black market item since the Nazis couldn’t have any of their captives listening to the BBC – and he let selected customers secretly listen to the news in the back of his shop. Although Sabine didn’t want to walk through today’s wreckage, she desperately wished to hear news that Hitler had just surrendered after the attacks, given up.

Her aunt protested. “It’s too dangerous to be on the streets right now. Nicholas said building walls could be unstable, collapse on you at any minute.” But Sabine couldn’t care less what Nicholas had said, and even if he was right, she would rather take her chances if it meant possibly hearing good news.

She walked into the hallway to see the husband from flat #17, the man whose body warmth she felt in the cellar only an hour ago, standing outside his apartment. The few strands of hair the man had left he had attempted to style in a comb-over. He quickly hid something in his jacket pocket once he heard Sabine shut the door. Sadly, Sabine knew that what he hid was food. He did this all the time: stood outside his apartment and secretly ate until he was full and then brought the scraps into the apartment for his wife and three children. Despicable. Despicable that a man would do that to his family. Despicable that a Hitler Youth wouldn’t.

No good news came from the short wave radio. The local channels were full of the same nonsense Nicholas spewed. Germany and the Ostmark will prevail. Keep your faith in the Führer. And the BBC simply said the Germans still formed defensive lines. The owner of the smoke shop – a bald Viennese in his early sixties with a nub instead of a trigger finger – seemed just as disappointed as Sabine. He lit a cigar, the smoke filling the entire back closet, and stood up to turn off the radio. Sabine left.

Back outside, roads were blocked by rubble throughout the city and Sabine had to weave through the military trucks stuck in traffic. She cut through Stephansplatz to see the plaza’s central cathedral up in flames; its once beautiful mosaic roofing now nonexistent. Sabine seemed unable to process the horror. She just continued to numbly

walk by the handful of shops, churches, and historical landmarks that had suffered a similar fate. Sabine had to see if her parents' old apartment building was still intact.

She walked two miles, the public transportation system currently out of service. When she reached the building where she was raised, she felt relief that it appeared unharmed. The concrete steps were cracked but stable and the brick walls had a small amount of smoke damage but nothing serious. She walked inside, the scent of stale air instantly reviving memories of Sabine's childhood. For a moment, her ears played a cruel trick on her and she thought she heard her mother's piano playing coming from their old apartment on the first floor. She walked down to the cellar, motivated by the desire to distance herself from the pretend music and also to see if any of her old neighbors were down there. But the cellar was empty.

Sunlight peaked through the windows that bordered the tops of the cellar walls, revealing a dirt floor that was covered in footsteps from those who must have taken shelter from the air raid. All the boxes and old furniture she remembered had once filled the cellar when she was a child were gone. No one had the luxury of holding onto things that were not absolute necessities. Also missing was the brass coal bin, the one her parents had used to hide the little Jewish girl in whenever German soldiers patrolled the area. But what was left was green paint on the plaster wall beside the coal shoot, courtesy of a failed art project Nicholas and Sabine had worked on when they were younger, before the Anschluss and the war. Sabine hadn't thought in years about all the times she and Nicholas had played in this cellar when they were adolescents.

She could vividly visualize games of tag they'd played. Hide-and-seek. Government and Outlaws. Nicholas always wanted to play the role of the good guy. It

was hard for Sabine to believe that she and Nicholas had actually been close at one time, that they had been playmates.

She thought back to the day when Onkel Karl, Tante Maria and Nicholas had come over so the adults could listen to Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg's speech on the radio. Even though that had been seven years ago, Sabine still remembered how difficult it was to be fast and agile in the multiple layers of clothing that warded off the February chill. Nicholas had pretended to be a government official protecting the Austrian Chancellor Dolfuss while Sabine pretended to be one of the outsiders involved in the assassination. This game of good guys and bad guys had been their favorite game and one they played secretly.

The two pranced around in their layers of sweaters, coats and scarfs. They used their hands as toy guns and sticks as pretend swords. They giggled as Nicholas protected the Austrian Republic with cannons and horses while Sabine attempted to wreak chaos as the best fencing-trained assassin.

Sabine had had so much fun that day that she let Nicholas win. She had fallen to the floor in a laughing fit and surrendered. "You've won, you've defeated me." Nicholas had gleamed with cheer. Being younger, he rarely tasted victory. But Sabine wanted Nicholas to win and to have as much fun as she did.

Sabine shuddered at the thought that Nicholas had considered her to be his best friend seven years ago. She shuddered at the fact that his position in the Hitler Youth four years ago kept her from disappearing alongside her parents, who were caught hiding a Jewish girl in the very building where Sabine currently stood. Sabine felt even more claustrophobic in the empty, lit cellar, surrounded by her memories, than she had in her

aunt and uncle's dark cramped cellar only hours prior. So she left the cellar and the apartment building and made her way back across town.

Women made homeless from the day's air raid wandered the streets. Some had small cuts and bruises while others appeared unharmed; however, all had a lost look on their faces. The men who wandered, presumably wounded veterans no longer fit to fight a war, seemed indifferent to their surroundings. The smell of charred brick encompassed every corner of the city. Buildings that had been burning for hours were beginning to lose their strength and tumble over, and Sabine knew to hurry home.

She made the two mile walk in record time and was greeted with a note on the table in Tante Maria's hand writing: "I'm at the hospital with Nicholas. A wall fell on him. He is okay, but suffered a few fractures."

During the two days Nicholas was in the military hospital, Sabine visited him and his ruptured vertebrae only once. There wasn't a lot of room between the rows of beds full of hurt soldiers, some from the front lines, others injured in the bombings yesterday. Tante Maria gave Nicholas one of her usual optimistic speeches. The men gave Onkel Karl a nod like he was one of their brothers. But Sabine felt that both she and her uncle thought the same. Seeing Nicholas lie underneath a hospital blanket embroidered with the SS logo while surrounded by Nazis with whom he fit in perfectly, it didn't take long for Sabine to forget her childhood memories and reignite her hatred. The thought that perhaps Nicholas and she still had something in common, that they had both forgotten all childhood memories and replaced them with a craving for violence against other people crossed Sabine's mind for only a moment before she quickly crushed it.

When Nicholas was sent home from the hospital, he was ordered by the doctors to stay in bed for the next six weeks. Tante Maria took care of him – whether out of self-preservation that involved keeping members of the government happy or matriarchal love, Sabine still could not tell. All Sabine knew was that with Tante Maria staying at home, Sabine was now solely in charge of finding food for the family. Ostmark began preparing for the celebration of Hitler’s 56th birthday and food ration cards were being issued throughout Vienna again, so getting food was doable at first. Nicholas, although confined to his old bed, was joyous about the celebration. Sabine felt sick having to provide him food. She sometimes imagined smothering him in his sleep. Stabbing him when he wasn’t paying attention. He needed to be held accountable for celebrating the life of the man who had Sabine’s parents killed. However, the fire of hatred dampened as the acid in her stomach no longer had any food to dissolve. After April 20th came and went, so did the ration cards.

Sabine slowly bartered the last of any valuable items in the apartment for whatever scraps of food she could find. Every day, Sabine stopped by the smoke shop, holding tightly to the little loaf of bread or chicken bouillon cubes that would keep her aunt, uncle, and herself from slowly starving. Although her stomach was almost always empty, she tried to keep her hopes up as she heard on the BBC that the Soviet Army bled out German forces by cutting off their supplies.

The day she stopped by the smoke shop with only a cup of flour, three eggs and the last valuable item to her aunt and uncle’s name – an art Nouveau China set – the shop owner greeted her with glee. “Come, come. Listen, listen,” he said, clipping off the opening of what smelled like an expensive cigar. Sabine walked into the back closet

where the owner kept the radio. For the first time ever, the shop owner did not close the closet door behind them, an act which made Sabine nervous. What if someone were to walk in and see them with the black market item or see Sabine with a cup of flour? But Sabine's fear lasted only momentarily as she heard over the radio waves that the twin Soviet offensive broke the final German defensive lines. "Austria will be liberated any day now," the shop owner spoke quietly, but excitedly. He gave Sabine a kiss on the cheek and a free book of stamps. "Write all your friends, tell the world."

As Sabine hurried home she imagined the rumble of Russian tanks crossing the border into Austria. She rushed up the apartment's flight of stairs, the flour bouncing in its sack, and ran into the apartment where she saw Nicholas asleep in his usual spot on the couch. Although Nicholas still wore his swastika armband, clueless as to the news Sabine had just heard, Sabine knew for the first time that those broad cross lines no longer bore any weight in the world. Nicholas and his ideology were no longer backed by an army capable of fighting.

She held the sack of food close to her breast while his breast was incased by a metal back brace. For the first time since Nicholas was eight and Sabine was ten, she had power over him. And she was not going to be nice and let Nicholas win this time. Even if Nicholas was vulnerable and helpless, she was finally going to avenge her parents' death and she knew just how to do it. It was not going to be the smothering or stabbing she had originally hoped for, but it would work just the same.

She tip-toed through the living room and quietly opened her uncle's bedroom door where he and her aunt lay. "I got a cup of flour today that we can mix with the eggs

and some water to make a dough, but we are not going to feed Nicholas,” Sabine said confidently.

Tante Maria sat up in bed and moved her lips like she was going to say something, but didn’t.

“We don’t have to pretend to be nice to him anymore,” Sabine continued. “I heard it on the radio; the Russians will take Vienna any day now.” Sabine’s voice rose in excitement, which she quickly tried to tame so to not wake Nicholas.

Sabine’s aunt had a distinctive look in her eyes. Normally Tante Maria’s expression kept Sabine guessing how she felt about Nicholas. Even in the hospital, Sabine couldn’t tell what Tante Maria really thought, but for the first time it was clear that she was Nicholas’s mother, that she’d birthed him, raised him. Sabine’s aunt may not support the Nazis, but she still loved her son. Sabine wanted to beg her, please don’t love him, please don’t protect him. You should hate him and what he stands for as much as I hate him, as much as my parents would have hated him. Sabine spoke out loud, “You just have to, you just have to hate him.”

“Hate my son?” Her aunt responded in a voice more compassionate than Sabine had ever heard her aunt use directly with Nicholas. Sabine felt silly for a moment. She tried to process what she was asking of her aunt and uncle but the anger still burned deep inside her. Sabine looked over at her uncle, her ally, as he sat up in the bed. It was apparent in every wrinkle in his face, every crack in his lips, every speck in his irises, that he was too tired to hate.

Ludmilla

Against constant warnings from the women at Monday night seniors' Bible study at church, Eleanor did not wear gloves when she picked blackberries from the bushes in her backyard. Although decades of practice almost made avoiding thorns when sifting through leaves and clusters of tiny black beads a part of muscle memory, Eleanor still scraped her nimble fingers on a spike every now and then, and when she did, she'd bleed a lot more than she used to. Fragile skin was just a part of aging, her doctor had said after her visits became more frequent when she entered her mid-sixties.

However, if the thorns didn't get Eleanor, the knots that formed in her back if she stayed bent over the blackberry bushes too long would. So Eleanor made sure to pick her blackberries swiftly, filling her jar with enough to make a cobbler. Once finished, she made the hike back to her house, passing the shed whose paint was badly chipped and whose wood had rotted during the past twenty-five years. Eleanor's pastor had volunteered a group of young men to go over and rebuild her shed, but she had declined.

Her husband, God bless his now deceased soul, had built that shed as a coping mechanism after their seven-year-old Isabella had died from pneumonia decades ago. If it was anyone's job to put in the work on that shed, it should be someone with Robert's blood in them. It should be Eleanor's own son.

Back in the kitchen, Eleanor couldn't get over how loud her new air conditioning window-unit sounded. Eleanor had saved up three paychecks from working part-time at the church to buy the new thing. They were all the rage for battling Texas heat in August. She washed off the blackberries with great care and a splash of 7-Up. This was an important cobbler. She mixed together melted butter, self-rising flour, sugar – tons of sugar, milk and the blackberries into a baking dish. She waited until the phone rang – her son saying his plane had landed at Dallas Love Field Airport – before she put the cobbler in the oven. It was strategy, her plan to have her whole house smell like sweet blackberries when her son came home. Blackberries that weren't for him. She washed her mixing bowls out and dried off the dishes before putting them back in the chestnut cabinets.

She did one last thorough walk through of the house with a duster and meticulously double checked that each rug and carpeted bedroom was vacuumed and every spot of linoleum flooring mopped before sitting and waiting at the kitchen table with a cup full of homemade ice cream.

Eleanor listened closely to hear the creaking on the front porch followed by the clattering of her wind chime. That thing had always hung too low for her full-grown Jimmy. She also heard a woman giggle. It was an awful giggle, Eleanor thought, one

that sounded like a mouse choking on cheese, probably some of that fancy foreign cheese.

There was a quick knock, followed by the heavy front door squeaking open. “Mom?” Eleanor heard Jimmy’s voice but remained quiet. “We can just set our stuff down right here. She’s probably in the kitchen.” Eleanor listened closely.

“Right here?” a female voice said from the living room, the accent so heavy that it rolled the “r” in “right” and weighed down the “h” in “here.” Eleanor had hoped right up to that very moment that maybe something had happened and her son’s new girlfriend wouldn’t actually have come. They could have gotten in a fight at the Vienna airport and broken up right then and there. Or maybe Jimmy could have realized he was breaking his mother’s heart and just left the floozy at the airport once they’d landed. Eleanor knew these thoughts were un-Christ like, but she couldn’t help it. It was bad enough that Jimmy had abandoned her, left her all alone and moved thousands of miles away after his divorce, God forgive his soul. She was the only one in Bible study to have no grandkids to brag about. And now he was dating a foreigner, really? What foreigner could be a Baptist? Could she speak English besides the two words “right here?” Eleanor took a huge bite of her ice cream hoping it would help cool her off.

She heard footsteps, heavy footsteps from a man the house was no longer used to. Eleanor had nowhere near the weight to make the old carpeted living room floor rattle, causing an almost imperceptible ripple in her Hummel figurine collection that lined the built-in shelves by the dining room archway. “Mom!” Jimmy appeared next to the shelves. He looked so handsome Eleanor couldn’t help but perk up a little. Although she told herself she was going to give Jimmy the cold shoulder, she got right on up and gave

him a big hug, a mother's hug. "It's good to see you. You look great," Jimmy said, not yet able to pull away from the tight grip Eleanor held on his neck as she buried her face in his chest. She was surprised to feel that he had rounded out a bit. She'd heard all sorts of stories that Vienna didn't have Dr. Pepper, peanut butter, or a handful of Jimmy's other favorites. To be quite honest, she was convinced that he would starve the first year he'd moved. But none of that seemed to matter now as she hugged him close. Maybe he would see her new window unit, see her shed that needed fixing and decide to move on back to Fort Worth from that country full of Catholic-practicing nonbelievers.

"Mom, I have someone I want you to meet." Jimmy finally pulled away. "This is Ludmilla." He moved to his left to show the short woman who stood behind him, her hair a dark brown that matched the freckles blanketing a square nose and protruding cheek bones.

"It's such a pleasure to finally meet you." Ludmilla moved in for a hug that Eleanor stiffly gave. The warmth she felt from Jimmy instantly drained and the cold reality was back.

Jimmy nostrils flared slightly as he took in a deep breathe. "Blackberry cobbler, oh man, that's my favorite."

"Made it for the church," Eleanor lied as she went back over to the table to grab the cup of now-melted ice cream. "They got this new family come down straight from Oklahoma. Handsome husband, lovely wife, good, God-fearing obedient son."

"That's very nice of you," Ludmilla said with a smile. "Jimmy always tells me that you bake the best pies."

"Cobblers," Eleanor was quick to correct.

“Ludmilla is quite the cook herself, Mom.” Jimmy looked down at his dwarf of a girlfriend with a look that only contributed to Eleanor’s anger.

She let out a grunt, which even she immediately recognized as unladylike. But really, a cook? Did this Ludamail use fresh ingredients from her own garden? Was she asked to make the green bean casserole every Thanksgiving for the church? Eleanor couldn’t keep herself from being tacky. “What kind of food do you native Australians make?”

Jimmy tensed up, the same way he used to when he was a boy and Eleanor would go fetch him from the Lake Worth shore and make him come home from fishing. “It’s Austria, Mom, and actually Ludmilla is Ukrainian.”

“She’s what?”

“Ukrainian,” Ludmilla said in her thick accent.

“That a part of Russia?” Eleanor felt the same sensation she’d get when she’d prick her finger on a thorn on the blackberry bush, except this prick was coursing through her entire body. For it wasn’t but a few years ago that that Khrushchev fellow went and unloaded those missiles in Cuba. Was Jimmy not aware that those evil men had built some wall in Germany trying to suppress people’s God-given freedom?

“We speak Russian,” Ludmilla said in a voice that sounded garbled to Eleanor, “but we’re southeast of Russia.”

“So how do you come to live in Austria?”

“Mom.” Jimmy looked embarrassed, like Eleanor had just poked at some sore subject.

“Well, if you don’t want to talk about it, why’d you bring it up?” Or really bring her here at all.

There was an awkward silence. Eleanor shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

“What lovely dolls you have,” Ludmilla said directing her eyes to Eleanor’s Goebel Hummel collection.

“They’re figurines,” Eleanor said.

“Figurines, yes,” Ludmilla repeated, putting emphasis on the consonants as if it was her first time to say the word. Figurines. “That one I like a lot.” She pointed to two little angels, one a boy and one a girl, both blonde, hugging one another.

“That one is supposed to represent the sanctity of marriage.” Eleanor said, making sure to keep her eyes forward with her next comment. “Did my son ever tell you about his divorce?” Eleanor could feel Jimmy giving her a look without moving her eyes. It was a cruel thing to say, she knew it, but it was only with Jimmy’s best interest in mind. He couldn’t be entering into some serious relationship with a Communist.

“Do you mind if Ludmilla goes ahead and showers? Twelve hours on a plane can be a bit rough.” The inflection Jimmy used in the word “rough” made Eleanor glance up at her son. She cringed at the idea of Loudvilla naked, showering in her house, but she nodded anyway. “I’ll help you unpack some of your clothes,” Jimmy said as the two walked back into the living room.

The conversation the three tried to have after Jimmy and Ludmilla had showered and changed was just as awkward, and the dinner conversation didn’t go any smoother.

Eleanor had gone back out to her garden to pick fresh green beans for a casserole. She wanted to remind Jimmy what good food was. Good American food. Ludmilla tried to help Eleanor wash the dishes after dinner. “This kitchen is really only big enough for one woman,” Eleanor said.

Eleanor tried to let the mindless action of rubbing soft soap bubbles over the china she'd gotten as a wedding gift 42 years earlier become a time of reflection. It wasn't that she didn't want her son to meet a woman and be happy. And it wasn't that she blamed the divorce on Jimmy, either. He tried his absolute best with Susan, but she still divorced him and remarried only a few months afterwards. As much as Eleanor thought Susan was a hussy, at least she was from Fort Worth, lived in Fort Worth and would probably spend the rest of her life in Fort Worth. Sure, Eleanor was thrilled that Jimmy'd been invited to play in an orchestra in Vienna, but she'd also secretly hoped he would decline the job, just stay in his position with the Fort Worth Symphony. He had been the first chair of the cello section. He could still be doing that right now. And it was also a job he could easily reclaim. He always had an opportunity to come back home, but having a girlfriend in Vienna complicated things. Eleanor dried all the dishes with intensity as the thoughts materialized in her mind. She was grateful for the knock at the front door that caused a distraction.

She heard Jimmy get up from the living room and open the door. “Well look who it is!” Marcus's voice was so distinctive. She heard back slapping and hurried to finish drying the dishes. “This must be the pretty new lady I've heard about.”

“Ludmilla, this is Marcus.”

“The handsome friend you’ve probably heard so much about,” Marcus added. Ludmilla’s soft laugh was obnoxious.

Eleanor put up the last dish when Marcus greeted her in the kitchen. “Hey, hey, Ms. Eleanor.” Marcus put his arm around Eleanor’s shoulder and looked at the baking dish on the counter top. “Blackberry cobbler, looks great!”

“It’s for the church,” Eleanor said, a little less confident.

“You’re a saint.” Marcus leaned in and gave Eleanor a kiss on the cheek. He’d always been such a good friend to Jimmy.

All four went into the living room. Marcus sat at the bench of a worn out piano that was awfully out of tune, but that Jimmy’s daddy had bought used when Jimmy first started to take a liking to music. Ludmilla sat on the couch, with a small statue of praying hands on a coffee table to one side and Jimmy on the other. Eleanor had her chair next to the gas outlet in the faux fireplace.

“So how’d you score such a peach?” Marcus laughed. “She got any friends?”

“You can always move to Vienna and find out.” Jimmy said.

“Oh, I ain’t got the guts you got. Moving to a foreign country, not knowing anyone.”

“You’d know us.”

“I’ll visit.” Marcus sipped on the sweet tea Eleanor had made fresh that morning.

“Texas is home for you, ain’t it Marcus?” Eleanor chimed in.

“I guess it is,” Marcus said with a smile.

Eleanor nodded and scooted back in her chair.

“But I’m really proud of Jimmy,” Marcus continued. “It’s just great, you playing the cello in Vienna, scoring a girl in the process.”

“Fiancée, actually,” Jimmy said with a huge smile that dropped as soon as he looked over at his mother’s stunned face.

“No kidding!” Marcus jumped up to give the two a hug. “Congratulations!”

Eleanor felt like something hit her chest and crushed her vocal chords. She couldn’t find her voice.

Marcus gave Ludmilla a kiss on the cheek.

“Thanks, man. We’re real happy,” Jimmy said.

Eleanor got up without saying a word. She walked outside to her garden and looked at the blackberry bush, slightly more barren after the morning’s pickings. She looked at the grass around the garden that, no matter how much she watered it, had died from the summer’s heat. And her tomato plants, whose days were numbered with the changing of the seasons.

“Mom.” Eleanor wasn’t startled by Jimmy’s voice behind her. She’d only picked from the blueberry bush twice that whole summer and the thing would be dead before she knew it. “Believe me, we had this whole nice plan to tell you during dinner.” Eleanor could hear Jimmy’s footsteps in the soil, but she didn’t turn to look at her son standing beside her. She just looked at her garden, making note of all the fruit and vegetables that would eventually expire. She wondered if she’d have the energy to garden next summer. Her back spasms could get worse over the winter. Her dried-out hands could become more fragile. “But really Mom, could you be any meaner to Ludmilla? It’s hard to share good news when you’re being, so, well, you know.”

“Good news,” Eleanor repeated the words with complete disbelief.

“Yes, Mom, it’s good news. Here.” Jimmy tried to hand Eleanor an envelope. She looked down at his hands. To others, it might not look like it, but Jimmy definitely had his father’s hands. The same thick fingers and coarse knuckles, although Jimmy’s hands weren’t calloused from years of carpentry.

Eleanor took the envelope without saying a word and opened it up. “A plane ticket?”

“To Vienna, for the wedding.”

There wasn’t a single breeze in the Texas heat, yet Eleanor felt some invisible force push her. It might as well have kicked her to the ground and stomped her.

“Mom, don’t get all nervous. It’s just that it’s easier to fly you to Vienna instead of flying all of Ludmilla’s family down here.”

All of Ludmilla’s family. Eleanor all alone. No living husband. No daughter, Isabella. No son.

“I think you’ll really like it, Vienna. It’s beautiful. You could watch me play at the Volksoper. Schönbrunn and Belvedere have lovely gardens.”

Eleanor’s face felt still, motionless, like she was being viewed in a coffin.

“We could even take a day trip to Salzburg. You could see where Mozart was born.”

She couldn’t respond.

“It’ll be great, Mom.”

After moments of silence passed, Jimmy walked back up to the house, leaving Eleanor next to her abandoned, rotting shed and half-dying garden.

Eleanor could not sleep that night. She listened for movement in the house. The sound of the AC unit was foreign to her. The creaks the house normally made sounded foreign to her. She needed to get a cold glass of iced tea, clear her mind, get to thinking straight, but even the refreshment could not refresh her. She walked past Jimmy's old room where Ludmilla slept and tried to not imagine Ludmilla underneath the quilt she had sewn for Jimmy when he was a growing boy. She walked past the living room where Jimmy slept on the sofa and fought the urge to wake him and tell him how he'd broken her heart.

The activities of the next few days were just as miserable. The three took a trip to the brand new Kimball Art Museum. Ludmilla said she really enjoyed the emotion behind impressionistic paintings. Eleanor was quick to opine that it was simply obnoxious when painters just slopped something on a canvas with no rhyme or reason. She paid no mind to Ludmilla's silly rebuttals about perception. The three went out to the movies one night. Eleanor returned every one of Jimmy's comments about how beautiful Salzburg looked in *The Sound of Music* by pointing out the beautiful things Texas had to offer. She did not care what Ludmilla had to say about the Viennese Crocus Albiflorus that bloomed in the spring. The three went to see the Fort Worth Philharmonic play. Eleanor watched as a man not nearly as talented as Jimmy played in the first chair position of the cello section. She made sure Jimmy knew what a disservice he had done by leaving the orchestra while she ignored Ludmilla's ramblings about how nicely Jimmy contributed to the orchestra pit in the Wiener Wolksooper.

Eleanor cooked feasts every night. Good, American, made-from-scratch meatloaf, fried chicken and homemade gravy, okra, double baked potatoes, chopped brisket with her secret recipe for barbeque sauce. But none of that cooking made her feel any better. And by the seventh night she lost hope and the three went out to eat.

On that seventh sleepless night – Jimmy’s last night before he’d be returning to Vienna – Eleanor woke her son up from the couch. They went to the dining room where she had already scooped two bowls of homemade ice cream. The first year after Jimmy’s father had died from a heart attack when Jimmy was a freshman in college, the two often stayed up late and ate ice cream at the table – sometimes talking, sometimes crying, sometimes laughing. Eleanor could still see Jimmy as he was 15 years ago, when he had just started at Texas Christian University. She could see Jimmy as he was pre-divorce, pre-moving to Europe, pre-34-years-old-and-still-without-any-children.

Jimmy looked thoughtful as he scooped half a spoonful of strawberry ice cream and half a spoonful of vanilla ice cream into one bite. Eleanor hated seeing her son so lost in troublesome thoughts. She was well aware she hadn’t made this trip as fun as he had probably hoped.

“Jimmy.” She felt her voice crack and took a breath and another bite of ice cream, but Jimmy beat her to the next words.

“Mom, I’m going to marry Ludmilla.”

“Why? Why, do you think she is right for you?” Eleanor set her spoon down.

“Jimmy, I’ve known you all your life. I’m your mother and this seems like a mistake to

me. She's a different nationality. She's of a different religion. There'd be a huge language barrier between her family and yours."

"Mom, stop that."

"Stop what? Making valid points?"

"She's perfect for me. She's intelligent, open-minded, a musician."

"Susan was a musician and that one didn't last." Eleanor regretted the words the second she said them. She regretted coming off so hatefully; that was not her personality. Why was her son bringing the worst out of her?

"Mom, I know you're lonely." Jimmy pushed his bowl – which still had a little bit of ice cream in it – out of the way. "And I'm sorry about that. I really am. But this is my life."

Eleanor felt a pressure behind her eyes. "It's just that everyone I've ever loved is dead."

Jimmy sat back in his chair and remained silent for a moment while Eleanor tried to keep from crying. "I'm not dead, Mom." Eleanor noticed how Jimmy's voice rose. "You're still here talking to me. You still have someone next to you right now." He was getting more and more upset.

"Jimmy."

"You're making yourself this lonely."

"You think this is a choice?"

"You've had a full house for a week. I bought you a plane ticket to Europe. I'm marrying into a big, loving family."

"Who are probably Communists."

“I can’t believe this.” Jimmy sounded exasperated.

“Well that makes two of us. You move away. You meet some floozy and then totally forget that you have a lonely mother on the other side of the world.”

“So visit me, use your plane ticket, be a part of our wedding.”

“And leave the house your father built just to rot by itself? Have you seen the shed?”

“I’ll call someone from your church tomorrow and see if they can’t come fix the shed.”

“You should be the one to fix it.” Eleanor feared her loud voice would wake up the floozy sleeping in Jimmy’s bed and that was the last person she would want to see right now.

“I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“That’s right, you’re leaving.”

“So why can’t you at least try to enjoy my last night here?”

“What’s the point?”

Jimmy looked down at the rest of his melted ice cream left in the bowl before leaving the table without another word.

Eleanor sat alone for at least an hour. She fought the urge to go into Jimmy’s old room and scream at Ludmilla. Eleanor recognized her overwhelming anger and knew that if she tried to speak another word she’d just end up making nonsensical loud noises. She eventually lay back down in her own room, alternating looking at her husband’s old side of the bed and the window just above her head where she could view the garden she now felt unsuccessful in raising.

In the morning, she got up early and fixed scrambled eggs fried in bacon grease and homemade biscuits and gravy. Ludmilla was extra comforting to Jimmy – holding his hand, rubbing his shoulder – as the three sat around the table. Eleanor felt hollow. The airport shuttle came to the house just a little before noon to take Jimmy and Ludmilla back to Dallas Love Field.

“Mom, I’ll write soon,” Jimmy said with his hands full as he placed Ludmilla’s and his luggage on the porch.

“It was a pleasure meeting you.” Ludmilla attempted a sideways hug.

“Don’t lose your plane ticket, the wedding’s in five months,” Jimmy said.

“Your flight will arrive ten days before the wedding. Maybe you could help bake the cake. Your food really is delicious.” Ludmilla swung her purse over her shoulder.

“All right, I love you, Mom.” Jimmy gave Eleanor a kiss before grabbing the last of the luggage.

Eleanor felt the tears running down her face. She heard nothing but silence after the airport shuttle drove away. Even in the Texas heat her empty house felt cold, like it lacked a pulse.

Eleanor turned on her oven with an anemic hope that some baking would warm the place back up. She looked at the plane ticket left on the coffee table before sticking it in her pocket and heading out towards her garden with an empty jar in hand. She went to the blackberry bush but couldn’t find the motivation to begin picking, so instead she sat on the soil in between her tomato plants and green bean stocks.

She pulled the plane ticket back out of her pocket, instantly feeling her face flush with anger as she looked at it. Her son couldn’t go through with the wedding. If she was

stubborn enough maybe she would be able to save him from his own demise. Maybe she could remind him that thou shalt obey thy parents and that he would eventually have to move back to Texas. Eleanor tore up the plane ticket, her fingers moving faster than they had in the last five years of berry picking. She planted the shredded paper in the soil by her feet with the thought that this would be the new seed that would save her son's life.

Chain-linked

The day Simon and Garfunkel released *Bookends*, Ralph began a two week spree of listening to the album every night with the only exception being the evening Martin Luther King Junior was assassinated. Ralph would come home from school and lay in his bed as the soft spring sunset would seep through his two large windows and add to the calming sensation the song “Punky’s Dilemma” seemed to spread throughout his room. Ralph would get lost in the ceiling, lost in the plants that covered his windowsill. His mother had read that gardening and planting helped alleviate stress and depression, so in consequence, there wasn’t a windowsill in the Buckley’s house that wasn’t covered with potted plants.

At first Ralph regretted showing his mother the science article about the correlation between mental health and gardening, but lately, he didn’t mind. He liked how the delicate orange buds and sturdy green stock of the Guppy plants, at eye level when he lay in bed, gave further texture and color to the music as he listened to “Over”

again and again. It helped him forget the fact that reading science articles on a daily basis hadn't made him the most popular junior at Arlington Heights High School. It was science magazines, however, that had helped develop a keen skill for observation in Ralph, and after two weeks of nonstop Simon and Garfunkel, Ralph noticed the Guppy plants in his room grew faster than any other Guppy plants in the house.

“This seems very interesting, Ralph,” Mrs. Wesley, Ralph’s homeroom teacher said as he handed her the hypothesis for his project for the academic fair held in early May: Playing calming music beside a plant every day will make it grow faster.

Ralph walked back to his desk and heard a comment from Jamie Jones – a brunette who he’d been friends with in elementary school before she developed huge boobs. “Could that guy be more of a nerd?” No one else in homeroom seemed as eager about the academic fair as Ralph, with the exception of Mary Hinkston, but Mary was also labeled an outsider, not because she was a nerd but because she was the only white girl in school who associated with the few black kids who had integrated Arlington Heights High a few years back.

“Now remember, students,” Mrs. Wesley announced, “I’ll be a judge for the academic fair this year, and the top three student projects will advance to the academic fair regionals held at TCU.” Mrs. Wesley smiled, her face possessing nowhere near the number of stress wrinkles Ralph’s mother’s had, although surely the two women were approximately the same age. She straightened out the sheets of paper she held in her hand and told everyone to use the rest of homeroom period to work on their projects, but

most of the students just talked about upcoming plans for the summer break only six weeks away.

Jamie Jones was going snorkeling in the Gulf of Mexico, a very dangerous place according to Ralph's mother on account of the reported number of Jellyfish stings each year. The guy who sat next to Ralph and had a red Camero and a tan was going to visit his family in Tennessee. "Eww, gross, that one girl is from Tennessee," Jamie Jones said, directing her attention toward Mary.

Mary sat at a desk in the back right-hand corner of the room next to two students whose names Ralph didn't know. Mary got called all sorts of names behind her back starting very shortly after she came to Fort Worth from Memphis the year before. Ralph had been curious what Mary could possibly have in common with the students she hung out with, but then again Ralph didn't understand how to have anything in common with any classmates. So Ralph kept his head over his desk and tried to tune out all the fun trips his classmates would take over the summer and just focus on the science project. He'd need seeds, soil, two plastic pots, similar controlled environments, Simon and Garfunkel and a ruler. He'd plant the seeds – ten to a pot – then expose only one pot to music, probably about two or three hours' worth a day.

By May 1st, the radish seeds exposed to music had grown at a faster rate and stood 250 millimeters taller than the control seeds that had been kept in silence, and that following weekend, Ralph's project took first place at the Arlington Heights Academic Fair.

"Congratulations, Ralph," Mrs. Wesley said as she walked by the table in the middle of the cafeteria where Ralph displayed his project on a trifold board: one fold

dedicated to his hypothesis and procedures, one fold dedicated to the chart documenting his observations and the last fold concerning an explanation that plants possibly receive stimuli from sound waves which in return help them germinate faster.

“What kind of music did you play for them?” a small voice said from behind Ralph. Ralph turned to see Mary Hinkston. At five-five Ralph was short for his age, but Mary couldn’t have been taller than five-feet. She wore her dirty blonde hair in a straight ponytail long enough to touch the middle of her back and bangs that swooped across her forehead. Her hair stuck out against her red cardigan, as did her pale skin.

“Excuse me,” Ralph said, his voice sounding funny to him. He wasn’t used to talking to other students and he became slightly paranoid that it showed in his voice.

“For the plants. What music did you play for the plants?” Mary said.

“Simon and Garfunkel.”

“Figures.” Mary turned so that she was shoulder to almost-shoulder with Ralph as they both faced the sea of students that swarmed the cafeteria. Students glanced at different tables and projects as they all seemed to walk in circles. “I guess Simon and Garfunkel is better than country and western, which seems to dominate radio stations down here. I’m definitely more of a Nina Simone girl myself.”

“Nina who?” Ralph asked.

“Simone.” Mary turned to look at Ralph. “‘Sinnerman?’ ‘Ain’t Got No, I Got Life?’ Ever heard of them?”

Ralph shook his head.

“Next you’re going to tell me you haven’t heard of James Brown, B.B. King or even Willie Mae.”

Ralph didn't know how to respond.

"You ever heard of Elvis?" Mary raised her eyebrows.

"Of course," Ralph sort of squeaked.

"Then you've heard Willie Mae, you just didn't know to give her the credit."

Mary leaned on the table that held Ralph's project. The way she slumped her shoulders was different than other kids at school. In fact, her whole demeanor was different. And she spoke with a bit of accent, although Ralph couldn't tell if it was a typical Memphis accent.

"Willie Mae, a black girl, sings a song and makes a few hundred dollars off it. Elvis, a white man, sings the exact same song and makes a few million dollars." Ralph followed Mary's eyes as they drifted through the cafeteria, her irises a dark blue that seemed to fade to a grey closer to her pupils. "You think it matters to plants if the singer is black or white, girl or boy?"

"No. Does it really matter to anyone?" Ralph asked honestly. "Music is music, right? It all has sound waves and frequencies and pitches and tones."

Mary laughed and stared at Ralph. "Are you serious?"

Ralph didn't see that he had said something funny.

"Is that all you think Simon and Garfunkel is? Sound waves and frequencies and tones and such?"

"Gosh, no." Ralph felt his cheeks grow warm. "It's guitars and lyrics and lovely harmonies blended in sound waves and frequencies."

Mary gave a slight nod of her head as if she agreed. “And Willie Mae and Nina Simone are velvety voices and life changing lyrics and raw instrumentals blended in sound waves and frequencies.”

“Sure,” Ralph said matter-of-factly.

“So you want to come to the record store down in Como and see a show tonight? They sometimes book bands to play in the back of the store.”

“Will one of those ladies you mentioned be there?”

Mary laughed again. “No, no, I don’t think they’ll be invited down here anytime soon.”

Ralph had a million more questions for Mary but got stuck on what had just happened. She had asked him to hang out with her that night. A fact that nearly shocked Ralph out of his skin. But what was even more shocking was that she had invited him to Como, a housing district with an infamously high crime rate by Fort Worth standards.

“We should celebrate, and what better way than with a show? You came in first place and I came in third. We’re both going to the regional academic fair.” Mary must have noticed that Ralph’s eyes were bulging with a mixture of excitement and apprehension. “What? Never been to Como? Does it make you nervous that it’s an all-black neighborhood?”

“No, it’s just that it’s kind of dangerous,” said Ralph, knowing that a little of his apprehension did spawn from it also being an all-black neighborhood. Ralph definitely didn’t ever really think about racism, or consider himself to be a racist. He had just never been around black people.

“It has a little crime, but that’s to be expected in most poor neighborhoods. It’s the price of oppression,” Mary said, not noticing that Jamie Jones walked by and shot her the evil-eye. Ralph wondered if Mary was aware what other people thought of her. Ralph knew he was viewed as a nerd, and he sort of just accepted it. His nerdiness was going to get him into college, it would probably also get him a scholarship and a student deferment from Vietnam. But Mary, well, it wasn’t that she seemed to accept her outsider status, she just really seemed not to care. Maybe that was a part of her demeanor that made her so different from everyone else. She seemed as confident as Jamie Jones, even though she was nowhere near as popular. It was attractive.

“I guess I could ask my mom to borrow her car and drive down to Como,” Ralph said, weighing in his head the chances that nothing dangerous would happen.

“You should,” Mary said and reached for Ralph’s notebook beside his trifold board. “Here’s the address for the place. You’ll have to go through the neighborhoods’ main entrance or else you might run into the fence that separates Como from Arlington Heights.” Mary wrote down the directions on how to get to the record store on a back piece of paper. “The show starts around seven tonight. It’s a local group, but it should still be good.”

As soon as Mary walked away Ralph eagerly flipped through his notebook and found the page she had written on. When he was sure no one was paying attention, he smelled it. It seemed like a sort of romantic thing to do. Didn’t girls have a scent they left behind on all things they touched? But the paper just smelled like paper and graphite.

“Absolutely not,” Ralph’s mother said. “No way are you going to some concert in Como.” Ralph always spent a part of his weekend helping his mother around the house. He’d normally fix or paint something, but this weekend, she just had him dust the living room and polish the wooden mantel and built-in bookshelves.

“But it’s a Saturday. We don’t have anywhere to be tomorrow morning, except church and that’s not until eleven.”

His mother had a vein that protruded through the stress wrinkles on her forehead whenever she felt confrontation. Ralph had read an article once about how stress causes people to lose all the pigment in their hair and assumed that was how his own mother had gone completely gray by her early forties, although an at-home hair dye kit covered it up quite nicely.

“I know what day it is,” she said, meticulously watering every plant that lined the living room bay window. She had on full make-up and white dress with red flower print, which Ralph found to be slightly silly because she’d only leave the house once that day to go grocery shopping. She had been widowed for so long, now, Ralph wondered if she sometimes dressed nice for simple outings in hopes of catching the eye of another man. “It’s not about the day of the week, it’s about the area. Como is dangerous. You know about that fence down there, don’t you? Back when the Negroes first took over that neighborhood, a fence had to be built to keep crime from spreading to our part of town.”

Ralph felt frustration growing in his throat as he sprayed more polish onto the cleaning rag. He didn’t know how to tell his mother that this evening was kind of a big deal. That he’d been invited to hang out with people for the first time in a long time, and

not just by anyone, but by a beautiful girl. “But Mom, Mary Hinkston said I should celebrate winning the academic fair.”

“Mary Hinkston.” His mother put down the watering can. “Is that the girl from Memphis?”

“Yeah.”

“That girl is odd. You should stay away from her,” Ralph’s mother said.

“Why?”

“Why you always asking questions and second guessing my authority?” His mother walked over to inspect the coffee table for dust.

“If you’re going to make a statement that something is odd, you at least have to present some evidence as to why you think so.” Ralph’s mother shot him a glance, which he knew all too well how to interpret. Ralph’s mother always got annoyed when he inserted scientific logic into every aspect of life.

“It’s just different for a girl to be hanging out with the sort of people she hangs out with.” His mother walked over to the living room closet. “Now I need you to wipe down the legs of this table as well before I get to vacuuming the carpet.”

Ralph knew the conversation about Como was closed and not to be reopened for further discussion. He finished his chores and bitterly spent the rest of the evening in his room, alone.

Ralph didn’t have the guts to confront Mary the following Monday at school, but he was still mighty glad when she walked up to him. “So you didn’t make it out Saturday.”

“No, I couldn’t.” Ralph sheepishly directed his eyes toward the linoleum flooring by his locker.

“Missed a heck of a show.”

“I bet.”

There was silence. Ralph’s imagination raced with thoughts of him and Mary going out together, listening to records, walking down the sidewalk holding hands, having discussions over Structuralism and Evolution. Ralph looked up at Mary, making note of a tiny scar on her cheek and finding it absolutely adorable. He prayed that his chances of hanging out with her hadn’t been ruined.

“I was thinking about what you said, you know, if plants react differently to different music.” Ralph couldn’t bring himself to look her in the eyes as he spoke. “Maybe I could expand on my research. Expose plants to different genres of music and see if they react the same to each genre or if different music brings about different effects.”

Mary nodded her head to the side. “That could be cool.”

“I just don’t really know what other genres I should expose them to.” Ralph felt his hands grow clammy. He wasn’t sure if he was being manipulative or flirtatious. He wasn’t even sure if there was a big difference between the two.

“Well if you ever want to go to the record store in Como with me, the offer still stands. I could go to that place seven days a week. It always cheers me.”

“Okay,” Ralph said excitedly.

Mary smiled and walked away. Other kids stared at her as she walked back to her group of black friends who all had lockers on the south side of the school.

Ralph tried to drown out the voice of his mother which said Mary was odd, as well as all the voices imposed from occasionally reading Ian Fleming novels that told him to play it cool and not act so eager around her.

During the following weeks, Ralph studied hard for his finals and spent any free time reading science articles about plants and thinking about Mary. Simon and Garfunkel sort of took on a different context with Mary in mind. He imagined spending his summer working on his science project and hanging out with her. He imagined getting a college scholarship based on his research and Mary picking a college based on where he went.

On the day the two were to present at the Texas Christian University regional academic fair, Ralph dressed in khaki pants and a green button up shirt with the hopes that he would not only look professional, like a real scientist, but that he would also come off as attractive to Mary.

He borrowed his mom's car and arrived at the TCU ballroom in the university center an hour early. He wanted time to both set up his project and see Mary. He brought the potted plants with him for a visual effect. He knew today's competition would be more stiff and he really wanted to place and advance to the state fair in August. He'd even spent the night before rewriting all the information on his tri-fold board in his neatest handwriting.

The TCU ballroom was much larger than Arlington Heights's cafeteria and had warmer lighting too. The walls were paneled in gold siding and the arched ceilings were decorated with chandeliers. Ralph felt much more at ease in the college environment than he did at his high school.

After he set up his presentation, he found Mary by a table on the east side of the ballroom. Centered on her poster board was a large image of a *Newsweek* cover with Martin Luther King Jr. peacefully lying in a coffin and a woman standing over him, crying. On the left side of the board, she had a complete timeline of the Civil Rights Movement. On the right, she listed in depth details of the Movement in Memphis and how it correlated with their music scene.

“That’s a cool picture.” Ralph pointed to the photograph on the top right hand side. The image focused on two white people – a man and a little girl, both holding signs that read “Jim Crow Must Go” – in a sea of black faces.

“That’s my dad and me,” Mary said, her blue flower dress swaying at her knees as she reached over to point to the little girl in the picture. Ralph didn’t know he could be even more attracted to Mary, but he was. The picture showed that she had lived. She had stories to tell. Crazy childhood memories. She was interesting, exciting, slightly exotic, and knowledgeable. Real knowledgeable. Her timeline was in depth. Her captions were poignant. Ralph even got a little nervous that Mary could possibly beat him out for a spot in the state competition. He didn’t like feeling jealous of her, so he wished her good luck and went back over to his project.

People began to trickle into the ballroom and it wasn’t long before Ralph was swarmed with questions. Everyone seemed fascinated by his research. “Both pots were exposed to the same amount of sunlight and received the same amount of water,” Ralph explained. Mrs. Wesley showed up and gave Ralph a wink as she walked by his table. “Yes, sir, two hours of Simon and Garfunkel every day,” Ralph told a judge. “If the

sound waves really work as a stimulant for plants, gardeners and farmers could benefit from such information.”

The judges smiled and nodded as Ralph answered their questions, and at noon they gave him the blue ribbon signifying second place and twenty dollars in prize money. Ralph’s first impulse was to be absolutely thrilled; his second impulse was curiosity as to whether Mary had won first place. He carefully maneuvered around the crowd that still filled the ballroom, all the while telling himself that he shouldn’t be a sore loser and to be happy for Mary if she’d beat him for first place. He passed the third place winner, a board dedicated to the history of the Warsaw Ghettos in Poland, before reaching the east wall of the ballroom where he knew Mary stood with her project. He spotted the gold ribbon – the first place prize – on one of the boards. Ralph got a little anxious.

The closer Ralph got, he realized the gold ribbon wasn’t on Mary’s board, but the board right next to her: a project dealing with the race to the moon. Seeing that Mary’s board didn’t have a ribbon on it at all, Ralph felt guilty about his jealousy.

Mary seemed somber, void of her usual confidence. Ralph had never tried to cheer up a girl before. He didn’t know what to say. “How’s it going?”

For the first time it was Mary who had trouble looking at Ralph. “No one really asked me any questions about my project. No one really seemed to care.” Ralph looked over the poster board and still found it to be amazing. But he also knew that the Civil Rights Movement wasn’t really a big thing in Fort Worth. He’d never heard of policemen here hosing down protesters or sticking attack dogs on them like the news sometimes portrayed in Mississippi or Alabama.

Mary began taking her board down. A man tapped Ralph on the shoulder. “We’d like to get a picture with all the fair winners together,” the man said.

“You placed?” Mary asked. “Congratulations.” Her tone was genuine but sad.

By the time the picture was taken Mary had left. Ralph talked to the judges a little longer about possibly expanding his research to involve other genres of music before he packed up too. He carefully placed his potted plants on the floorboard of his mother’s ’64 Nova station wagon. He knew his mother wanted him to come straight home after the fair, but all he could think about was the somber look on Mary’s face and the melancholy tone in her voice. He wanted to see her. Tell her how truly excellent a job she’d done and not to be discouraged just because the judges didn’t get it. He thought about how Mary had truly experienced things, and felt it was time he did the same.

Instead of taking the freeway home, he went back to Arlington Heights and then down Donnelly Street. “Let us be lovers, we’ll marry our fortunes together,” Ralph sang as he noticed the upkeep on the houses slowly declining the closer he got to Como. Houses had paint chipped on their siding and their roofs showed a great deal of wear. Still Ralph sang Simon and Garfunkel, relating every lyric to his drive toward Mary. He knew where to find her: the place that always cheered her up.

It startled him a little when he realized there was something in the road up ahead. He slowed down a bit as he noticed it was a fence. A chain link fence about eight feet tall that extended across the entire road and into the yards of the neighboring houses. It struck Ralph as odd, but he turned around in a driveway and made his way over to the next parallel residential street. The road again was blocked by the chain linked fence. He turned around and tried one more street several blocks over but was greeted by the same

outcome. It was absolutely ridiculous. “Who would put a fence in the middle of the road?” Ralph stepped outside the car and questioned the fence as if it was his mother.

He walked up to the imposing 8-foot structure and ran his fingers over the warm intertwined metal links. Through the fence he could see Como on the other side – worn down but not remotely as dangerous as he had expected. He shook the fence as he remembered Mary saying the only way he could get through Como was through the main entrance. “You’ll hit the fence if you try to come straight from Arlington Heights,” she had said. But it wasn’t until now that Ralph really understood what she had meant. Frustrated, Ralph tried to remember where the main entrance was. This was all so stupid, unnecessary.

Ralph got back in the car and noticed his hand shaking slightly as he turned the key in the ignition. Why had he not figured it out before that the fence wasn’t just about the crime rate in Como?

Ralph drove around for a while, the potted plants on his floor board clinking together with every stop and go. Separating plants was one thing. Separating people was another. He wasn’t sure how to process the realization that his hometown had built a cage to separate residential areas based on ethnicity. Was it any more humane than spraying people with a water hose to keep them in their supposed place? How did Mary know about these kinds of things and not let it absolutely crush her? Ralph drove almost in a complete circle before he was able to find the main entrance.

Ralph knew it was shameful how his motivation for going into Como had shifted. He now wanted Mary to cheer him up. Tell him how to handle having touched such an

imposing symbol of oppression. Tell him how to buck up and spend just a few minutes on the other side of the fence while people lived within it daily.

Once in Como, the directions to the record store were a lot easier to remember. Ralph had to drive straight for four blocks and then make only one right turn. “You can’t miss the sign for Charlie’s Records,” Mary had written. The big yellow lettering really stuck out against the grey atmosphere that seemed trapped by the fence as well. The lyrics to “America” by Simon and Garfunkel seemed foreign in this neighborhood. Ralph felt like a foreigner himself.

It took Ralph a second to compose himself. He felt nervous about opening the car door for several reasons. He wasn’t sure how he should approach Mary. Asking her to ameliorate the pit in his stomach seemed unfair. Maybe he could just start a conversation by saying he wanted to buy a new record and begin expanding on his research. Maybe it would be completely insensitive to start with a reminder that he had placed in the fair while she hadn’t. Maybe he should use his prize money to buy her a record. It would be a bold move, but Mary was a bold girl. How was he ever going to match up to her if he continued to chicken out of things?

Ralph got out of the car and recognized that the claustrophobia he felt was in his head. He had read several articles about how your mind can run with the power of suggestion, and with the fence nowhere in sight, he knew it was silly to believe that he still felt the fence near him.

A bell dinged as he pushed the record store door open, his eyes immediately fixating on the display case for Nina Simone’s newest album. The perfect record for Mary. Ralph looked up expecting to see her in a corner, or maybe in the back where she

said bands sometimes played. But it didn't take long for Ralph to realize not only that Mary wasn't there but that four set of eyes glared at him over short shelves of records. Uncomfortable was an understatement. Ralph had never been the only white person in a room before and he didn't like it. Mary got these kinds of glares at school all the time, but Ralph didn't think he could handle it. He wanted to walk right back out the door, get back to the other side of the fence as soon as possible. However, for the first time in his life, Ralph questioned the science articles he had read. Maybe his mind hadn't simply been playing tricks on him. Maybe the fence was still very much present. Maybe he carried a fence inside himself.

“How much is this Nina Simone record?” he asked.

Fingers

The hospital chicken was dry and the breadcrumbs that covered the tenders were stale, but James had had worse. Shit, the first time he'd ever seen Joe Brigsby, James had been eating leftover chicken tenders off the plate of a complete stranger. Maybe this was all the stranger's fault. Or Joe Brigsby's. Or Grandpa's Billy Preston collection. Or all three combined. Or the universe's fault. Maybe everything had been against him from the beginning.

At thirteen, James used to always try to sneak into the back of the Dueling Pianos, an eighteen-and-older joint right outside the heart of what had been the Deep Deuce District of NW 2nd Street. It was the joint where his father used to play, the one where he'd caught the eye of James's mother, or so the story had been told before Lupus sucked the last breath of air from her. Occasionally, if the back door of the joint wasn't securely shut, the Oklahoma wind would swing the door wide open, giving James a sixty-second portal to sneak in. Nine-out-of-ten times, James had gotten caught and thrown out. But

one evening, James snuck in, spotted an open table in the back with remnants of food left on it and took a seat. Looking like a paying customer with food in front of him, James surveyed the club. He began to imagine the father he knew only from pictures slapping a stand-up bass on the stage, a white man in a mostly all black club, until something else caught James's eye: the weather-worn Joe Brigsby. The man breezed up and down the piano, moving his fingers as if they were trying to outrun a tornado plaguing the ivory keys. James was hooked, caught in the whirlwind of sound that engulfed the club, and within a week, James showed up at Joe Brigsby's office at the community college.

The façade of confidence James conveyed shocked him as he stood at Joe Brigsby's door for the first time. He kept his shaking hand at his side after he knocked. He held his voice steady and said "Hi, sir. I'm James Flannery and I want to learn to play the blues piano."

The nurse who came into the hospital room every six hours with two more Lortabs for James's pain never carefully eased the heavy hospital room door shut, but rather let it slam behind her. "Can you rate your pain on a scale from one to ten?" she said in a monotone voice that made James wonder how long nurses' shifts usually lasted.

"Eight."

James hated the way the coating of the painkiller instantly melted on his tongue and how the taste stuck even after he washed the pills down with water. The nurse didn't say another word; she signed his chart and then Bang, the door slammed behind her.

Joe Brigsby, although more compassionate, had pretty much slammed the door on James too when he first mentioned his intentions to learn the piano. “Son, I teach adjunct for the college students and such,” Joe Brigsby had said, looking down at James who’d always been kind of short and scrawny, even at age thirteen. “I don’t really do private lessons for young folk.” Joe Brigsby’s voice was soft and didn’t much match his six-foot-frame. James had expected him to sound more like Louie Armstrong and less like Little Richard.

“But I’m a fast learner.” James said, even more determined by the peek he got of Joe Brigsby’s office. Shelves and shelves overflowing with what looked like sheet music and books; the top shelf dedicated to miniature bronze statues, guys with closed eyes and emotion-filled faces playing the piano. White brick walls cluttered with framed posters: James Booker in Concert with His Voice, His Black Piano and His Rhythm and Blues. The Jerry Lee Lewis Show and Dance, Vernon, Texas. The Fabulous Booker T: King of the Hammond Organ. Champion Jack Dupree: Blues Scene ‘69. James wanted to breathe in the life that flowed through the office, the vibrations of the piano chords that lasted even in silence.

“Fast learner or not, son, I’m guessing you’re definitely not a student here, so you’d have to pay me directly out of your pocket, and I’m not even sure what I’d charge.”

James’ grandpa couldn’t afford to give James or his brother an allowance, especially since their mother’s life insurance had run out. But still James put forth his ultimate façade of confidence. “That’s fine; I can pay,” he said, trying to think how he could get the money.

“How old are you?”

“Sixteen.” James’ lie of three years had been met with an apprehensive look from Joe Briggsby, who simply shook his head no, apologized and left it at that.

The next woman to walk into James’ hospital room wasn’t a nurse, but an administrator of the hospital. He hadn’t filled out any paperwork in the emergency room, but instead had been rushed right into a trauma ward. Now that he was settled into an overnight-stay room on the fifth floor with symptoms of infection simply adding one more notch of shit onto the last 12 hours, the paperwork began to come.

“Is there someone who could help you fill this out?” the administrator asked.

“I got it,” James said, possessing nowhere near the confidence he had had with Joe Briggsby six years prior. Although right handed, James kept his dominant bandaged hand to his side. He used his teeth to unclip the heart monitor from his left index finger before scribbling what he could with his left hand. He held the paper steady with his forearm. Name. Date of Birth. Address. It looked like a kindergartener’s writing, not a nineteen-year-old’s. Gender. Ethnicity. James always checked the box for “Other” and then wrote in “Mixed.” Not mulatto. Not chocolate milk. Not half and half.

Both James and his older brother Preston’s espresso skin tone came from their mother’s gene pool, although Preston teased James at a young age as to which brother inherited more white genes and which inherited more black. James remembered vividly the day he’d gotten a job delivering the *Daily Oklahoman*, an income he’d hoped would change Joe Brisby’s mind when it came to piano lessons. James waited patiently on his grandpa’s porch steps the last day of seventh grade for Preston to come home so he could

ask to borrow Preston's bike for his new paper route in the morning. James and Preston weren't even in the same school district back then. James' good grades had placed him in a charter school of advanced studies while Preston still attended regular public school. The rap music that echoed in the streets signaled Preston's ride home was just around the corner. James knew that his achievements embarrassed Preston; they made James come off like a do-gooder or a nerd. But becoming a blues pianist was bound to change all that, right? Preston stepped out of the car, his pants sagging a little more each day, one of the many things that drove their grandpa nuts.

"Hey, can I borrow your bike some this summer?" James asked as Preston walked towards the porch. Preston just slowly blinked. A pinkish color surrounded the rim of his irises and his hair had gotten so long and bushy it sometimes caught on his eyelashes. "I won't wreck it or anything." James didn't want to mention he had gotten a job as a paper boy, fearing it'd just be one more thing to further separate the two. Preston barely talked to James as is.

"Whatever."

James took that response as a victory and worked for two whole weeks before returning to Joe Brisby's office with \$70 out of the \$100 he'd earned in hand – \$30 of it already spent on candy and the latest issues of *Blues Music Magazine* and *Daredevil*.

Joe Brisby answered the door wearing khaki pants, a loose-fitting collared shirt rolled-up at the sleeves, and a look that let James know he hadn't expected to see him again.

"I got the money for lessons now. I can pay you, see." James pulled out three crinkled twenty dollar bills and the single ten from his jean pocket.

Joe Brigsby opened his mouth like he was going to talk and then stopped himself. James anxiously wondered whether the pause was a good thing or bad thing.

“Son,” Joe Brigsby spoke. “I don’t teach younger cats. I wasn’t even planning on teaching college kids. It’s just extra cash.”

“Well.” James needed to be quick on his toes. “How about making some more extra cash?” James held out the wad of cash.

“Where’d you get that?” Joe asked.

“Paper route. It’s a steady job. Getting paid every two weeks.”

“I’m sorry, son.” Joe shook his head. “But I’ll tell you what, I’ll ask around and see if I can’t find someone who teaches you young ones, then I’ll send him your way.”

James felt desperate. “But, Mr. Brigsby, I want you to teach me.” Often times, when James was nervous he talked faster. “I saw you the other night at the Dueling Pianos, and you’re amazing. You have to teach me. I know I’d be good. My dad used to play the string bass. I got the blues in my genes. Please, Mr. Brigsby.”

Joe Brigsby had halfway shut the door when he stopped. “How’d you get into a jazz joint?”

James didn’t know how to explain himself. Legally of age to enter or not, that club’s concrete floors, exposed black ceilings and velvet red curtains seemed to be the very fabric that made him. According to his grandpa, James’ mother Cecilia had been the most beautiful regular at the Dueling Pianos. And James’ father, although white, used to slap a mean bass line at that joint. Being in the Dueling Pianos was the only way to feel the life of his dead parents. But James said none of this. Instead he let out a slow, “uhhh.”

“You know, the club could get in a good deal of trouble if the wrong cat saw a minor like you in there.”

“I’ve only snuck in once,” James lied, but feeling the need to share some truth, he followed with, “But it gets in you, you know. That feeling, that sound, it’s like heart transplant, you get a new pulse and new reason to move.” For the first time, James realized he was really begging, and it embarrassed him. He was, after all, outside Joe’s door, standing in the hallway, not behind Joe’s door. James felt exposed. He even still had his money out. All his monetary worth. He face became hot. He put the money back in his pocket and looked towards the ground, fearing his embarrassment showed.

“All right, son.” Joe Brigsby’s high-pitched voice was like a trickle of cold water sizzling in the heat of shame that engulfed James. “Come back to my office after 4:30 today.”

James felt a few ice cubes run down his arm. “You’ll teach me?”

“I’ll at least see what you got.”

James couldn’t stand the smell of the chicken tenders any longer. Taking the Loritab on an empty stomach increased his nausea more than the pain did, but he had absolutely no appetite. James had to stand up, move around. He felt sunken into the hospital bed, sunken into despair and he needed to shake it, even if only for a second. He didn’t want to turn on the television set above the faux-maple cabinet at the end of his bed, so he settled for a walk to the door to catch a peep of the hallway: a change of scenery, a change of thought. He knew standing up would be difficult. He’d have to slip off the leg stockings that pulsated around his calves to prevent blood clots. He’d have to

ensure the I.V. attached to the saline bag at his right didn't fall out of the pit of his elbow. He'd have to unhook the heart monitor from his index finger again. His fingers. Son of a bitch. His fucking fingers. Motivated by sheer anger, James unhooked himself from all that strapped him to his new reality. He grabbed the tray of uneaten food off the bedside table with his left hand and pushed the I.V. pole towards the door with his foot. He rested the tray on his right forearm, his bandaged right hand already beginning to dampen with fresh blood.

At the very least, James should be able to put his food outside the door for the nurse to pick up, he told himself. Maybe take a stroll through the halls. Pace his steps with his thoughts. Get some sort of rhythm going.

James reached with his left hand to open the door. Not expecting the weight of the high-density fiberboard, James had to pull hard, an act which forfeited the balance of his tray. The juice box to the right of the tenders tipped over and tumbled onto James' recently-mutilated right hand, scathing where his index, middle and ring finger had been only a few hours earlier. James couldn't feel the apple juice that moistened his socks. All he felt was excruciating pain that pulsed through the knobs-instead-of-fingers just below his knuckles. A slew of curse words flew from James' mouth, almost loud enough to drown out his cell phone ringing on the bedside table.

"Dumb shits don't know how to drive, cutting people off, not using their blinkers, shit," Joe Brigsby had said as he drove James in his '86 Cutlass Supreme. The two had met at 4:30 at Joe's office since the community college was within walking distance for James from his grandpa's house. Joe Brigsby then drove thirteen-year-old James to his

duplex about ten minutes away. “I don’t think the school would like me teaching private lessons in their offices, you know what I mean?” Joe Brigsby repeated his explanation two or three times.

Joe’s duplex wasn’t as glamorous as James had expected. His baby grand piano took up most of the living room, only leaving a small corner for two chairs and a coffee table. The textured, beige walls weren’t covered in posters, like his office, but housed a few framed exaggerated nightclub paintings that James would later learn were prints by Archibald Motley. Joe, to James’ expectations however, did have three free-floating shelves in his living room that held more of those foot-tall statues James had seen in his office. James spent a good minute staring at those statues. “I buy myself one of them in every city I travel to for shows,” Joe Brigsby said. “Austin, New Orleans, Kansas City, Chicago, all sorts of music stores have them.”

James studied the plumb-faces of the bronze men that depicted your typical blues musician. James imagined squinting his eyes like that in ecstasy. He imagined his fingers poetically dancing on keys like the statues illustrated. He thought about himself wearing a hat, a button-up shirt, maybe even a tie, looking fancy as he wowed audiences.

“All right, well, have a seat.” Joe broke James’ fantasy as he motioned to the bench in front of the piano. Joe scooted over a chair from the corner and took a seat himself. “You ever play before?”

James wanted to lie, say yes, continue to fantasize that he was already a blues pianist, but he shook his head no.

“Ever play any instrument at all? Study music in school or something?”

Ashamed, James shook his head no again.

“I see, well, we’ll start from the beginning.” Joe stood up and reached for some sheet music that cluttered the top of his piano. “You going to learn how to read music. I ain’t going to teach you to just listen for the tune. A real musician can look at a piece of paper and hear the melody flowing off it.”

Joe sat back down. “Unlike other instruments, the piano uses both bass and treble clef, okay? This is the treble line and this is the bass.” He pointed to two symbols on the paper: a swirled out circle with a line through it and the backwards, skinny C. “Now were going to start with just learning the treble line. That’s what your right hand will play most of the time.”

Joe reached his hand out and hammered the center key of the piano. “Okay, now this note right here, this is called the ‘middle C.’ This is your home base, your reference point while you’re starting out.”

James lifted his hand and gently touched the worn ivory as instructed. He felt a sort of electricity in it. A jolt. As well as in the other notes Joe Brigsby taught him that day. EGBDF: Every Good Boy Does Fine – the notes of the treble line and FACE – the notes in the spaces. Joe explained sharps and flats. James played a twelve note octave over and over again. Then Joe showed him a few scales and a chord. James felt a little awkward, his fingers moving in a way they had never moved before, but the sheer beauty of the sound each note produced quickly overcame the awkwardness of it.

“All right now,” Joe Brigsby said at the end of James’ first lesson. “It’s real important you practice those scales and chords before your next lesson, okay?” James got a little anxious. He hadn’t thought about practicing. He certainly didn’t have a piano at his grandpa’s house that he could practice on. He pondered where he could get hold of

a piano before his next lesson as Joe Briggsby drove him home. Before James got out of the car, he remembered the \$70 in his pocket. “How much you want me to pay you for today?”

The expression on Joe’s face changed in a way that James didn’t know how to interpret. James hoped he wouldn’t ask for the whole \$70. “We’ll say five bucks,” Joe said. Joe didn’t admit to James until years later that he always felt guilty taking any money at all from such a young, ambitious kid.

James couldn’t tell if the moisture that swelled in his eyes was from the pain or his frustration. His phone went to voicemail before he was able to get back to the bed to answer it. He squeezed his right hand with his left until the pain spasms calmed down a bit. Even though three of his fingers had been reduced to knubs, a pain seemed to course through where they had once been. James had heard about ghost limbs before, people still feeling their legs itch or cramp-up or hurt even after their legs were gone. It was a hell of a mind trip, almost as trippy as how out of place his thumb and pinky now looked – the only two fingers left. James couldn’t stand the sight of his mutilated hand for more than a second or two.

He crawled back into his bed and rehooked himself to his new prison. He didn’t bother to listen to the voicemail but simply called his grandpa back. “Hey-ya, boy. How you feeling?” His grandpa’s upbeat tone wasn’t fooling anybody. “Well, I guess that’s kind of the wrong question to ask, ain’t it.” James’ grandpa continued after James’ silence. “Well, I’m sorry it’s taking me so long to get to the hospital, but I’m still waiting

on Preston to come pick me up. Boy, if my legs were only what they used to be, you know I'd start walking my way up there right damn now."

"Yeah, I know." James tried to keep his tone even. This whole thing wasn't his grandpa's fault and he didn't want to sound mad or upset toward him. His grandpa had really been the only support James had outside his piano and music circle.

"All right, boy." Grandpa fake coughed to cover up that his voice cracked. "I'll see you as soon as I can."

James desperately wanted to see someone he considered family, blood related or not. He felt himself returning to that small-child yearning everyone has felt at one time or another for their mother. He felt silly at nineteen-years-old wanting the warm embrace of matriarchal arms. Maybe that'd been one of his initial drives towards music. Hearing music was like being hugged by your closest companion or ally or a parent. The blues had always wrapped its arms around James and held him tight. And playing the blues, well, that felt like actually understanding love, not merely being embraced by it. And now he was surely bound to be forever divorced from that relationship, that ability, with only having seven fingers and all.

James had once feared being dumped by the blues piano before the two even had a chance to really get to know each other. He feared if he didn't practice between lessons, Joe Brigsby wouldn't take him seriously and stop teaching him. But where could he practice?

James walked to the community college the day after his first lesson. Surely they had practice rooms with pianos for students. What college kid could afford an instrument

of their own? James searched up and down the halls of the Department of Music on campus until he found three vacant rooms with scratched-up, worn-in, up-right pianos that touched three out of the four room walls. Still, the pianos looked magnificent to James. He took a seat behind one and slowly started hammering out the notes Joe Brigsby had taught him. CFAC AFC. ACFA FCA. As James began the third scale – FAC – a school monitor walked into the room.

“Excuse me,” the plump freckled-face sophomore said. “Do you have your school I.D. on you?”

“My what?”

“Your school I.D.?”

James felt the emptiness of his pockets, trying to pretend like he knew what the monitor was talking about.

“You can’t use the practice rooms unless you’re a student of this institution with proper identification,” the sophomore said. It was instances like this James wished he and Preston were still as close as they had been in elementary school. Preston was always good at calling people out when they acted big-headed or like an authoritative prick, but James never possessed that kind of courage. James left, a defeat that embarrassed him so much he knew he’d never try to use the practice rooms on campus again.

The following day, James searched through the phone book for music stores that surely had pianos he could practice on, but clerks at the first two music stores James rode Preston’s bike to quickly informed James he had to be seriously interested in purchasing

a piano if he intended on playing one. James got nervous. There was only one more music store within bike-riding distance of James' house.

The music store didn't even look like a music store; it looked more like a mansion surrounded by other businesses that separated one of the richest neighborhoods downtown from one of the poorest. A pine sign hung in the front lawn with red lettering: Christopher's Pianos. The sign in the bay window said open, but the front door was locked. James peered into the glass, trying to shield away the sunlight with his hands as he pressed his face to the window to see inside. There were four grand pianos, each resting on their own Persian rug in what looked like a living room. The sun heating James' backside illuminated the polished onyx siding of the Steinways. These pianos were far nicer than any he'd seen at other music stores or at Joe Brigsby's duplex or the jazz club or the community college.

James rang the doorbell as if hypnotized by the spell his eyes feasted upon. An elderly man cracked the door, the chain still locked. "Can I help you?" the man, presumably Christopher himself, said with a thick accent. James had met very few European immigrants, but if he had to guess he'd have said the man sounded German.

"I'm looking to buy a piano," James lied, afraid of the same outcome as from the last two music stores clerks to whom he'd admitted his intentions of simply practicing.

The elderly man looked at James apprehensively, yet the feeling was mutual. Christopher looked more like a retired school teacher in a cardigan and slacks than a man who understood anything about the soul of a piano. "I don't think we have anything here for you." Christopher's voice was sharp as he shut the door.

Whether due to desperation that his next lesson was only four days away and he hadn't practiced or because he was hypnotized by the beauty of the instruments inside or a mixture of both, James screamed, "Wait!" and rang the doorbell again. Christopher opened the door, but before he could say anything, James started talking a mile a minute. He blurted out every reason why he needed a place to practice: how he'd gotten a job to pay for lessons but couldn't yet afford a piano of his own; how he had to beg Joe Briggsby to give him lessons in the first place; how the blues were in his genes; how his brother resented him but maybe he'd think James was cool if he could jam a tune; how James had an uncontrollable desire and love for music; how the blues ached in him every second of every day. Right when Christopher shut the door again and James was convinced all hope was lost, he heard the chain click unlocked. Christopher, still with shrewd eyes, opened the door.

There was a knock on the hospital door. James cringed at the thought of seeing another nurse, doctor or hospital administrator. He didn't want another pill or more bad news or more paperwork.

"Hey-ya boy." James heard his grandpa's voice from the hallway and immediately sat up in his bed, suppressing the dizziness that accompanied moving so fast. Grandpa's speckled white hair and stiff walk portrayed a man of age but his eyes were warm. "I made it," he said placing a heavy hand on James' shoulder.

James looked back toward the door, expecting to see Preston standing with his jeans sagging, his eyes sunken and his hair all matted, but no one was there. "Is Preston parking the car?" James asked.

Grandpa shook his head. “I had to get a ride from Joe Brigsby. He should be up in a minute.” Grandpa’s eyes drifted toward the hand James kept at his side, tucked underneath the covers. It was obvious Grandpa had a million questions but remained silent, either out of respect for James or fear for the answers. There was no point keeping the old man in anticipation, so James lifted up his gauze-covered hand, revealing the blank space between his thumb and pinky. James braced himself for his grandpa’s response – a gasp, tears, an “Oh Lord” – but Grandpa did none of those. His eyes simply widened for a second and then returned to their usually comforting state. He gave James’ shoulder a gentle but firm squeeze and nodded his head. “They giving you anything for the pain?”

“Yeah, Lortabs.”

“Well, that’s good.” His grandpa continued to nod. “That’s good.”

Joe Brigsby knocked with a rhythm and walked in with his usual beat until James waved with his bandaged hand. Joe Brigsby winced as if he suddenly felt a pain in his own hands. James was grateful for the empathy, the level of understanding, and also that neither Joe nor Grandpa smothered him with questions. Grandpa brought a deck of cards. “The game is to keep your mind occupied until they let you out of here.” They played games that didn’t require you to hold a bunch of cards in your hand at once – games like slap jack, black jack, sixty-six, five card draw, war. Still it felt wrong to James, only using one hand.

At Christopher Pianos, James played the few scales he knew how to play. “Your hands are too flat,” Christopher said. “You’re supposed to keep your hands arched, like

you have a ball in your palms.” Christopher sat down on the bench next to James and demonstrated what he meant. “Now play the scales again.” James did, over and over. Christopher nodded and walked to the breakfast nook where he sat at a desk covered in paperwork. James stayed for an hour and a half, and without a verbal agreement, Christopher Pianos became his place to practice.

James never could figure out why Christopher had been so generous with him, and he never jinxed the relationship with questions. Christopher had once too been a musician before his arthritis worsened, James learned, but Christopher played a different style of piano than James. His style had the speed of James Booker with the staccato of Oscar Peterson but the rhythm and note coordination was unlike anything James had ever heard. “It’s Mozart,” Christopher had said the first time he played for James. “Rondo alla Turca.”

With a place to practice, James never showed up for a lesson unprepared. After James learned how to read notes on sheet music, Joe Briggsby began throwing bluesy note combos at him. C, B-flat, E, C and F-flat; F, E-Sharp, C, F and A; E then C. James’ fingers maneuvered around the layers of keys as if the act was innate. However practicing became more difficult once his hands had to jump around the piano. Still James practiced and practiced with an intensity that would last for hours, a fact that was sometimes greeted warmly by Christopher and sometimes not.

About a year and a half into lessons with Joe Briggsby, James had upgraded jobs from paper boy to Sonic employee and was already learning to play some ragtime by Scott Joplin and provide his own improvisations to songs like “Boogie Woogie.” Joe would burn James all sorts of CDs and by year two of lessons, James could jam some

Thelonious Monk and Kenny Wayne. “Watching you learn the piano is liking watching a baby learn to suck on a nip,” Joe Brigsby said after a lesson, when the two would sometimes sit back together and listen to recordings for hours. Jon Cleary and The Absolute Monster Gentlemen. Roosevelt Sykes. Amos Milburn.

Sometimes Joe Brigsby would invite James’ grandpa over to his house so James could perform mini concerts packed full of tunes by Jimmy Yancy and some of the jams James was beginning to write himself. Grandpa sat in the corner chair and bobbed his head. James felt the energy of his two-man crowd and would play with more excitement. “A real musician can never stop himself from feeding off his audience,” Joe Brigsby would say.

James sometimes invited Preston too, but Preston never came. By that time Preston wasn’t really staying at the house much because he and Grandpa were always fighting – sometimes about the wads of cash Preston would bring home even though he didn’t have a job, sometimes about all the weight Preston was losing and about how his personal hygiene was plummeting, sometimes about Preston’s general apathy towards everything. His grandpa always seemed to be yelling at home, but at Joe Brigsby’s house he never once raised his voice. He seemed relaxed listening to James play, happy even, and James held onto that fact with great pride.

Grandpa and Joe Brigsby left to get James some food. “That’s why you ain’t got no appetite,” Grandpa said. “Ain’t nobody ever got an appetite for hospital food.”

James stared at the cards his grandpa had left on the bedside table. When he finally decided to pull the cards out of the box, it was a struggle using only one hand. As

James held all fifty-two cards in his left hand, he wondered if he'd ever be able to do something as simple as shuffling them ever again. The thought alone agitated him and he slammed the deck back on the table. He had also gotten a little agitated the first time Joe Brigsby brought his friends over to jam with James. Even though that'd only been two years ago, it felt a lot longer. All the guys had teased James for being young. "Just a kid, a baby really," they'd called him. "Fresh out of the crib." There was an eleven-year-gap between James and the next youngest of Joe Brigsby's band, the drummer Pete, a slender, white cat that rocked shaggy hair and a mustache. The guitarist was well in his thirties and the stand-up bassist was older than Joe, at fifty-six.

"Yeah, but the kid's got talent." Joe had stood up for James.

The five began practicing, grooving together, learning each other's rhythm. And Joe Brigsby was right. At just seventeen-years-old, James blew the boys out of the water with his iridescent flow, precision and tempo.

A week before James' eighteenth birthday, Joe Brigsby surprised him with some big news. "With you becoming an adult and all, I thought the best way to enter your manhood would be to book you a show with the band on the eve of your birthday," Joe said as the two listened to some records at his house.

"Really?" Excitement rushed through James. He imagined playing to a dozen of his grandpas, a dozen Christophers, and the thought elated him. "Where?"

"That's the best part," Joe said. "The Dueling Pianos."

James rubbed the brook of his nose. The deck of cards seemed to be staring at him now and the thought made his head spin.

His head had spun too the first time he showed his I.D. to the doorman at the Dueling Pianos and said “I’m a part of the floor show tonight.” The guys were already setting up their instruments and Joe Brigsby was running his fingers across one of the two baby-grand Yamaha pianos on stage.

“I’ll let you pick which piano you want to play on.” Joe said.

James walked onto the black platform, expecting to feel a great sense of harmony, like he’d been united with his father for the first time, but instead he felt a nervous pit in the bottom of his stomach. James looked at the crowd that already began to fill the joint. Men in ties, girls in hippy skirts, older ladies who tried to look young, young guys who looked like they could play a chord or two.

James’ fingers felt completely stiff as he tried to warm up with some scales on the stage-left piano. People continued to come into the club, order drinks, sit down at tables, look at menus. James remembered being thirteen-years-old and standing in the back of the joint, hungry to play the piano. He wondered how many guys in the crowd were hungry to be in his position now. Instead of feeling some sort of victory in that thought, he felt like he was going to be sick. By the time the guitarist and bassist did a mic check, James was in all out panic mode.

He pulled Joe Brigsby to the side of the stage. “I can’t do this. I can’t remember any of the tunes, any of the notes.” The spotlights lit Joe Brigsby’s blue shirt so that it almost looked purple.

“That’s just nerves,” Joe said. “And having a little nerves always make for a better performance.”

But James didn't simply have a little nerves, he had a lot of nerves. James sat back down at the piano and wondered how foolish he'd look running out of the club before the show even started. He thought about how he'd prove all the jokes the guys made about him being just a kid right if he were to simply split. Yet, the option still looked tempting as he gauged the nearest exit sign. But within a few minutes his window for escape slammed shut as Joe Brigby announced the band to a full house.

James picked up the deck of cards again. He flipped through the deck with his thumb, separating the fifty-two cards into two halves. There wasn't a single exit sign in the hospital that served as an escape from the reality of only having seven fingers, and he knew that. He felt determined to shuffle the cards. He held onto half the deck between his left thumb and middle finger. He then reached down with his right hand, or what was left of it, to pick up the other half of the cards with his thumb and pinky finger. James was careful not to let the cards touch the bandaged area of his three missing fingers.

With no index finger to apply the pressure that would force the cards to steadily flip through his right hand, James had to compensate with extra pressure from his thumb. He placed the two halves side by side and attempted to flip them together until they were shuffled, but he lost control of the cards in his right hand and the cards shot all over his chest. James wanted to throw the cards across the room, forget ever having tried to shuffle, but he didn't. He picked up the spun-out cards and placed them back into a straight pile. He then split the deck and tried to shuffle the cards again. This time he flipped the two halves into one semi-interwoven deck. He pushed the cards together and tried again. And again. And again. After James got decent at shuffling the cards with

only seven fingers, he decided to try doing a bridge to get the two halves pushed back into one.

James sat anxiously at the piano bench in the Dueling Pianos while Pete clicked off the beat with his drum sticks. First came the string bass with a mellow run accompanied by a nice tsh-t-tsh-t-tsh brush against the snare. Next, a few passionate chords out of the guitar before Joe unleashed the melody with his right hand. James' entrance was supposed to come at the bridge of the song. He counted the rhythm in his head: five and six and his fingers started moving. The staccato of his left hand couldn't mask the nerves that jumped through every fiber of his being but the explosion of sound quickly got James' adrenaline going and it wasn't but few moments until he was whole heartedly in the game.

James gave off an energy the crowd instantly absorbed and synthesized into a new vibe that really got James playing. The band picked up as well and Joe Brisgby shot in a beat from the bass-line of his piano that ensured the train of jams was racing full speed down the tracks of music. He'd tease James with riff and James would answer with a chord combo that made a man in the audience yell, "Eww, you get him boy." Joe would show off and then James would show off. Their fingers dueled one another, laughed with each other, and the audience cheered and hollered in excitement. The audience was hooked. Joe and the band were fiending for more. James became a down-right addict.

It wasn't even a question after the show was over: more shows were in the band's future. "Woo-wee, we really got something here," Joe said as they packed up the instruments, microphones and chords.

“All that practicing is really paying off,” Christopher said as he emerged from the crowd and shook James’ hand. James still felt the excitement of the evening and gave Christopher a huge hug.

James heard his grandpa in the crowd telling people, “That’s my grandson.”

“You guys can play here anytime you’d like,” the manager of the club walked up and said.

By the end of the weekend, Joe Brigsby had already booked the band two more gigs at the Dueling Pianos and one down in Austin. “Austin’s got a hell of music scene,” Joe Brigsby said during practice.

James picked up extra shifts at Sonic, but still needed a little financial assistance from Joe to afford the trip to Texas. The band played at a club right on Sixth Street to an audience twice the size of the Dueling Pianos but equally as excited about the music that flowed from Joe Brigsby and James’ fingertips. Joe used some of his share of the tip money that piled up during the show to buy himself a bronze statue from Wild About Music, and he went ahead and grabbed James a keychain that read “Keep Austin Weird.”

“You’re going to need something to start collecting while we’re on the road and trust me, we got what it takes to be on the road quite a bit.” James’ mind ran wild with the cities Joe named off as they walked down Sixth Street. Memphis, New Orleans, Chicago. They all sounded amazing, but it was obvious James would need to make more money than he earned at Sonic.

“Well looky there,” Grandpa said as he and Joe Brigsby walked back in the hospital room to find James successfully shuffling cards and half-way successfully doing

a bridge. Joe's eyes widened as he set the sack from Grandy's on the bedside table, but it was obvious he didn't want to get his hopes too high. James shuffled the cards so he and Joe Briggsby could play Cube Rummy. Grandpa sat in the hospital chair and drew circles on his Find-a-Word puzzle.

James had been sitting at Grandpa's living room table, circling help wanted ads in the *Daily Oklahoman* the last time he had seen Preston. It was understood that once James turned eighteen, he'd help Grandpa with some of the bills. Preston no longer lived at home and didn't help Grandpa at all. That's why James was shocked the day Preston came over, looking like absolute shit. His soft puffy hair he'd once referred to as a chick magnet lay flat and oily down the sides of his gaunt face. His eyes were faint and red and he looked so skinny it was a wonder his clothes didn't slide right off him. "Looking for a job, huh?" Preston said slowly, pausing in between words as if he forgot how to speak. "I thought you were going to be some hot shot piano man. Some big fucking star."

James was used to Preston speaking abusively toward their grandpa, but he normally just ignored James. The new attention made James nervous. As Preston stumbled closer, James caught a nasty whiff of body odor. "You looking to make some real money?"

"I'm looking to get myself to Memphis," James said and scooted his chair a little further from Preston.

"Memphis," Preston scuffed. "What would a Beaver Cleaver character like you do down in Memphis?"

James should have known Preston would be able to get underneath his skin. Get him all worked up. “Beaver Cleaver? What, because I’m not on drugs, I’m not black enough for you?” James wished he had swallowed the words the second he said them.

“It’s because you’re a-too-good-for-your-own-brother-piece-of-shit, that I don’t like you.” Preston leaned down so he was eye level with James. “I make money, you make shit. If you ever pulled your head out of your own ass for a second, you’d see that.” Preston pulled out a wad of hundreds from his pocket. “I’m surprised with all the supposed smarts you got, straight-A honor roll at a chartered school and shit, you ain’t got the brains to figure out that if you showed me an ounce of respect, I could help you make some money too.”

But in the spirit of being disrespectful James stood up and walked back to his room without saying another word to Preston. “And now leaving the room, ladies and gentlemen,” Preston said in an announcer’s voice. “A dumbass who thinks he’s hot shit.”

James tried to ignore Preston, but once he was safe in his bedroom with the door locked, he threw the paper on his bed. It seemed completely off balance, that Preston could have that amount of cash while James worked hard and was left shorthanded. James imagined himself walking back out to Preston instead of cowardly hiding in his room. Maybe he’d tell Preston off, maybe he’d inquire about how he made so much money. He wouldn’t actually take Preston up on his offer and show a little respect in exchange for several hundred dollars, right?

James waited until he heard Preston storm out the front door before looking through help wanted ads again. He finally stumbled across an ad that looked familiar. It

was the logo for an oil company where Pete the drummer's uncle was a manager. James called Pete and then answered the ad.

Pete walked into the hospital room in the midst of James' winning Cube Rummy for the third time against Joe Briggsby. A nurse was behind Pete within moments to remind the men that only two visitors were allowed in a hospital room at one time.

"I need to get some coffee anyways," Grandpa said, leaving his seat behind for Pete.

Pete's faux leather jacket crinkled at his chest as he sat down. In his eyes there was a guilt James had been afraid Pete would feel. James wanted to tell Pete not to be silly, but instead he let an awkward silence fill the room. To be honest it was the first time he'd ever seen Pete outside a musical setting and the lack of sound lay thick over James.

"Did they at least hook you up with a radio, CD player or mp3 player in here?" Pete asked.

James let out a soft laugh. "My phone's got some music on in, but that's it as far as listening to tunes goes."

"Hospitals, man."

"They make you nervous?"

"It's just, like, scientifically proven that music helps the healing process, yet they don't have any music?"

"Where'd you hear that?" Joe Briggsby turned toward Pete.

“Everybody knows that.” Pete always smiled so that no one could see his teeth through his mustache. “Well, anyways, I got you a CD to listen to once you get out of here.” Pete pulled a 12 cm x 12 cm case out of his jacket pocket and handed it to James who then read the title out loud.

“Def Leppard.”

“You bought him a horrible 80s pop-metal CD?” Joe Brigsby asked.

“The drummer of that band lost an arm in a car accident,” Pete said.

“That’s really depressing,” James said.

“It is, but here’s the thing: he still plays drums for the band.”

“Like with a prosthetic?”

“No, just with his one arm. He taught himself how to play in a way that compensated for the loss, you know, with extra foot pedals and stuff. He’s performed thousands of concerts with one arm alone.” Pete got excited as he shared the news, but the excitement faded almost as fast as it came. Pete’s face regained its seriousness. “I’m really sorry about what happened, man.”

James nodded and pretended to read the back of the CD instead of look at Pete. Pete had simply been the one to get James a job; he didn’t dictate what accidents could or couldn’t happen. But still James knew Pete felt some responsibility for having ever gotten James a job there in the first place. The whole thing was a freak accident, but James couldn’t bring himself to say so.

James had been ecstatic when Pete’s uncle hired him in the weld shop of Wringer Oil nine months ago. Charlie was into rock and roll and it was obvious where Pete got

his style and love for music. With seventeen dollars an hour and ten hours mandatory overtime each week, James could easily help his Grandpa with bills and afford to travel with the band one weekend out of every month.

James had just bought a keychain while in Memphis the weekend before that said “Beale Street Blues.” He even brought back an Elvis keychain for Pete’s uncle. “Hey, thanks,” Charlie said as James walked out of Charlie’s office and back to the metal shop. James had his own area at work, sectioned off with parts and equipped with an industrial size blow torch and positioning table, and he spent his days welding valves for oil rigs.

That morning, like any other morning, a crane moved a freshly heated three-ton metal valve onto James’ positioning table. James bolted the scalding metal in place before pumping the pedal that maneuvered his table from a horizontal angel to a vertical one. Every time James tapped the table’s pedal, he tapped a beat to a song in his head. Today, it was Jimmy Rushing, a big old Oklahoma boy, conceived in the Deep Deuce district back in 1901. The man held the red dirt of Oklahoma in the rasp of his voice and James was obsessed. James sung “Everyday I Have the Blues” in his head.

James had seen all the instructional safety videos that warned how metal bolts can crack and break if they’ve been heated and cooled one too many times. “Well ain’t nobody hurt and they’r ain’t nobody cry’n.” The lyrics ran through James’ head so loud he didn’t hear the bolt crack. The three-ton part slid off the table and crashed onto James three fingers, taking them clear off like a dull-blade guillotine. Everything went silent to James. He didn’t hear music; he didn’t hear himself screaming. He heard nothing, yet he felt everything.

Charlie tried to talk to James as he rushed him to the hospital, but James couldn't hold a conversation. He could only hold his bloody hand. It wasn't until James was in the emergency room with a doctor and three nurses hovering over him that James seemed to snap back and when he did, he didn't like what he heard.

Charlie had all the pieces of James' fingers in a zip lock bag, but the bones in the detached fingers were shattered. "They are done for," the doctor said. James heard himself crying as he called Grandpa. He heard himself crying as he called Joe Briggsby. Shoot, he even called Christopher from Christopher's piano, who showed up at the hospital only shortly after Pete, Joe Briggsby and Grandpa had left for the evening.

"I brought you a CD as well," Christopher said as he looked at the Def Leppard album on James' bedside table. "It's a recording of Paul Wittgenstein playing 'Ravel Piano Concerto for Left Hand.'" Christopher took a seat and ran his fingers through his thin white strands of hair. "Wittgenstein's an Austrian, like me, who lost his right hand in World War I. Several composers wrote pieces especially for him after the war." James had had no idea that one armed musicians were quite the rave.

A nurse came by and gave James his antibiotics and painkillers. "A weld shop's not the cleanest place to lose a few fingers," James told Christopher. "They're just keeping me overnight to keep an eye out for infections; I should be home by tomorrow."

Christopher didn't nod in understanding or look like he had even heard James. His eyes seemed a little empty, like someone off in a day dream. James wasn't sure how to react. "Christopher," he said, trying to snap the piano owner back to reality. Still Christopher seemed to be looking past James, not at him.

“I’ve seen quite a few amputees,” Christopher finally said. “Back home, when I was younger, they were quite common. Half of Vienna’s male population seemed to have lost an arm or a leg in the war.” Christopher rubbed his hands together like he sometimes did when his arthritis bothered him. “You see a guy with a cane instead of a right leg, you study his face for a moment and you can easily tell.”

“Tell what?”

“Tell whether he’s really ever going to be okay again or not. Whether he’s the type of person whose mind can survive such a loss.” Christopher looked down at the palm of his hands and then back at James. “A kid with as much soul as you, well, I don’t even have to look at your face to know you’ll be fine. That sort of honesty and passion radiates from you. People feel it. I felt it the first day you knocked on my door.”

Christopher stood up and brushed off his slacks to eliminate any wrinkles that could have formed while sitting. “Even with only seven fingers, your talent will not be wasted.”

James’ mind wandered after Christopher left. He imagined what things would have been like if he’d gone and worked for Preston, making easy money instead of welding. He wondered how many cities Joe Brigsby thought the band could play. He wondered if he really could ever play again. James didn’t realize his thoughts had lulled him to sleep until a nurse woke him up the next morning.

“We’ll be getting you out of here real soon, okay, darling?” The nurse brought with her paperwork for James’ release as well as a plastic bag full of homecare products. She briefly explained how James should dress his wound at home before handing him the

paper work and placing the homecare package on the bedside table. She picked up the CDs and looked at James.

“You like music?” she asked.

“Yes ma’am.” James signed his name on the release form with his left hand.

“I’m a blues pianist.”

SKINS

The night before, Reed and his buddies had gone to an Oi! show and gotten blackout wasted. Now Reed stood in a bathtub, uncertain whether the new stain on his steel-toed boots was from a spilled glass of whiskey or puke. He looked at the half-tiled shower wall and then down at the bucket of mixed-mortar to his right. If he were to puke in the bucket, he'd just have to make another batch, thus inhaling more powder mortar, a distinct taste of cement rolled in dirt. Reed let out a low grunt as he spread mortar across the barren shower wall with the flat edge of a trowel.

“Morning sickness, uh?” Kyle said, continuing to apply trim around the bathroom door. The bathroom was the last room of the house to be remodeled. “I told you not to be letting all those boys cum inside you last night,” Kyle joked. Kyle rarely had hangovers, a fact which often pissed Reed off. As a teenager, Reed used to be able to drink every night and then show up to work barely phased, but once he'd hit his late

twenties that luxury had gone. Kyle was still a puppy, though, freshly twenty-one with a liver seven years less damaged.

Reed rolled a small chunk of mortar into a nickel sized ball and threw it at the back of Kyle's freshly-shaved head. "Oh, you big black teddy bear, calm down," Kyle said in a sensual voice, followed by kissing sounds Reed couldn't help but laugh at. Kyle, although white and a good two-hundred pounds lighter than Reed, was the only one who got away with calling Reed a big black teddy bear.

Reed had met Kyle at a punk show when Kyle was a stupid confused high school kid who still hid under daddy-abandonment issues. But underneath Kyle's initial bullshit, Reed liked that the kid was scrappy with a good sense of humor, so he introduced Kyle to bands such as the *Blitz* and *Sham 69* and bought him a pair of steeled-toe boots and a flight jacket before shaving him into the Oklahoma City chapter of the social club Day Drunk Skins – DDS for short.

Reed's phone vibrated in his jean pocket. It was Lee, the owner of the house, the one who bought shit properties, paid Reed and his friends to fix them up, and then flipped them, sometimes making up to \$50,000 in profit. Yet, Reed, Kyle and Shay were only paid \$12 an hour. But hey, at least that was under the table and therefore not taxed.

"Yeah, we're working on the bathroom right now," Reed said into the phone, not mentioning the fact that Shay was already 45 minutes late. When Shay did arrive an hour later, he brought coffee and fictitious stories about how he fucked some chick after the show last night.

"What, you don't think I could land a girl that hot?" Shay slapped Reed on the back and handed him a full 7-11 Styrofoam cup.

“With a face like yours?”

“Girls love this face.”

“Girls love it when you actually do some work.” Reed handed Shay the bucket to mix more mortar.

Reed had never been the biggest fan of Shay, but Shay and Kyle had kind of been a package deal. The three worked on the bathroom – tiling, applying trim, painting and plumbing – while listening to Ron of Perkele sing about needing a strong working class. Shay sang the loudest and also took the most smoke breaks, contributing very little work to his already shortened work day.

Now that the coffee had brought Reed’s headache and nausea to submission, he double checked to make sure that each tile was completely level and flush with the rest. He took a lot of pride working on these old houses in the historic district. Yeah, some yuppie fuck was probably going to spend a small fortune on the house after Reed did all the grunt work making it awesome, but the trade was more important than being able to afford the product, or so Reed was sometimes able to convince himself.

“Holy shit,” Shay said from behind Reed after having come back from his fifth smoke break in the last two hours.

Reed turned around to see Shay holding a rusted drain pipe with a small swastika painted in black on its side.

“All these old houses have them.” Reed turned back to place the second to last tile on the wall. “Most houses built in Oklahoma City in the 1920s got their brass from Germany.”

“Cool,” Shay said, examining the pipe. “I mean, not like cool that it’s Nazi shit, I mean cool that it’s historical and all.”

Reed turned around and stared at Shay, not passing up an opportunity to mess with him. Reed always knew that Shay was a little intimidated by him, partly because he was so big and partly because he was black.

Shay’s ears got a little red, a sign that he was nervous. “I mean it wasn’t like a symbol of genocide in the twenties, it was just, like, a thing, you know?”

Reed continued his hard stare at Shay, but Kyle had to direct his attention back to the trim to hide his smile. “So are you listening to *Skrewdriver* these days?” Reed said, referring to the infamous white power band that originally stole the skinhead fashion and turned it into some neo-Nazi freak show.

Reed voice was stern and he kept his eyes steadily on Shay, who began his next sentence with, “No, it’s not like that, I’m just saying…” before Kyle finally broke and started laughing.

“Jesus, Shay he’s just fucking with you,” Kyle said. The smile Reed held back finally loosened as he laughed with Kyle for a minute while Shay’s ears shot to a rose color.

“Fuck you guys,” Shay said as he went to take another smoke break.

The three prepped the bathroom for the new sink to be installed, a task that kept them there until almost six o’clock. Reed caught Shay starring at the old piping the three had ripped out. “We’re just going to toss it if you want to keep one, you know, for historical value, not because you love *Skrewdriver* or anything,” Reed teased before escorting both out so he could lock the house for the day.

Reed declined going to the pub after work, but gave Shay and Kyle each a loving slap to the back to show admiration for their stamina. “Just don’t be two hours late tomorrow,” Reed yelled at Shay as they left.

Reed’s duplex was within walking distance from work, a perk considering he’d gotten a DUI a few months back and had his license suspended. Reed didn’t really mind that his living room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom combined were less than 700 square feet because he controlled the back room of his shared detached garage – an extra 75 square feet that used to be an apartment in the 1920s but now served as a glorious music room, lined with stacks of vinyls and equipped with a turntable and two twenty-five-inch speakers. The floor was concrete – a solid punk feel – and had a few drilled holes from old plumbing. These back-garage-rooms were originally built as quarters for black maids who decades ago cleaned houses in the neighborhood but weren’t actually allowed to live in them – another odd fact Reed had learned from working and living in the Paseo District. When Kyle had first asked Reed if that sort of thing bothered him, Reed just sort of shrugged. Reed had always been in awe of the spirit of 1969 not because of the Civil Rights Movement but because of the birth of skinhead culture – the fusion of Jamaican Rude boy and Hard Mods. His uncle raised him on the romanticized idea of the working class and the reggae music of *John Holt* and *Toots & Maytals*. Reed’s prize possession was a framed photograph he kept on his left speaker, an image of himself at age fifteen and his uncle: both with shaved heads, braces and plaid button-up shirts. Reed easily remembered the first time his uncle had been labeled a delusional black man drawn to a white power culture. But Reed and his uncle both knew that their roots lay in a beer-drinking, reggae-listening, working-class counter culture that embraced all

ethnicities, not some bullshit neo-Nazi movement that stole the fashion from original skinheads back in the '80s.

With fond memories of his uncle, Reed put on his vinyl of *The Upsetters*. The simple but steady ascending bass line always set a good rhythm for Reed to paint, his current project an old French door he'd converted into a coffee table. What got his head bobbing were the guitar chords that served as a beat while the drums worked to compliment what the other instruments had already established. Reed was careful not to ash on the fresh paint as Carnival cigarette after Carnival cigarette let him drift further into the music.

Reed had built all his furniture himself, with the exception of his couches, those he'd acquired from behind the Goodwill thrift store on Britton and Western. Reed took a lot of pride in what he built and often felt nostalgia towards what he imagined the early sixties were like – men able to support their stay-at-home wives and pay their kid's tuition just from one forty-hour week as a blue-collared worker, making a difference building homes or cars for people. Reed's uncle used to laugh when Reed would sometimes say he'd been born in the wrong era. "Kid, you crazy? The earlier sixties would have not been a good time for you. Ain't you ever read James Baldwin?" No, he hadn't, or if he had he didn't remember. What he did remember from the one semester he used a Pell grant to go to Oklahoma City Community College was Eugene O'Neil's "The Hairy Ape" and Jack London's "South of the Slot."

Reed fantasized about meeting a girl like Mary Conton from "South of the Slot," a strong, quick-tongued woman fighting for the rights of the working class. A smart girl, intelligent, who could chug whiskey and curse like a man. A rebel spirit who didn't give

a damn if she stayed out all night dancing. That type of girl, Reed would build anything for. That type of girl, he imagined dancing to the *Upsetter's* "Return of Django" or "Dollar in the Teeth" as the vinyl on his turn table turned and turned until Reed lulled himself to sleep, comforted by the fumes of paint and the cigarette ash that surrounded the concrete floor near his mustard velvet couch.

Once the new sink for the bathroom was installed, the house the three had renovated was deemed finished and went on the market. Reed had saved up a little money for what was coming next, but Kyle and Shay hadn't.

"This part always sucks," Kyle said, picking the change off his Buick's floorboard parked outside the Blue Note. There wasn't going to be any steady work for the three until the house sold and Lee could invest money for labor on another house he'd bought and planned to flip. Still all three hoped to get some hours during the waiting period, maybe doing maintenance on one of Lee's rental properties.

"Yeah, man, but it is what it is." Reed pulled out a few extra dollars from his wallet to help Kyle pay his cover into the Blue Note, a local bar that occasionally served as a venue. The small stage directly opposite the bar's main entrance could fit a five or six piece band, although neither Reed nor Kyle recognized the band setting up, but that didn't shock them. They had only come out for the evening's headliner, *White Flag Down*.

Shay sat at the bar to the left of the stage and waved them over.

"How can you afford Guinness?" Kyle asked about the beer in front of Shay.

“Those nice guys over there bought it for me.” Shay pointed to a group of three men standing to the right of the stage. Reed gauged the group, not noticing anything special at first, just your regular face tattoos, tucked in navy polo shirts, rolled-up jeans and boots.

“Where are those guys from?” Reed asked Shay as Kyle wandered off to greet other members of the DDS that were beginning to show up.

“I don’t know, some shit town near the Texas border.” Shay had already begun to slur his words. “They say they’re friends with one of the opening bands.”

Reed nodded.

“Dude, you’ll never guess what I saw today,” Shay said after taking another large gulp from his Guinness. “I drove by that four-plex Lee owns and these two Mexican dudes were out rebuilding the wooden fence around it.” Reed opened a tab with his non-driver’s license I.D. in exchange for the two beers the bartender sat in front of him. “Did you know Lee had other guys working for him?”

“Nope.”

“Why would he hire more dudes if he doesn’t even have work for us?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s shit man.” Shay’s eyes sagged as he downed the rest of his Guinness.

“Pure shit.”

Reed was far too sober to indulge Shay at the moment, so he took both beers and headed over to the pool tables where Kyle stood, looking goofy holding a pool stick that was not much wider than him.

“Do you have the next game?” Reed heard a girl’s voice beside him. He turned to face a brunette, three quarters of her hair cascading in lovely locks just above her shoulder while one quarter of her head was buzzed with two lightning bolts shaved into it. She had a round face with narrow eyes that complimented the bordering spirals.

“You can play winner,” Kyle chimed in, grabbing a beer from Reed.

“Cool.” The girl pulled over a bar stool while she waited. “I’m Hailey,” she said as she hopped onto the seat, her bare yet thick calves dangling for a second before she wrapped her boots around two of the wooden legs.

Kyle introduced himself with a bow. “And this guy’s Reed.”

The band setting up on stage began to do a mic check and Kyle failed at corner-kissing the 4-ball into the top right pocket.

“What’s your arm say?” Hailey pointed to the two ink wrenches that cross-boned one another on Reed’s forearm.

“Working class hero,” Reed said about the old English font wrapped around the wrenches.

“I love that kind of stuff.” Hailey pulled down the left sleeve of her red flannel shirt, revealing her white spaghetti strap, burgundy lace bra and her Rock Island tattoo. “My grandpa worked for the railroads his entire life and helped take care of me and my mom.” A soft smile unveiled her perfectly straight teeth.

“You get that in honor of him?” Reed felt nervous talking to a girl he felt so attracted to.

“Yeah, just after he passed.”

“That’s pretty solid.” Reed tried to anticipate his next move. “Can I buy you a drink?”

Hailey nodded. “Well whiskey with a splash of Coke for color.” Reed tried to not act too excited as he walked over to the bar and placed his order. The three out-of-towners Shay had met earlier were now at the bar, giving Reed some dirty-ass looks. Reed reached for the whiskey set in front of him, but before he could pick it up, one of the out-of-towners went for a bar napkin and clipped the drink with his elbow, its content pouring onto Reed’s shirt. “What the fuck, dude?” Reed eyed the out-of-towner who didn’t proceed to offer Reed a napkin but only flicked his wrist as a form of an apology. Reed looked back and was glad Hailey wasn’t watching. He considered planting his fist right into the dude’s jaw on the account of being an asshole, but getting kicked out of a bar for fighting wasn’t the best first impression for Hailey, plus the bartender was nice enough to replace the drink free of charge.

Reed handed Hailey the drink as the first band struck its opening chords. “Thanks,” Hailey said, taking the drink with one hand and Reed’s arm with the other. She pulled Reed up to the front of the stage, careful not to spill her drink while avoiding the elbows that already flailed as a mosh pit formed at the center of the audience. Half the crowd rushed the stage and Reed made sure to stand his ground and not get pushed on top of Hailey. Not that Reed would have minded being on top of Hailey, but he didn’t want to hurt her. She seemed to hold her own quite well, throwing her fist in the air at all the appropriate moments and tossing around her head as if instantly submerged in the explosion raging from the speakers. Reed found himself moving to the song as well,

although he couldn't tell if it was because he liked what he heard or if he was just feeding off Hailey's energy.

After the first few songs, the band had to stop and readjust the amps facing them. Reed took advantage of the silence. "So, are you from around here?" He looked down at Hailey's face which had turned red from the heat accumulating in the middle of a crowd.

"Not really."

Before Reed could ask another question, Kyle came up and jumped on his back. "Dude, Shay's getting pretty trashed." Kyle laughed as he pointed to Shay who stood by the left hand of the stage, next to the out-of-towners, one of whom handed him another Guinness.

"Yeah, he now has these Mexicans doing the job." Shay was talking drunkenly loud. "It's shit man, pure shit."

Kyle squeezed himself into the crowd, forcing Reed to stand even closer to Hailey. He shot Reed a grin and the drummer clicked off the next song, a fast, seemingly unorganized rhythm that hyped up the crowd. A circle pit formed just behind Reed. Reed felt himself get kind of protective of Hailey. He stretched out his arms to save her from the pulsing fist of some dude with a green Mohawk. Hailey laughed as she watched Reed keep her from getting punched. She leaned down and gave Reed's arm a solid lick. It was an odd thing to do, yes, but man it sent a jolt through Reed's entire arm, across his chest and then down his sternum. As the jolt about hit his waistline, he felt an unpleasant shock go through his ribs and realized one of the out-of-towners, a different guy than the one who had knocked over his drink, had landed an elbow right into his side.

Kyle quickly pushed the out-of-towner back into the circle pit, leaned into Reed and screamed over the music, “Assholes don’t know how to dance.” But Reed knew this went beyond just a lack of mosh-pit etiquette. That elbow was intentional. He felt a surge of anger beam behind his eyes, but he tried to breathe through it and focus on Hailey who was dancing in place, her head down and her shoulders shimmying to the beat. He wondered if jealousy of her attention had sparked this conflict. He contemplated taking his revenge on that last elbow by moving even closer to Hailey, but before he could put the thought into action, he felt a hard hit connect just in front of his ear, leaving his vision momentarily blurry. He took a step to the side to catch himself.

“Whoa,” Hailey said and grabbed hold of the arm she’d licked.

Reed turned around to see Kyle in a fight with the out-of-towner who had now hit Reed twice. Reed practically blacked out with anger. He stormed over to the guy Kyle was fighting and landed two solid blows to the dude’s jaw. When the other out-of-towner, the one who had previously knocked a drink on Reed, jumped on Reed’s back and went for a choke hold, Reed flipped him over his shoulder and landed a heel to the guy’s ribs. Reed couldn’t process the five or six guys who were trying to break up the fight. Nor could he fully process the SS tattoo that peeked out underneath the shirt collar of the out-of-towner Reed had planted on the floor. Reed just continued to swing and stomp until finally a handful of crowd members successfully pushed Reed into the bar’s backroom.

“What the fuck!” the bar’s manager said frantically to Reed and Kyle in the storage-like space that housed cases of beer, liquor and the personal belongings of the bartenders.

“Those assholes totally provoked that fight,” Kyle said as he held a napkin to his bleeding lip. Reed couldn’t process if he was bleeding or not; he was still too full of anger.

The bar manager, a redhead who’d drunkenly made out with Kyle a few months back, dialed on her cell phone. “You guys are lucky that I haven’t called the cops yet.”

Reed was finally able to realize how hard he was breathing. He tried to take a few deep breaths but still felt shaky. He tried to walk back out to the bar but the manager jumped in front of him. “Oh no, you don’t. You guys are both staying in here at least until those other guys leave.”

“Man, fuck those Nazi cunts.” Kyle spit up a little blood as he spoke bitterly. From the small plastic window on the backroom’s door, Reed could see the sea of white bodies listening to the show. He had been the only black guy in the bar. The mixture of nerves firing from both being in a fight and feeling uncomfortably aware of his skin was a cocktail Reed felt unable to swallow.

The manager spoke into the phone, probably to the bar’s owner. “Yeah, the guys still here are regulars.” She paused. “Yeah, I’ll just keep them for a little longer until the coast is clear and then escort them outside.”

Once the manager was certain the neo-Nazis had left, she had two doormen follow Reed and Kyle back through the bar and to their car. Reed got a glimpse of Hailey dancing to *White Flag Down*, but he just followed the doormen. Once outside, the Oklahoma breeze hit Reed’s face and made him aware not only of the cut on his cheek but of all the reasons why he was livid. Those assholes had done more than simply start a

fight or possess some bullshit hatred. They were ruining skinhead culture, tainting a scene Reed loved.

“Hey, what the hell happened?” Shay stood by Kyle’s car, his sunken eyes revealing how much booze he’d downed.

“You were playing buddy-buddy all night to a bunch of Nazis, that’s what happened.” Kyle reached in his pocket for his car keys.

“What are you talking about?”

Reed was so angry he still couldn’t speak.

“What, you were too busy sucking those out-of-towners’ dicks for drinks that you didn’t notice what kind of guys they were?” Kyle said as he used the key to manually unlock his Buick’s doors since his clicker had stopped working months ago.

“We just talked about work and music,” Shay pleaded.

Kyle shook his head in disapproval. Shay turned to Reed. “Honestly, I didn’t know they were messing with you.”

Reed remained silent and got into the passenger side of Kyle’s Buick. Kyle slammed his door as he took his spot behind the wheel. Neither one asked if they should offer Shay a ride.

Shay apologized to Reed and Kyle again the following morning and presented a peace offering: a one day gig repainting the old chapel at Dewey and 27th. All three made fifty bucks a piece from the random job, which was enough to buy forgiveness, two packs of smokes and a few groceries. Still, the three were getting desperate for steady work. Reed managed to find a few more side gigs via Craig’s list: delivering firewood,

shampooing carpet, doing yard work. But the process of looking for these jobs online was so depressing – your craft listed next to a dollar amount showing how much you’re actually worth. Reed only cost \$10 an hour at the most, according to the internet. So on his way home from a gig of cutting down a tree, Reed was ecstatic to see that after two and a half months on the market, a red “Sold” ribbon was pasted on top of the yard sign in front of Lee’s house. It took several phone calls to finally get hold of Lee, but once Reed did, it was confirmed that the three could begin work next week.

All three showed at 8:30 sharp Monday morning to a house at 25th and Shartel, a spacious duplex with a large shared front porch and a big back yard, as well as a weed-infested lawn, boarded windows and rotten wooden siding. But the house had potential, and Reed always loved revitalizing things.

Ready to get to work, Reed walked inside to find a thin glassy film lining the edges of the floor boards and the insides of the kitchen cabinets, a sign the duplex had already been sprayed for bugs, the first step for any renovation. Kyle pointed out that the bricks on the fireplace were new and Shay mentioned that the back bedrooms’ walls were already painted and the wooden floors sanded.

“You think Lee’s been working on this house solo?” Kyle asked.

Reed looked around for the attic, curious to see if any of the electrical work had been started. He found the latch in the ceiling of the back hallway, but the stairs that normally accompanied the latch were broken. Reed looked around the house for something to serve as a stepping stool. He hoped to maybe find a leftover chair or coffee table in the basement, but instead found two men replacing a light bulb.

“Hi,” one of them said. They didn’t look like squatters, and Reed couldn’t justify why any burglars would be out working an abandoned house on a Monday morning. The man walked over and extended his hand. But Reed still didn’t know why they were there, and their English was too broken for a full explanation.

“Did I not tell you Miguel and Emilio are working for me as well?” Lee said over the phone as Reed walked back inside the house.

“How long have they been working on this house?” Reed wasn’t sure if he wanted to know the answer.

“Look, I’m sorry I couldn’t afford to keep on all five of you guys while I waited for the old house to sell. I thought Miguel and Emilio could at least give you guys a head start,” Lee said before mentioning a remodel for the master bedroom closet and then hanging up the phone.

After one week of work, Reed learned more about what affordable meant to Lee. “He’s only paying those guys \$8 an hour,” Shay told Reed as they sat in the garage/music room.

“That’s barely minimum wage.” Reed shook his head.

“That’s illegal workers for you.” Shay stomped over to the third stack of vinyls.

“They’re illegal?”

“Does it matter? We don’t work for two months because two dumb Mexicans think \$8 is a lot of money or some bullshit and agree to do our jobs for half the cost. It completely devalues us.” Shay flipped through the stack, obviously more concerned with what he was saying than finding a record to play next.

The way Shay said “Mexicans” hit Reed kind of funny. Reed remembered Shay bitching to those Nazi cunts at the *White Flag Down* show about Miguel and Emilio building the fence around the rental property, and his mind began to run with all the possibilities of how those Nazis could have responded. This made Reed cautious. He was absolutely infuriated about the situation with Miguel and Emilio, too. He wanted to agree with Shay, be super pissed off that his job had been stripped for two months by two Mexicans who would work for a ridiculous pay, but he didn’t want to feel like a Nazi, so he kept quiet. There had been plenty of links between Americans and Nazis far before cunts started shaving their heads in the ‘80s and playing the wrong kind of music and reading the wrong kind of books. Shit, Hitler had gone on record saying that he originally thought the United States would be a strong ally in the ‘30s based on how blacks were treated here. He even modeled his original text for Jewish segregation during the beginning of his reign on Jim Crow laws. He literary wrote the same legislation verbatim, with the only change being the targeted ethnic group. He simply replaced the word “Negro” for “Jew,” but left all the other text the same.

Reed had known these facts for years and felt anxious at the idea that he could possibly sympathize with the German WWI vets, the original Nazis, who came home from the war and lost their jobs to Jews. But he didn’t imagine punching Miguel in the face because of his ethnicity, right? It was simply because he had stolen Reed’s job. But Miguel had stolen his job because his ethnic group continually came to this country and worked for cheaper wages than Americans. Reed was more than uncomfortable with his thoughts. Wasn’t being exploited for cheap labor the story of his own race? Reed rubbed his bald head. What did it matter what Miguel or Emilio were getting paid as long as he

got paid, too? But two weeks of labor and one paycheck later, Reed was forced out of his pretend neutral state.

The five were rebuilding the kitchen cabinets on payday. While that many workers on one project normally seemed crowded and obnoxious, Reed enjoyed his Friday with ease knowing that he would be cashing a pretty good-sized paycheck soon and the congratulatory drinks would inevitably follow. The cabinet he had built was by far the most level of anyone's, its seams nearly invisible, and he felt proud of it when Lee showed up at the end of the day to write the paychecks as always. Lee handed Reed a paycheck that was \$50 more than it should have been. Reed smiled at Lee and asked, "What's this for?" The first thought that it was for impeccable work only lasted a second as Reed looked at Lee's nervous face.

"Reed you're an amazing carpenter, that's just a fact. But the economy these days." Lee scratched the back of his head, a tuft of brown hair now sticking out. "That last house didn't sell for as much as I was hoping, you know, with the housing market and all, and I just can't keep affording all this." He cleared his throat. "I tried it out again, you know, I really loved having you, Kyle and Shay around, but it's just not working."

Reed didn't need to continue listening to Lee to know that he had just been outsourced by two \$8-an-hour workers. If he hadn't thought he absolutely needed the money, he would have gladly told Lee to shove his \$50 severance package up his ass.

"Here is Shay and Kyle's check." Lee handed two more quarter-length pieces of paper to Reed. "Would you go ahead and give them the heads up?"

Reed was dumbfounded as Lee got back in his car. What an utter coward. Reed had no idea how to break the news to Shay and Kyle, who were still in the backyard, packing up the tools. Reed took a seat on the front porch, feeling weak for sulking over the loss of his job but unable to stop himself. Miguel and Emilio walked around to the front of the house, Miguel carrying his usual grin while Emilio just looked towards the ground as always. "Bye, bye," Miguel said as the two got into a shitty early '90s pick-up.

Bye, bye. The words made Reed want to jump up, grab Miguel by the hair, pull him out of the truck through the window and begin stomping his face. Bye, bye.

"Go fuck yourself," Reed said, his voice more steady than he expected.

Miguel's smile dropped instantly and he looked confused as the two drove away. Reed contemplated throwing a rock through their rear windshield, running after them, jumping in the bed of their truck.

Kyle reacted to the news with a sturdy string of curse words, but Shay seemed to possess more of Reed's anger. Reed felt comforted by Shay throwing down the tools and screaming that this was all bullshit.

"It really is," Reed responded.

"All the hard work we've done is only worth \$8 an hour now?" Shay spit on the ground.

Reed nodded, feeling for the first time bonded to Shay.

Kyle opted to go home by himself, but Reed and Shay decided the best thing to do was get wasted on cheap beer, so the two cashed their checks and bought a thirty pack of PBR. They sat in Reed's garage and listened to *Combat 84*, an Oi! band that could get even the calmest person geared up. After shotgunning his third beer, Shay stomped

around the room, the only way Shay knew how to dance. In between stomps, Shay made comments. “We should go jump those Mexicans,” he said. Reed continued to pound beers and nod. “We should at least make them bleed.” Shay was getting more riled up and Reed felt no opposition to it. The two managed to kill the 30 pack and still feel the thirst, so they walked down the street to the small, hole-in-the-wall convenience store. They grabbed a case of Miller High Life and brought it to the counter where a short Hispanic man, probably late twenties, stood at the register. Shay let out an exasperated and very drunken laugh as he set down the beer. “Of course, you’d be the one with a job.” Shay leaned on the counter and stared at the cashier with a grin that sobered Reed up a little. “Let me ask you something? Did you steal this job from an American as well?”

Reed elbowed Shay in the arm. “Just pay the dude.”

Shay started laughing and pulled some ones from his wallet. “You did, didn’t you? I mean that’s pretty much what you guys do.”

Reed grabbed a hold of Shay’s shoulder. “Let off it.”

The cashier spoke up, no accent, obviously from around here. “What’s this guy talking about?”

“What am I talking about?” Shay laughed even harder. “How much you getting paid for this shit job? Did you low ball some legitimate worker from making a decent earning?”

“Dude, come on.” Reed pulled on Shay’s shoulder.

“You fucking did, didn’t you?” Shay dropped his wallet on the ground, a few bills slipping out of it.

“I’m sorry, he’s really drunk.” Reed looked at the cashier. He could tell the cashier was getting worked up although he remained silent.

“Let’s go.” Reed put a hand on Shay’s back as Shay bent over to pick up his things.

“I can’t sell you beer if this guy’s already toasted and making a fool of himself,” the cashier said in an authoritative voice that Reed recognized as pure fear. Reed nodded his head.

Shay grabbed his wallet and the wad of bills from the floor with one hand and stood up, his free hand, balled in a fist, making a solid right connection over the counter into the cashier’s jaw. Reed took a step back, caught as off-guard as the cashier who stumbled into the rack of cigarettes.

Shay jumped over the counter. “I’m the fool?” He threw another punch that connected with the cashier’s eye. Reed could see in the glimpse of a second that Shay was releasing all his anger onto the cashier and that it felt good to him. However, as Reed watched Shay’s fist once again pummel into the man’s face, Reed’s feet got to moving and he ran around to the side of the counter. “It’s your people that are the fools,” Shay slurred, landing a blow to the cashier’s stomach before Reed could grab Shay.

“We got to go,” Shay said, urgently grabbing the beer off the counter and running out the door. But Reed stayed. The cashier’s lip had already begun to swell and blood seeped from the gash above his left eye.

“What the fuck?” the cashier said as he curled onto the floor.

Reed felt a hollow pit in his stomach, seeing a man nearly in the fetal position. Sure, he had agreed thirty minutes prior to jump Miguel and Emilio, but he didn’t agree

to jump the next person of Hispanic descent he ran into. Looking down at the cashier as blood poured down his face, Reed felt ashamed that he had even agreed to jump Miguel and Emilio. Reed grabbed a biker bandana from the rack of sunglasses and applied pressure to the cashier's wounds. He looked through the glass window front at his right side, but couldn't see Shay anywhere around and had no idea where he might have run off to.

"Do you guys carry super glue?" Reed asked, but the cashier only let out another exasperated: "What the fuck?" The stomach shoot surely knocked the wind out of him.

"Once the bleeding stops, we can super glue the gash shut. Trust me, it's a lot cheaper than stitches." Reed let out a quiet laugh hoping to lend a little comfort, but the cashier only became hysterical.

"Do I need to go to the hospital? The cashier tried to stand up. "I need to call Jasmine. I need to call my girlfriend." The color quickly drained from his face, forcing him to sit back on the ground, surrounded by the cigarette packs that had fallen off the shelf.

"You need to sit still until the bleeding stops." Reed put his hand on the cashier's shoulder to prevent him from trying to stand again.

The cashier started tearing up. It must have settled in that he had been beat up. "I want to talk to Jasmine."

"Just stay down and tell me where your phone is." Reed followed the man's directions and found the phone behind the register. While the cashier called his girlfriend, Reed replayed the image of Shay's satisfied expression as he threw his punches. The thought made Reed nauseous.

Within five minutes of the cashier's phone call, his girlfriend arrived. She ran out of her car, leaving a silhouette figure in the driver-side seat. Jasmine had a strong face, fierce eyes, and squared jaw that was offset by thick lips and long lashes. "Some racist started talking shit about 'my people' and then jumped me," the cashier told his girlfriend.

"Whoa, whoa, he's not a racist," Reed said with a confidence that shrunk with one look from Jasmine.

"Oh, really?" Jasmine said.

"How can he be, he's friends with a black guy?" Reed asked the two as well as himself.

"You're honestly trying to say that wasn't race motivated?" The cashier's voice trembled. Reed looked down at the man and his girlfriend.

"Hailey's in the car, she'll drive us to the hospital a few blocks away." Jasmine slowly helped up her boyfriend. "It'll be faster than calling 911. Come on, Mark."

Hailey? Reed looked over at the silhouette figure in the car. Surely that wasn't the same Hailey he had met at the show, right? Reed tried to give the cashier a hand, but Jasmine quickly snapped, "Don't touch him. If you want to do something helpful, why don't you call the cops and tell them what your piece-of-shit friend did."

Reed stood next to the chip rack in the store and watched Jasmine hold the door open for her boyfriend. Reed was embarrassed at what Jasmine and Mark thought of him, the friend of a racist. He was embarrassed at the possibility that someone like the Hailey he'd met could see him standing there, friends of an assailant whose act of

violence was probably race motivated. Probably? It was. Reed was embarrassed as he stood there, exposed, slightly unsure which side he had been on with this fight.

Liberation Square

As Mack Clemens sat at the coffee house, by far the oldest customer there, he knew none of the young, beautifully tattooed, head-shaved women or bearded boys in pleather combat boots would know that he had once been given an award by the International Documentary Association for best short film over propaganda in North Korea. None of them recognized him as the award-winning cinematographer who had filmed rare footage of a nuclear power plant melting down in Japan. And that depressed him because it weakened the chances of Mack taking a beautiful woman home with him. And really, what did Mack have left if it wasn't sex?

He took another drink of his mocha latte and straightened out the stylish vest he'd found at a thrift store. He looked down at the pre-faded jeans he had spent too much money on. When his sister had seen his new wardrobe she had simply labeled it a mid-life crisis. But Mack knew it was more serious than a mid-life crisis: it was the beginning of a complete mental breakdown. Who the hell was he supposed to be now, a banished man from the documentary world, his name as an ethical journalist tarnished forever?

How was Mack supposed to handle the images of those little Liberian boys' faces following him everywhere he went?

Mack took another sip of his latte, a trendy drink, he hoped, as he continued to people watch and attempt eye contact with at least one woman. It was uncomfortable, trying to be hip. Mack hadn't attempted it since high school, some twenty years ago. It had been a good eight years since he'd been in a relationship. With such a stellar career he hadn't depended on other people's personal approval or felt the need to complicate being away from home all the time with a serious girlfriend. He had already spent an hour at the coffee house and was contemplating calling it a day. No need to further humiliate himself. It looked like he wasn't going to get laid one way or the other. The moment Mack stopped thinking about sex, the memories of what the press had written about him began playing in his mind over and over again.

Taken from *The Star Line* – February 18, 2010:

The controversy continues over Mack Clemens's Pulitzer Prize nomination for his footage of a Liberian war lord's indoctrination camp for children soldiers. Last November, Clemens was en route with a group of Nationalist Liberian Military when they encountered a rebel group. After a deadly shoot out, the nationalists were able to secure the area. It was then that Clemens discovered the barn full of young boys about fifty yards away from his group.

Mack decided not to answer the unrecognizable number calling his cellphone. Instead he continued to watch the footage from his laptop of his most recent project, a documentary about freak side-show acts, a job he was commissioned to do and about the only work he seemed to get these days. He had put an ad online, offering freelance work, giving only his email address as contact information, not mentioning anything about the awards he had won in Liberia. The only people who ever responded were those not globally aware.

His phone continued to vibrate and Mack wished he had programmed his voicemail to pick up after only the first ring. On more than one occasion over the year, he had received calls from different presses wanting to interview him over the “incident.”

On his monitor in front of him, Mack watched the footage of a natural size-H boob break a brick of concrete. He watched as other carnies ate glass, pierced their scrotums. Mack thought about how Nick Ut had once captured one of the most famous images to come out of Vietnam, little Kim Phuc running naked down the street, her clothes and half her skin burned off by napalm. Later, the only images Nick Ut could sell were those of Paris Hilton crying in her car after her DUI court hearing. Mack watched the footage of carnies offering themselves up as human dart boards.

His phone buzzed, signaling that he had a voicemail. It still haunted Mack, using his equipment, the same that had filmed the faces of all those beaten black boys. Their eyes sunken in. Their bodies half starved. The major difference between Nick Ut and Mack was that Ut actually saved little Kim Phuc. After capturing that powerful image on the streets of Vietnam, Ut rushed Kim to the hospital. Mack thought about

every time a reporter had asked him what happened to those boys in Liberia, and Mack could not give an answer.

The Liberian government had warned all journalists to film and document only, but to stay out of all the country's affairs. Mack tried to remind himself of this as he sat in his dark living room, mostly barren of furniture, his desk and a dining room chair now the centerpieces of the room. He had sold his leather couch and armchair just last week in order to pay rent. Get your stories and get out, Liberia's government had said. But none of what Mack told himself was ever any comfort. The computer screen showed the carnies layering themselves on multiple beds of nails. His phone rang again.

Taken from *News Today* Blog – February 19, 2010:

Clemens has been trying to feed the media excuses as to why he did not tell the Nationalist Military that he had found that barn full of children, but let's look at the facts. He found the boys, filmed them, and then left them there to die, without even trying to get them help. Yet, now, Clemens's footage is getting nominated for awards? Deadly selfishness gets a gold star?

Mack waited at the restaurant's bar like the man with a thick accent on the voicemail had requested. A television screen was directly behind the display of liquor as Mack noticed the station was tuned to the news. "2011 is already off to quite a start..." the broadcaster announced as Mack tuned him out. Mack hadn't gotten his hopes up

even though the man mentioned that he had some work for Mack. What was he going to be filming now? A documentary about janitors in the porn industry?

Mack ordered himself a glass of water, far too afraid to touch booze in his current state of mind. The last thing he needed to add to his plate was alcoholism. He heard a voice from behind him, “Mack Clemens?” Mack recognized the accent from his voicemail. The man to whom the accent belonged stood six feet tall, Middle Eastern, and wore a tan suit. Mack didn’t even stand up to greet him, but just nodded and turned back around on his bar stool. How could he possibly get excited about whatever shit job he was about to be offered?

“Were your manners always this bad or have you just now decided to match the villain everyone makes you out to be?” the man asked as he took a seat in the barstool next to Mack.

Mack, now nervous, forced himself to remain calm and squeezed more lemon into his water, imagining the bitter taste to feel a lot like the man’s last comment. Most people who knew Mack’s reputation didn’t offer him work.

After Mack didn’t respond, the man ordered a drink and continued. “I’d like you to come back to Africa.”

Mack couldn’t decide what was harder to digest, the lemon seed he had just accidentally swallowed or what he had just heard. “Is that supposed to be funny?”

“Not Liberia. Cairo.”

Mack reached into his pocket for a dollar to tip the bartender, even though he’d only ordered a glass of water, and stood up, ready to leave.

“You’re going to dismiss this opportunity so fast?” the man said. “I’ve heard you called heartless, but not stupid.”

Mack scoffed. “Heartless.”

“I’ve been curious,” the man continued. “Are you bothered more by how the media and the public handled your Liberian footage or by your actual actions? Do you feel misunderstood, believe you did everything in your ability to help those boys? Or do you feel you had made a grave, narcissistic mistake?”

“What newspaper are you working for?” This prick had, after all, taken the time to find Mack’s phone number instead of emailing him like his advertisement had said to. “You think it’s clever, trying to reel me in with talk about some bullshit job so you can get some follow-up story about what all happened in Liberia?”

“Quite the contrary.” The man made a bitter face after he took a drink of his beer. “I do indeed have a job for you. I first need to make sure, however, that I’m not simply dealing with a head case on this delicate assignment. I’m looking to hire an experienced, serious, investigative videographer.”

“What happened in Liberia wasn’t my fault.” Mack tried consciously not to raise his voice. “It was chaotic. There was no time to notify anyone about that barn or those boys.”

“I don’t need a journalist with outstanding morals; I just need someone to do his job.”

“I have morals.” Mack couldn’t keep his voice quiet on that comment, and he noticed the bartender look up from the glasses she washed.

“The job doesn’t pay well, but based on your current predicament.”

Mack, realizing that he'd drawn some attention to himself, sat back down and took a long sip of his water, trying to cool off. The last thing he wanted to do was let this little Egyptian shit know that he was getting him all worked up. "You don't think I have the dignity to turn you down?"

"I don't think you have a choice."

A quote from *The Post* columnist Mary Shelton:

"I just don't see how a person could find those boys and not automatically do everything in their power to help them. Is Mack Clemens just one man? Yes. But could he have done more? I definitely think so."

On the flight to Cairo, Mack dreamed about the last time he was in Africa. He dreamed about the gun shots and the shouting. He dreamed about the rebels lying on the ground, blood streaming from their bodies. He dreamed about opening the barn and seeing the boys' faces, only this time the boys were not merely beaten, but walking corpses. The boys were speaking in Bassa, a language that Mack didn't actually understand, but in his dream, he knew the boys were calling him a demon. When Mack woke up, he first thought he saw the faces of the boys in various passengers on the plane. He had to splash cold water on his face in the tiny airborne bathroom before he was able to think straight again. A voice came on over the airplane's speakers, first in Arabic, then English. "We'll be arriving in Cairo on time at 3:35, January 24th. The captain would like everyone to return to their seats as we begin preparing for our descent."

At Cairo's International Airport, Mack collected his baggage and met Ako, the Egyptian from the restaurant, at the Starbucks in the E Gate. Mack followed Ako through the crowded terminal. The large areas of skylight in the airport's ceilings and the wall-size, glass windows allowed for the bright sun to remind Mack of the drastic time difference between the States and Cairo. Once outside, Mack saw a two-story metal sculpture of a sphere with metal birds posed as if flying around the sphere. Mack used to love the feeling of realizing he currently stood on the opposite side of the world, thousands of miles from where his feet had stood only the day prior. It used to make him feel adventurous, alive. But for the first time, it made him feel nervous. He'd never had traveler's anxiety before.

Ako kept quiet as he led Mack out to his car in the parking garage. He didn't ask Mack how his flight was, nor did he talk about the weather; Ako simply popped the trunk of his car to signal where Mack could put his luggage.

"I understand you want to keep everything confidential, on a need-to-know basis kind of thing," Mack said once sitting in the passenger seat, "but I'm going to need more details about my assignment."

Ako said nothing as he drove Mack through the densely populated streets of Cairo. Hundreds of cars side by side and bumper to bumper. No one seemed too concerned with traffic lines or stop lights. Mack took in all the tall, tan and brown, staggered buildings that seemed like a lego town. People on bicycles weaved in between the cars fearlessly. The sidewalks seemed too small to hold all those who were walking. Ako drove passed streets overflowing with shops and open air markets. Store fronts were

covered with bright lettering, golds and reds and greens. Both Arabic and English writing.

“You’re a little less chatty than you were at the restaurant in America the other day, Ako,” Mack said, hoping some conversation would ease his anxiety.

“Mr. Clemens, you’re in Cairo now. This is not a chatty place.”

Mack nodded and tried to stay calm. He had been in plenty of crazy environments before. But for some reason, this was like getting his very first assignment all over again. Like he was a virgin to different cultures and working. It had been more than a year since he’d been abroad.

They passed streets covered with street vendors. Men riding bicycles, balancing with only one hand trays stacked with dozens of loaves of bread, the trays themselves longer than the bikes. Another vendor had a wagon, full of lettuce, being pulled by a donkey in a red and brown harness. A woman pushed a wooden cart, packed full with potatoes, tomatoes and oranges, across the busy street, right in front of Ako’s car. Ako slammed on the horn, startling Mack.

“Street vendors, roaches really,” Ako said underneath his breathe. “Just like that peasant in Tunisia. Lighting himself on fire, calling that a statement.”

Even though Mack hadn’t been a fan of the media the last year, he thought back to what the papers had written about that street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi. How his actions were viewed as a stand against his government, how it sparked a movement that led to Tunisia’s president stepping down a little over a week ago.

“Now people are talking about starting a revolution here. Taking out our modern pharaoh. Our government’s done nothing but protect its people and serve as a strong ally to your country.”

“With all due respect Ako, I still need to know what exactly you want me to do here.”

“People are talking about demonstrations. I just need you, an outside party who will *not* get involved, to document what the people in the streets are saying. Ask questions. See what they think, what they’re planning.”

“You want me to spy?”

“Is spying how you labeled your work in North Korea? Just do your job. Present the information and allow us to make the conclusions.”

Mack wanted to ask, who the “us” were, but decided not to. Ako continued to drive aggressively, honking every few minutes, until the two arrived at Cairo Inn. From outside, the hotel seemed more westernized than other parts of the city. The inn lined a roundabout road alongside other buildings with French style balconies and windowed archways. Ako put his car in park and handed Mack a manila folder. “All the background information you will need to know.”

Mack nodded, ready to get to his room. It may have been only five o’clock Cairo’s time, but it was two in the morning based on Mack’s internal clock, and jetlag was starting to get to him.

The Liberian boys came to Mack in a dream yet again, except this time they chanted and screamed, and when Mack woke up he felt lost. He looked around the small

beige hotel room, where morning sunlight and noise from the streets peeked in from behind green shutters, leaking streaks of brightness and loud commotion into his dark and silent room. He heard people chanting outside and at first feared that the Liberian boys had finally followed him into his waking life. He lay in his hotel bed, knowing the Liberian boys were just beyond his window, ready to ask all the questions everyone else had been asking for the past year. “Why didn’t you do anything to help us? Why’d you leave us there to simply be retaken by the rebels, or worse, die in that barn?”

“We heard more rebels coming from behind the trees,” Mack wanted to scream at the imaginary boys he thought were waiting for him on the other side of his curtain. “There wasn’t time to save you. There wasn’t time to tell anyone,” he pleaded in his mind without making any actual sound. He was still half asleep. “I’m sorry, okay, I’m so sorry. I know I fucked up.”

Mack rubbed his face, feeling the wetness that had formed just beneath his eyes. He had to keep it together. He had to remind himself where he was. This was Cairo. There were no Liberian boys. He had been hired to document. Just do your job, he told himself.

Mack got out of bed, the movement forcing scattered papers – the documents Ako had handed Mack yesterday – to fall off the comforter onto the floor. As Mack walked around, regaining his full consciousness and finally grabbing onto reality again, he realized the chanting had not merely been in his mind or just in his dream, but that a real noise actually came from outside. He pushed the curtains apart, squinting at the bright light that greeted him. Once his eyes adjusted, he looked down at massive crowds of

people walking the streets. He didn't need to open his window to hear what they yelled. "Hor-re-yah! Hor-re-yah!"

Mack's Arabic was too rusty to interpret the chant but he still knew this needed to be filmed. He put on the first shirt and pair of pants he could find in his suitcase and grabbed all his camera equipment as he ran out of his room.

In the short elevator ride down to the first floor of the hotel, Mack managed to unpack his Panasonic camera. He didn't have a film crew with him. He was solo, *just like in Liberia*, his mind reminded him. Mack knew those thoughts couldn't keep popping up.

Mack began filming the second he walked out onto the streets of Cairo. The noise was a lot louder now that it wasn't muffled by Mack's hotel walls. Masses of plainly clothed men, women and children marched down the streets. Some chanting "Hor-re-yah," others chanting things Mack couldn't quite make out.

Mack followed and recorded the crowd as they marched, the sheer number of people almost overwhelming. Mack remembered how comforting it could be to use the camera as a filter. A slight distance between you and the sometimes scary reality in front of you. Mack wondered if the younger generation of protesters, all with their smart phones out and also filming, felt like they needed that distance too, or if they just wanted proof that they were actually involved.

The crowd led Mack right up to Tahrir Square, which was only about a mile away from his hotel. Upon entering the square, Mack heard what sounded like sirens, the noise echoing off of the concrete making it almost impossible to tell where exactly the sirens came from. Mack felt his phone vibrate.

“Jesus, Ako,” Mack answered his phone. “This is some demonstration.”

“Where are you right now?” Ako asked, his voice almost inaudible over the crowd which now doubled in size.

“Tahrir Square. That packet you gave me last night didn’t at all indicate that any of those issues could lead to something this big.” Mack felt like he needed to bend down a little to try and get away from all the sound and commotion that seemed to rise upward. But, he was more focused on getting the shots. Filming his surroundings. Afraid that one look down might make him miss something vital, important. He still couldn’t tell exactly which direction the sirens came from.

“Meet me back at your hotel in one hour,” Ako said. Mack spotted, over a sea of earth-tone clothing, a solid line of black. Black hard hats with black solid visors. Black vests over thick black jackets. The black neared the crowd.

“Hey Ako, what does Hor-re-yah mean?” Mack asked.

There was a moment of silence on the phone before Mack heard the click of Ako hanging up on him. Mack felt someone grab him by his shoulders, causing his heart to race. “It means Freedom.” Mack turned around to see the man behind him, still holding onto one of Mack’s shoulders, as he began shaking it with the force Mack imagined could come from such a tall, intimidating-looking Egyptian. “Horreyah. We’re screaming for our freedom.”

Mack felt ten times more alive than he had in the past year. No anxiety, just adrenaline. He caught everything on film. The police using tear gas and water cannons. The protesters throwing rocks. Man versus man with baton. Mack caught it all. He

didn't care that more than an hour had passed, and he hadn't returned to the hotel to meet with Ako. This was far more important. This was his story, his shot at redemption, and he couldn't just walk away from it.

As he filmed, Mack pondered to whom he could stream his videos back in the United States. National Geographic? The Associated Press? CNN? MSNBC? Despite Mack's past, this footage could be what put all previous barriers aside.

Mack stayed with the crowd for hours, gathering all the footage he could, already making mental notes in his head on how to edit it. How to organize it. He made calls to all his old contacts, letting them know what kind of a mammoth he was wrestling. After he got the go from the Associated Press and National Geographic to send the footage over and they'd draft his freelancing contract, Mack headed back to his hotel, saddened to be distanced from the story even for a few hours.

The gentleman at the front desk of the hotel stopped Mack as he walked through the lobby. "Excuse me sir, but a man was here waiting for you." The gentleman looked exhausted. Mack wondered how the gentleman could tend the front desk with what was going on around him. The chaos of the streets.

"I'll call him once I'm in my room." Mack took a step toward the elevator.

"Well sir, your hotel room was being booked by the man-who-was-waiting-for-you's credit card. He informed me that you were checking out, so all your bags have already been gathered and are waiting for you behind the desk along with an airplane ticket."

"I'm not leaving yet." Mack looked directly at the gentleman.

"You no longer have a room."

“I’ll check one out myself, with my own credit card. You have availability. My room was reserved for a week.”

The gentleman gave Mack a peculiar look. “This is not the time to be in Cairo.”

“This is the perfect time to be in Cairo,” Mack rebutted as he reached into his pocket for his wallet.

“I’m sorry, sir.” The gentleman grabbed Mack’s luggage and headed towards the door.

Mack had to settle for another hotel about a block away. Even though the Gresham House Hotel was only ten U.S. dollars a night, Mack still worried that his Visa might be declined. He had, after all, spent a year with no solid income, trying to survive solely off credit, so Mack felt relief as the Gresham’s front desk man handed Mack a receipt to sign and a new hotel key.

Once in a new room, Mack wasted no time getting to work, uploading the footage onto his computer, making small edits and using the hotel’s internet to send out the footage to all the international news services. He received his freelance contracts via email.

The riots continued into the night, the violence refusing to follow the sun to sleep. A new light in the sky came from fire. Protestors setting police cars and government buildings ablaze. The military responded with brutal force. Mack slept only when his body refused to stay awake any longer. No Liberian boys came to him in his dreams. The rest he got during the chaos was the best he’d had in almost a year. He woke up to shouting and screaming, feeling rejuvenated and ready to go back to work. This is what

he'd been born to do, he told himself. Filming dire world events was the breath in his lungs. It took a rare breed to put all fears aside and get the images the world needed to see, but someone had to do it, and Mack was more than willing. Robert Capa had gone ashore on Omaha Beach with the 16th Regiment of the 1st Infantry Division, his only weapon his camera, and took some of the most powerful photographs to come out of WWII. It's often the dangerous stories that people need to know most about, Mack told himself the next three days as he continued to stay in Cairo.

Mack was sure Ako thought Mack had simply gone home. And even though that left Mack alone in figuring out how to get a plane ticket home, he wasn't too concerned. The Associated Press streamed all of Mack's footage into their domain, allowing all the major new stations to air Mack's work. Mack felt like he actually made a difference again, and he loved it.

By Friday, as things only continued to escalate in the streets, the Cairo government shut off all internet connection in and out of the city. Mack stayed in contact via phone with his news affiliates, letting them know what had happened. An explosive energy filled Cairo. Mack prepared himself for intense footage, a real piece on the basic human response to oppression.

No personnel could be found at Mack's hotel that morning. It seemed everyone was now involved. The vendors who had crowded the roads the first day Mack arrived in Cairo must have traded their carts for Arabic flags and various banners. Yellow banners with red writing: *اجتماعية عدالة حرية، عيش،* Bread, freedom, Social justice. Cardboard with black writing: *فراعون يا ارحل*. Leave, O Pharaoh. White signs with brown lettering: *مصر ال يوم وتونس أمس*. Yesterday Tunisia, today Egypt.

Mack got chaotic interviews. A woman with brown eyes and a purple hijab screamed over the noise of the chanting: “The people refuse to leave, the president needs to leave.” Mack got footage of a boy in all black, his face covered by a bandana, ripping down banners of Hosni Mubarak hung throughout the city. “Angry Friday.” The idea of such a name to label the atmosphere began circulating among the masses.

At nightfall, the government attempted to impose a 6:00 p.m. curfew, which was quickly ignored and only further fueled the riots. “We will not be silenced.” Mack filmed as a broad-shouldered, bearded man screamed into Mack’s camera. “We will not be herded back into our homes. We are not sheep.” As the man yelled and Mack filmed, the crowd cheered. “This is our revolution.”

Mack circled Tahrir Square multiple times. He went up and down various streets trying to catch different people’s reactions, get the story from as many angles as possible. Down one street, many people were gathered, so Mack thought he’d take the opportunity to ask more questions, get more answers as to how people were responding to this new level of isolation and the idea of a curfew. Even though one could still hear the shots of tear gas and possibly guns being fired off in the distance, the street didn’t have quite the noise that Tahrir Square did, so the interviewees were a little easier to hear.

A woman spoke her thoughts, a man his. Mack could hear a truck coming down the road, but he didn’t want to take his camera off the guy he was interviewing. “A few days ago I would have not dared to imagine such a revolution.” The man spoke better English than anyone else Mack had filmed. “It’s really happening, you know.”

Mack heard a truck nearing and noticed all the people standing in the background of his shot. Who would try to drive a truck down a street blocked by so many? People

began to scream and those in Mack's background shot started running. The man being interviewed was a little slower to realize what was going on.

Mack turned his head and his camera towards a large diplomatic truck heading straight towards the crowd of people with no signs of slowing down. "Holy shit!" Mack said as he jumped up and joined the crowd in trying to avoid being hit by the truck, but many were not so lucky. Mack could hear the yelps and the sounds of bodies getting crushed just behind him. The noise only got louder as people chased after the truck, its victims left behind.

Mack, his camera lowered from his face for the first time all day, looked at the scene around him. No filter distancing himself from the scary reality that stood in front of him. Mack counted twelve bleeding bodies lying on the pavement around him. A mob of people ran down the street, now angrier and louder, in the same direction the truck had driven. A mass of boys responded by attacking a fence near them. Mack cautiously took a step back into the street, nearing the man he had just interviewed who now lay on the pavement. As Mack tried to take a look at the man's face, he saw one of the Liberian boys for the first time in days, lying in his interviewee's place. "Help me," Mack heard a voice say, not knowing if the plea was spoken in that perfect English his interviewee had just used or if it was the voice of one of the Liberian boys. Mack felt as if an electric jolt had shocked his nerves, knocking his sight and hearing off balance. He shook his head before the actual interviewee's face became clear to him again.

Thousands of thoughts flooded Mack's brain in a matter of seconds as he tightly held the camera at his side. Should he be filming this? Did the world need to see the violent destruction of a diplomatic truck that had just run over its own people? Should he

be concerned with the people's reaction, documenting how one responds to such an act of violence?

Mack looked down at his interviewee again as women crowded around the injured. The man didn't say a word but only breathed fast and hard as Mack assessed the man's leg, obviously crushed, and the good chance of internal bleeding in his abdomen. More and more people were now running down the street after the truck. Where that truck was headed next and who was driving it: that was Mack's story. But was Mack supposed to just leave the man lying there, grasping for breath? Was he going to pawn off helping the man onto someone else? Mack had heard the rebels coming from behind the trees in Liberia. He heard the Nationalist warning Mack that they had to leave. But had there really been no time to save those boys?

Mack tucked his camera in between his legs and took off his shirt. Maybe wrapping some clothes around the man's leg and applying some pressure would help stop the bleeding. But as Mack leaned down toward the man, another wave of people came rushing down the street. Mack was knocked down, his camera smacked away from his knees, and the foot of a stranger falling hard on Mack's ribs. Mack lay on the ground, a throbbing pain pulsing throughout his abdomen as he felt helpless.

Junior

My sister named the bear Junior. The blue ribbon wrapped around its neck whipped in the wind as we drove home from school with open car windows on a warm April day. The bear's cozy white coat absorbed the hot breeze and its soft black eyes beckoned to me. Junior's eyes said, "Covet me, I should be yours," although I was in first grade and only the second graders – my sister included – received the gift of the white bear at school that day. Every time I reached across the bench seat for the bear, to pet it, to feel its fluffy coat, my sister pulled the bear closer to herself and reminded me to whom the bear belonged, thus foreshadowing the fights my mother would have to break up in the days to come: My sister claiming the bear, which in all actuality was rightfully hers, while I refused to stop trying to make it mine.

The heavy breeze that carried my jealousy through the car that afternoon was the same breeze that would rustle my blue dress a few days later when my mother took us downtown to see the nine-story Alfred P. Murrah building with its front half blown off.

Industrial-sized spotlights illuminated the exposed organs of a concrete structure half melted away. Mounds of rubble barricaded the building's naked first and second stories and caution tape kept people at a safe distance. Shattered glass, woodchips, concrete splinters, scraps of fabric, shredded paper and other debris still covered the sidewalk as my family and I got closer. The surrounding buildings – their red brick walls seared black – all had glassless windows revealing deserted office spaces, recreational centers and houses of worship. My mother looked down at my sister and me and told us we needed to see this but she didn't tell us that there were still bodies buried in the rubble. She told us that we needed to understand that something horrible had happened here, something that would be a part of history, but I only understood that 168 was a large number, not the magnitude of grief it held.

I had heard that Junior was a gift to all Orvis Risner second graders in honor of my sister's classmate who had lost her father, but I didn't put two and two together, that her father had been killed in the bombing of the building that stood right in front of me. I didn't really understand why my mother thought it fitting that my sister brought Junior along on this outing. All I understood was an eerie presence surrounded downtown. I didn't know to give it the name of death, loss, terror, terrorism; I only knew my own desire to hold Junior close to me, to have him comfort me from the eerie, to be mine, not my sister's.

During the following weeks, my mother, in the name of sharing, allowed me to keep Junior in my room on Sunday nights. Junior would lie next to me in bed, my nightlight brightening his cuddly attributes. Having him for the night is what I looked forward to during the week. Sunday would come, my mother would steer us away from

the evening news with a trip to the grocery store and then we'd go home and Junior was mine for the next nine-or-so hours. On one Sunday, when my sister would soon be forced to share her bear, she refused to share her seat in the shopping cart basket, forcing me to walk along its side while she single-handedly enjoyed the adventures that went on inside the basket on wheels. As a way of pouting, I wandered away from the shopping cart where there was a table set up with stacks of the same book. The boy on the cover looked about my age and held a candle and a tiny American flag. I flipped through the books pages' and first noticed a picture of the half-blown building my mother had taken me to see about a month prior. I continued to survey the book, my skin tingling as I saw images of a woman on the ground, her arms sprawled out, her eyes rolled to the back of her head and her face and arms covered in blood. Firefighters bent over her, and also over a man with a brace around his neck bleeding severely from his head, his white shirt stained red. Another firefighter held a limp baby girl in his hands. I felt hollow. Mortified. My mother grabbed the book away from me. I couldn't stop asking questions on the ride home. She tried to explain.

That night I didn't let Junior sleep next to me. I placed him by my door. My nightlight seemed to project the images of the book onto Junior's white coat. I put him in my closet. I hid him under my desk. I buried him in my laundry hamper. I finally understood what he represented, and every time I looked at him I was overwhelmed. I couldn't sleep, no matter where I hid him. I eventually went to my mother's room and crawled into her bed. I knew then I would never ask for Junior again. I lay on her arm and felt her chest move in and out. I listened to my own breath as it came quick and heavy.