

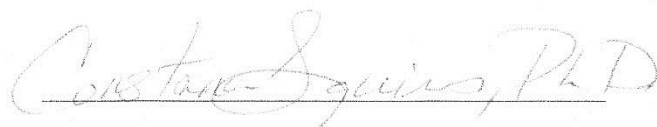
**Moonlight and Other Stories**

A THESIS

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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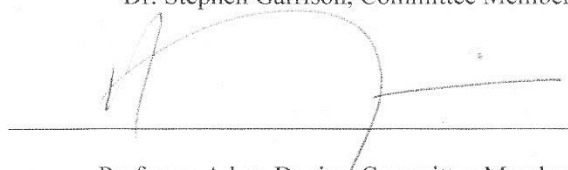
By

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Constance Squires, Ph.D." written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Constance Squires, Committee Chairperson

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Stephen Garrison, Ph.D." written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Stephen Garrison, Committee Member

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Adam Davies" written over a horizontal line.

Professor Adam Davies, Committee Member

UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL OKLAHOMA

Edmond, Oklahoma

GRADUATE COLLEGE

Moonlight and Other Stories

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN CREATIVE WRITING

Jeffrey Degginger

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## Abstract

Moonlight and Other Stories is a collection of Literary Short Stories. It primarily deals with families in conflict, whether it's a newly divorced man who is convinced his only son is gay, or a young boy wanting to separate himself from his father's shadow and lose his virginity, a tired mother who is fighting for hope against hope for a dying daughter, among other stories. Characters are the focus with each person discovering that what they are fighting for is perhaps the wrong focus, a police officer who is stuck in a cycle of violence, a sad man who can't save the few things that matter in his life, a young man attempting to connect with his future father-in-law. Each story expresses a personal challenge that the character may or may not be aware of, a misunderstanding of the appropriate sexual politics as a young adult, overemphasizing your own sacrifices over everyone else's, holding on to the idea of a relationship so long that who you are and what others want you to become blur until you lose sight of yourself. I write about young men in their teens and twenties, men in their thirties and forties, and women in the same age ranges. I write about divorced parents, married parents, single young adults, young adults in relationships, and a variety of other relationships. What holds it all together is a sense of loss that leads to self-realizations, confronting the demons and beliefs that have been making you someone no one wants to be around, and how to either maintain that as identity or forgo it as a relic of a former you. These stories are meant to beg the question of what happens when you lose what you think is your greatest strength, your coping mechanism, your inevitable dream, and who are you when that most important thing is gone.

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## Moonlight

Frank had spent twenty-five long years with Janine. At the start, he'd worked a nothing job in a hardware store while she spent all her free time painting. Even when she had become successful enough to buy the house, Frank still felt like her painting was little more than a hobby. She'd be working in her art studio to the music of Pink Floyd, the smell of cigarettes drifting into the hallway. He would buy a bottle of wine only for it to appear empty and discarded a few days later before he'd even gotten a sip. Often, she'd grab his penis in the middle of the night and whisper her desires in his ear. He never obliged. When he found out she'd cheated on him, he couldn't have filed for divorce faster. His return to bachelor status couldn't have made him happier.

Except for the fact that he knew his son was gay.

Cody was nineteen. He'd returned home after failing his most recent semester of college. Frank had let him know who was to blame. "You're the one who failed yourself, son." Cody spent a lot of time out, but Frank knew he was just being a young man. As long as Cody returned to their home each night, Frank could live with it.

Frank was reading a book by lamp in the library of their home. It had been Janine's studio, but Frank had renovated it once she was gone. There were no paintings on any of the walls. He liked to read aloud when Cody wasn't home. He was interrupted by the rumbling of a car engine pulling into the driveway. No doubt it was Cody returning from a visit to a friend's house. Frank listened as the key entered the lock. The door seemed to be opened carefully. Cody's footsteps were quiet.

"How was Andrew?"

Cody took a breath before responding. “Fine.” He appeared in the doorway. Cody winced as he walked in and collapsed into an armchair.

“Are you all right?” Frank asked.

Cody rubbed his nose. “Yeah.”

“Now, you said his girlfriend left him a few days ago, right?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

Whenever Frank knew he was annoying Cody he liked to see how far he could push it. He figured if he was tough or pushy that Cody would eventually just break and be more forward. It was a nineteen year experiment that had yielded little result. “It’s just that a man can feel lonely. He could desire to be with someone. Anyone.”

Cody’s muscular body was bright against the dark green walls and dark wood bookshelves. “He’s the one who broke up with her.”

“That doesn’t mean he isn’t lonely.”

“I know my own friend.”

“Why are you so snappy all of a sudden?” He set the book down and laid his hands in his lap. “I just want to know about your life.”

“It’s not your life to know.” Cody said. He was halfway through the doorway before pausing, then he walked back over and kissed Frank’s cheek. “Good night, Dad.”

Frank wiped his cheek as Cody left the room.

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When Frank awoke in the morning, he found himself sprawled out in the middle of his queen-sized bed. For too long he’d been smothered by the clingiest woman on the planet. He went to the bathroom, which was no longer the mess it had always been when

Janine had been around. He didn't have to deal with the clothes tossed at the hamper, or the smell of bath salts from the night before. He didn't have to wait to take a shower.

There was no mass of bottles on the counters, no plastic bin full of green and purple nail polish, no collections of cotton balls, hair dryers, tampon boxes, or files.

Frank went to the kitchen and saw Cody sitting at the dining table with a bowl of cereal wearing nothing but his boxers. He watched a TV in the nearby living room, which Frank had kept only at Cody's request. The boy loved to watch TV, and Frank knew it had to be the reason he hadn't performed well in college.

The kitchen's gray counters were all clean. Frank had scrubbed them down last night. As Frank washed a bowl for cereal he thought about the swim team Cody had been a part of. The boys in the pool, their glistening bodies pushing through the water. He could see Cody standing in the locker room among other wet, attractive boys. He could see the steam from the shower as his son entered, engulfed in the humidity as someone squeezed his butt.

"What?" Frank asked, knowing Cody had just said something that snapped him out of his imagination.

"I said I'm heading out after breakfast. Andrew wants to hang some more."

"Out with Andrew again?"

"He is my best friend."

"What day is it? Saturday? Why don't you and I go fishing or something?"

"You hate fishing, Dad."

"Then let's do what you want to do. Seriously, I'm down for anything."

“What are you talking about?” Cody asked, replacing the bowl on the counter.

“When was the last time we did anything together?”

“We’ve done stuff.” He pointed at Cody. “I don’t like you implying otherwise. If we spent any time apart odds are your mother had something to do with it.”

“Yeah, well, that’s always been your story. Mom this, mom that.”

“Look I’m just glad she’s gone. I probably shouldn’t say this, but the past six months have been the best six months of my life.”

“Yeah, good for you. I’m going to hang out with Andrew.”

Frank sighed and crossed his arms, imitating his son’s gesture. “What time will you be home?”

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Frank had cleaned yesterday but the house still seemed filthy. He dusted the library, vacuumed the floors and lifted the couch, loveseat, and armchair cushions so he could vacuum underneath those, mopped the kitchen, polished the deck, cleaned out the rain gutters, polished the wind chimes—but not the ones Janine bought—took out the trash, cleaned the stove inside and out, made his bed, Cody’s bed, the guest bed, cleaned off as many cabinets he could find, made sure the books in the library were still sorted alphabetically, wiped off the windows, and scrubbed the toilets and sinks.

When he’d finished it was only two o’clock. He wondered what Cody and Andrew were up to. Shopping at some mall. Going into some dressing room together. Watching the other shed his shirt like the burden of secrecy. There they were free to stand before each other, vulnerable, alive, in lust. Then to push against the wall and bite up and down each other’s rib cages.



Frank's cell phone started ringing. He looked at the name and when he saw it was Genna, he thought about hanging up. She always insisted on talking to him about Janine.

He answered the phone. "Hello?"

"Do you really think that boy is gay?"

"What? Who?"

"Cody. Your son. You think he's gay."

Frank scratched the back of his ear. "What makes you think that?"

"Janine and I ran into him at the mall. He was with one of his friends and after we talked to them Janine told me that you think he's gay."

"I don't think, I'm certain."

"Well, if I'm going to go along with the notion... why?"

"Let's call it father's intuition."

"I mean, the boy that Cody was with was dressed very... I wouldn't have been surprised if he were gay. Are you sure? Has Cody told you anything concrete?"

"No, but as far as I'm concerned, I can tell. It's fine if you don't believe me."

"Oh, don't be like that."

"Maybe you should ask Janine why I'm being this way."

"Look... I'm sorry. One moment." Frank heard the sound of her saying goodbye to Janine over the phone. "Frank, I really want to see you in person soon. I haven't seen you since the divorce and I'm worried about how you're holding up."

Frank thought about high school when he, Janine, Genna, and Genna's ex-husband would go to rock concerts and debate who was the better metal band, Metallica

or Anthrax. “Have you and I ever gone out by ourselves?” Frank asked. “It seems like we were always in a group.”

“Yeah, but I imagine that you’re probably cooped up in home all night nowadays. I know home was the only place I wanted to be after my divorce.”

Frank would’ve admitted it to her—but not at that moment—that a routine of waking up and reading wasn’t making him the most excited person in the morning. Genna was always fun after a few drinks. “How about... Frederico’s, six o’clock.”

“I love that place. See you then, big guy.” Frank wanted to tell her not to call him big guy again, but she had hung up. He pocketed his phone and felt like he’d made a huge mistake. Whatever Genna was up to wasn’t purely out of friendship to him. She had always been way closer to Janine.

He went to his closet and looked at the outfits he had available. Genna was going to be looking for signs of weakness, anything she could report back to Janine. He wanted to look sharp, smart, resilient, and easy-going. He looked at himself in the mirror. His age showed in annoying ways. So many wrinkles had appeared on his face that hadn’t been there before. He was in his forties, damn it. He could still look good. He settled on a shiny blue button up and black slacks. Yeah, this was him. This was Frank in his mid-forties. He combed his hair, trying to make it look perfect.

As he was about to leave, Cody came through the door. He looked Frank up and down. “Why are you all dressed up?”

“Genna needed a hot date, so I said I’d take her out for a night on the town.”

“Genna? Like Mom’s best friend Genna?”

“Yeah.” He saw Cody bite his lips. “I was joking about the hot date part.”

“I don’t see what’s so funny about taking Mom’s best friend on a date.”

“It’s not really a date. She’s just making sure I’m okay.” As Frank walked past he had the urge to ask, “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Enjoy your date, Dad.” Cody’s hands were clenched at his side and he stood oddly still.

Frank wanted to push the issue as usual. But he noticed the tension of Cody’s shoulders. Maybe he shouldn’t. Maybe it had been a bad day. Plus, Frank was hungry and didn’t want to deal with an angrier-than-usual son. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Good bye.”

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Frank walked into Frederico’s, double checking his watch and shirt buttons. Frederico’s was a restaurant that had always confused Frank. It had been a Mexican restaurant and was now an Italian one. Many people often reported their food tasting of cumin or receiving items that had not appeared on the menu. The flags on the wall were red, white, and green.

He saw Genna sitting in a booth. His initial realization was that she had gained a lot of weight since the last time he saw her. She looked up and covered her mouth, she started laughing. Frank figured something about him must be as alien to her memory as she was to him. He laughed too.

He pulled her into a hug, which she returned with a hearty smile. “How have you been, Frank?”

“Just getting by.” Frank rubbed the back of his head. That sounded wrong. “I mean, you know, never better.”

“Sounds like you’ve been having a complicated time.” The warmth of the hug had seemed to disappear. Frank felt like everything he could think to ask about had evaporated.

“What have you been up to? How are the kids?” Frank asked.

“Oh, yeah, they’re fine, fine.” Genna ran a hand through her hair and looked off to the side.

The waiter came by with a bottle of wine. “Madam, Monsieur.”

“Splurging much?” Frank asked.

“I just thought we should forget ourselves a little bit tonight. We’ve been parents for so long, I’m worried we don’t know how to have fun anymore.”

All was quiet at their table. The hostess came by and sat another family nearby. Frank could hear music in the background, but it was in a foreign language. It was at that time that Frank realized they really had nothing to talk about except the past. “So, you’ve been hanging out with Janine a lot?”

“Yeah, just being a friend. Not that that’s any excuse for not being in touch with you sooner.”

“I’ve been okay. You really don’t need to feel bad.” He looked at his glass of wine and decided to drink some. He tasted grapes for a moment before he was left thirsty and he drank more wine warming his tongue, throat, and nose. “I don’t know if you’ll believe me or not, but I’ve sincerely never felt better in my life.”

“That’s how I felt at first, too.” She finished her glass of wine. “My husband was just awful, I mean you know what he did to me. I couldn’t have felt better after he’d left. It’s just what happens after that. All the little questions come back to haunt you. Every

single thing you ever said to each other morphs into a major event in your mind. And I had two kids asking when daddy was coming home.” She sighed, and took a sip of wine. “But that was my situation. You’re lucky that Cody’s a grown man.”

“I’m proud of Cody. I think he understands that his parents had some problems and that we were all better off.” Frank realized that he and Cody had never really talked about the whole situation. “What all has Janine told you, anyway?”

For a moment Genna didn’t say anything. She seemed to have slipped into a thought and stared at a piece of garlic bread in front of her. “Oh, you know Janine. She keeps everything to herself.” She paused for a moment, “You know, kids can surprise us. Even the grown ones.”

“I think I know my son, Genna.” All was quiet again. “Sorry, I’ve always hated other people telling me about my kids. I know you’ve got experience. Maybe there is something going on with him recently but,” Frank let his thoughts fall off. “I just have good reason to believe what I believe.”

Genna shook her head, “Why are we getting into all of this, anyway? I said we should forget, so let’s forget.” Genna lifted her glass. Frank looked down and found his strangely empty. His belly felt warmed and he looked from the bottle to Genna’s glass, refilled it. Tonight he’d drink with Genna. They toasted and tipped their glasses back.

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Janine had always drunk more than Frank. He met her at a house party when they were in college, and it was their primary social activity. They went to music festivals,

concerts, art shows, and everything they did, drinks were always around. It didn't bother Frank until he decided to stop and she did not.

For their fifth anniversary Frank and Janine travelled to Key West. It was after Janine had found mild success with her painting and they could afford these sorts of things. A few days into the vacation, they went to a restaurant to avoid a sudden rainstorm. Frank had never felt happier with Janine than in that moment, her red hair soaked, make-up only slightly smudged from rain.

They ordered wine, starting with just a glass. Janine had ordered two more before he finished his first. He'd never seen her put it back so fast. She didn't pay much attention to his prodding questions, such as whether that was her third or seventeenth glass. She just laughed like he'd told a joke. Meanwhile the bottle drained more quickly.

It was when she was red faced and somewhat accusatory towards Frank that she said, in a dreamlike voice, "I wish we could just live here. Can we live here?"

"No, of course not."

"Why not?"

Frank had enjoyed his time on the island but he glanced sideways at its cheap shacks. Locals shot them dirty looks when they rode bikes through the neighborhood. The island was a maze of one ways and drunks. You couldn't stumble down a city block without falling into three different bars. It's not like they had the money to move either.

"It's just not something we can really do. Besides this place isn't all that great."

She began to grow upset. Frank told the waiter they didn't need another bottle and that upset her even more. "You think I'm a drunk, don't you? Just some drunk who paints useless things all day."

Well, sure, he'd thought that from time to time, but why would he ever admit it to her face? It didn't stop him from loving her. He saw the merit in her artistry, though he would still sneak in a question as to whether or not she was still considering that management job her father-in-law offered every few months.

When they left the restaurant, Janine did everything she could to get away from Frank, her white skirt flowing above her sandals ahead of him. She ran down to the beach while he tried to keep up with her. She stood in the ocean with her feet in the salt water, seaweed washing up against her legs. Frank tried calling to her, asking her to come back in, but she seemed lost and entranced. He sat down in the sand fuming and questioning himself. She hadn't been this drunk in a long time.

As they sat there, the world moved around them. The sun faded into its setting place and the moon appeared like an apparition in the night sky. That distant orb held Frank's attention as the beach dyed itself blue and the torches began to light up the shoreline. Would she ever come back in from the water? He wondered if she was waiting to sober up, or if she was thinking like he was, or if she was thinking about nothing at all. Then she turned and came back into the shore. She hugged him. Ocean water was getting on Frank's legs and he wanted to get back to the hotel.

"I'm sorry." Her head was looking down. She had sand between her toes.

Frank tried to ask her what happened and she refused to say anything. The next two nights of the vacation she got drunk again. Whenever she ordered a martini on the flight back home, he knew that she had begun to grow out of control. He didn't confront her about it. It was a week later when he called the divorce lawyer to ask about what he

needed to prepare for. It was another week later when Janine told Frank she was pregnant.

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He was looking at Genna. He knew he had drunk too much. He felt like his head was tipping sideways even though he was sitting still. “You just came here tonight to report on me for my ex-wife, didn’t you?” He blinked. He hoped hadn’t actually said that out loud.

“What makes you think Janine is even interested in what you’re going through right now?” It had probably been wine that made Genna say something that mean to him. He was sure that was it. How many times had Janine said mean things only after she was drunk enough to say mean things. Genna was sweet, but drunk Genna was quickly turning into a capital-B bitch.

“Of course she’s worried about me. You two are like the same girl. If you’re worried about me, she’s worried about me. That’s how it works. You two practically share the same brain.”

“What has gotten into you?” Genna asked, leaning forward, her hands gripping the table. “Don’t you remember high school? Before Janine?”

He did remember high school. It was an annoying time when Genna would do nothing but hit on him. “Oh my god, why are you even bringing that up?”

“Those are our memories, Frank. Don’t insult them.”

“I’m not insulting them, I’m just—” he stopped. He took a deep breath. He felt like a ship on the open sea. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t ever drink wine again. Ever.”



“What can I do to make it up to you?”

“Pay for dinner.”

Frank kept his mouth closed. He paid the bill and tipped the waiter.

Outside, the moon seemed bigger in the sky than the other night, as if it was falling towards the earth. They walked across the parking lot, “I came tonight because you haven’t tried contacting me once since your divorce. I’ve seen Janine go through a lot, and—don’t roll your eyes at me—she’s gone from upset, to angry, to depressed, to suicidal, to a point where she can at least get through the day. But she’s needed me. And you’re still in the first step, Frank. I’ve been where both of you have been, and we’ve always been friends, and not once in this awful time have you reached out for help. Why do you think you’re okay?”

Frank stood with his hands in his pockets, his eyes fixed on the moon. “Look, Genna. If I could tell you why I’m okay, I would. Is it not enough for me to just tell you in all honesty that I’m fine now?”

“No. I want you to open up. You’ve gone through an awful experience just like she has. You threw away a relationship that lasted a quarter of a century. Your youth, your life, is mostly Janine. On top of that, you talk about Cody like he’s a disgusting insect for you to study. What is your problem with him?”

Cody. He should have known. “If this has all been about Cody—“

“Call me sometime when you’re ready to open up about these things. Until then, consider me just as gone as Janine is.” She climbed into her car and left Frank staring at her head lights.

He fumbled back to his car and knew he shouldn't drive drunk. He called Cody and got the voice mail. "Never mind." He hung up the phone. He pulled out his keys and sat in the car, gripped the steering wheel, and thought about the mile and half he had to drive back home.

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He woke up to a hangover. He pressed his hands against his forehead as if he could move the headache somewhere else. He had slept on only one side of the bed. He dreamed that he'd been in bed and someone—tan skin, smelling like sand and sweat—had joined him under the covers. He knew he would vomit. He would need to call and apologize to Genna.

Maybe he should tell her everything, but he didn't know if she'd be willing to hear it.

As he walked toward the kitchen, he stopped at Cody's door. The room was completely empty. The dresser was gone. The bed was gone. Clothes and hangers were missing from the closet. None of the band posters on his wall remained, just the residue of dead tape. He checked the locks on the doors and realized they were locked as he'd left them. Cody had been gone before Frank had come back home.

A silhouette surrounded by dust was visible where the bed had been against the wall. The room was filthy and Frank felt the urge to clean it. He checked the house. There was nothing, no sign of anything left by Cody. Not even a note. He wanted to scrub the walls of their dust, to remove that layer of historied filth. He called Cody's phone and was upset by a recorded message declaring that the number either didn't exist or he'd been blocked.

“Fucking hell,” he said and threw the phone against the wall. His hangover turned into grief. He kneeled on the floor trying to catch his breath again. He wanted to find Cody and ask him what the hell he thought he was doing.

Frank got dressed. He knew where Cody must’ve gone. There was only one other person he could have gone to for help. He picked up the phone and dialed Genna’s number.

“Frank? If this is about last night—“

“I need you to tell me Janine’s address.”

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It had been ten years ago, in a Wal-Mart in New Mexico. “What do you mean Cody is gone?!” Janine had asked.

They had gone on vacation to Santa Fe so that Janine could sell a collection of her paintings to a man who described himself as a huge fan. Frank had rolled his eyes at the thought and found the man to be annoying, especially the way he’d keep eyeing Frank and asking what it must be like to be married to such a talented artist. It had been like hell, he’d thought.

Frank had taken Cody to browse the toy aisles, looking at the blue and chrome colored action figures. It had seemed like only a moment that Frank had taken his eyes off the boy. Cody was nowhere to be found. He looked in all the toy aisles, moved the displays from the shelf, checked the giant irresistible cages of bouncy balls, the steel towers of bicycles, and the pink aisles the boy avoided at all costs.

Frank felt like he’d lost a key to something precious. He knew Janine was in the food aisles—searching for sugary snacks to hold the boy over from his fits of crying at an

age Frank felt was far too advanced for such behavior. Perhaps that's why he dawdled in the toy aisles waiting to see if Cody would reappear for fifteen minutes. He was upset with himself for his inactivity, but felt like he was alone. He couldn't return to Janine and tell her he'd lost him.

She did not relent. "How in the hell do you lose our child? What in the fuck do you mean you lost him fifteen minutes ago?"

"Janine, I think you ought to save your energy for yelling at me and put it to some use helping me find our son."

Perhaps it was that snip that made Janine slap him. Frank, with a swollen cheek, explained to a security guard that his son was missing and had been for more than twenty minutes.

The store was locked down, amber alerts were sent out, and aisles were checked one by one. The ground floor was cleared and they were told that Cody was nowhere to be found. Groups had been sent to double check the store room and other difficult areas for a child to reach, but the officer in charge declared the boy to be missing from the store. Frank had never heard Janine react the way she had when the officer told her. She became hysterical. She grabbed Frank and held him. Frank tongued his cheek and kept one arm around Janine.

He imagined the police finding Cody, half-buried in mud in a ditch somewhere with no clothes. He imagined the ghost image of the boy's life hanging on his face. He wondered, if Cody was dead, what he would do with his life.

A teenager with braces arrived at the security station. "We found him."

The next few minutes were a blur. Someone said something about the parking lot. Then Cody was in front of them again. For their own entirely separate reasons, the parents held the boy between them, practically tearing him apart.

“Why were you outside?” Frank asked.

“I wanted to be in the moonlight.”

Frank shook his head, “You could’ve been in the moonlight outside when we went back to the car. Why did you leave by yourself?”

For the first time in Cody’s nine years of life, he looked at Frank with a contempt he’d eventually grow used to. “I told you,” he looked up at Janine. “I’m not lying.”

Frank wanted to push the boy to get the truth out of him. Why was he saying such asinine things at nine years old anyway? But there she was, Janine, between them now, her arms descending over Cody like a Valkyrie’s wings. She picked him up and said, “Come on, Cody. Let’s go home.”

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Genna had threatened to hang up before he explained the situation. Genna said she’d call Janine and though Frank wanted to tell her not to she had hung up before he could say anything.

Janine had moved in to an apartment building that was in a good neighborhood, but Frank knew that apartments were apartments—it didn’t really matter how nice the surroundings were. These apartments were tall, made of white stone and fancy architecture, with large black balconies that overlooked the river across the street. Frank climbed the three flights of stairs to reach Janine’s floor. Somewhat out of breath, he knocked on the door. He had the odd feeling that she was peeking out of the eye hole.

The door opened.

Instead of Janine it was a man who appeared to be in his early thirties. Frank looked at his flamboyant clothes, a maroon button up parted enough for his chest hair to be displayed in the cool air. He had tan skin. “Can I help you?” the man asked.

“Umm... I was looking for someone. Is there a Janine here?”

“Oh, you’re here for Janine. Are you Frank?”

“That’s right.”

“One moment.” The door closed and the lock clicked. That infuriated Frank more. This was some ploy, a distraction. Janine was in there holding Cody against her right now. This doorman was who Cody had been seeing for months. This was them collaborating together, plotting against him.

The door reopened. Janine, with her hair straightened and her arms crossed, looked at Frank with a lightness he wasn’t expecting. “Okay, Janine. Where is he? Where is Cody?”

“I could ask you the same thing.” She smoldered in her pink blush and blue eye shadow. She ran painted fingernails through her hair. Frank remembered how fake he thought she always looked when she was made-up.

“Don’t play dumb with me, Janine. I know he’s in there. I know you’re hiding him from me.”

“Oh you and the things you know. If you’re so sure, how about you come in and check for yourself.”

Frank looked at the open door for a moment suspicious of what awaited him. He walked in carefully, expecting the door to slam shut and for Janine and the doorman to

hold him down and stab him in the kitchen. Cody was nowhere to be seen in the living room. They walked through each room. Cody was in none of them, but Frank could smell him. He'd been there a lot, or recently.

“Let's talk,” Janine said. She gestured toward a blue couch in the living room. Janine sat in the loveseat across from him. The man at the breakfast bar was reading a newspaper. When Frank looked at him, he kept reading the paper as if he didn't notice. Maybe Cody was out with some friends. Frank didn't have anywhere else to be. He could wait.

“You probably think he's out somewhere, don't you?” Janine asked. Frank huffed and looked away from Janine. “That huff—that means yes. Our son isn't hiding out in this apartment with me. He didn't come here because he knew this was the first place you'd look.”

“You obviously know where he is.”

“Yes. And I discouraged him from refusing to tell you as best as I could.” Frank thought very little of Janine's best. “I'll tell you where he is, but first I need to say something to you. Something I've always wanted to say to you.” Janine smoothed the hair on both sides of her head. “We spent twenty-five years together. I went from nineteen to forty-four with you as my husband, and I probably won't live long enough to get that kind of time with anyone else.”

“Janine, I don't want you back.”

Janine laughed and snapped her fingers. She looked at the man reading the newspaper and back to Frank. She touched her chest and cleared her throat. “Shut up.” Janine's eyes were closed. “Shut up, or I'll never tell you where our son is.”

Frank crossed his arms. Janine kept talking to Frank, but he started tuning her out, preferring to examine the layers of dust on the counters. “I just couldn’t stand it anymore.” Frank thought about the bronze statuette on the glass end table between them. It was a statue of Venus, and he traced his fingers on her figure. “As a person, I evolved. I knew I couldn’t be there anymore. I want to apologize for one thing, and only one thing. You weren’t supposed to see me like that... in the bathroom. That wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“What wasn’t supposed to happen? Alcohol poisoning? I don’t know how you couldn’t have expected that. For a moment, I thought you’d done something irreversible.” When he’d gotten back from the hospital he remembered telling Cody that she’d just eaten some bad food.

“Then you asked for a divorce.”

“You cheated on me.” Frank said, feeling righteous. “But honestly I’m not really upset about that.” He’d been looking for a good excuse to get a divorce before that. “It’s Cody I’m worried about.”

“If you were so worried about Cody maybe you’d actually talk to him about something like this.” She quivered on the couch and crossed her arms. “And get on to me about cheating, huh? What about Spain? You ever think about that anymore?”

Frank could still feel sunlight on his face and a very pregnant Janine crying. Her face had looked almost glazed. He thought about the man who had whispered Spanish poems in his ear. “Why ask that now? You never brought it up before. You just took it and accepted things the way they were.”

“No I didn’t. That was your choice. You accepted things the way they were.”



“I made a sacrifice. For you and for him. I gave you the life you wanted.”

“You gave us artifice. You think you’re so great for what you gave up? You think you provided for us? You think you can sit there and hate someone for years without anyone noticing?”

“Are you done, Janine? I can still spend my life with my son in happiness. Why can’t you just get over it?”

Janine crossed her arms, “You’ve done awful things to me Frank. And to Cody, though I know you’ll never see it that way.” She rubbed her temples. “That’s all I wanted to say.” She went to the kitchen for a moment and returned holding a sheet of paper. “This is where Cody is.” The paper was a flyer for a house. Pictures showed a two-story house and a few rooms, a kitchen, a bathroom, a spacious garage. “I think Cody made a mistake in keeping this secret. He wants to hurt you and that is not the type of man I want him to be.”

“Good Lord, Janine. How much money did you give him?”

“What he needed and I will always do so, Frank. Money isn’t important to me. I can get more anytime I want. I will always support my son, no matter what. Speaking of which how are you doing? How’s it feel to live somewhere your wife bought for you?”

Frank said nothing. He stood with the flyer. “It’s different now that you’re gone. I’m glad you’re doing well for yourself.”

“Good bye, Frank.”

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Frank drove straight to the two-story house. He rubbed his eyes and looked again. It had a white picket fence. The windows had black drapes that were perfect for the white

paneling outside. There was a porch swing. Bushes were strategically placed alongside the foundation.

Frank approached the door hoping he would get an answer; that he wouldn't be told to leave. He wanted to say the best thing—the right thing—that would make Cody come back home with him. He rang the doorbell. When the door opened it was a slender boy with black hair, “Can I... help you?”

“Yes, I was directed here by a friend of mine. Is there a boy named Cody living here?”

“Oh. Are you Frank?”

“Yes, that's right.”

“He's out with his Mom right now.” Frank thought for a moment and wondered if that were really possible. He'd seen Janine twenty minutes ago. She hadn't seemed prepared to go anywhere. “I guess you and her aren't together anymore?”

“No, happily divorced.”

“They shouldn't be out much longer.”

Frank waited to be invited inside, but the boy held fast. “I'm afraid I didn't get your name, young man.”

“It's Andrew.”

“Ah, the illustrious Andrew.”

“Illustrious?”

“Sorry, I've just heard a lot about you. So he'll be back soon?”

“Yeah.” Andrew stepped away from the door as if to close it.

“Do you mind if I wait inside for him?”

“Oh...” Andrew looked back inside. “No, you can come in, I guess. Shouldn’t hurt anything.” He rubbed his head as the door opened. “Truth be told, we were sort of expecting you to show up sooner or later.”

The living room was well decorated and clean. A TV was flanked by bookcases holding books, movies, and video games. There were music posters on the wall of bands wearing black and white and with hair that was spiked and black or neon colored. There was one wall scroll of an anime girl with a skirt that seemed way too short. “So is it just you and Cody?”

“No it’s us and Toby and George.”

Frank had never heard Cody mention them and now here they were—all living together. Maybe they were just some other homosexuals they’d picked up in clubs or at parties.

“This is a very nice room. I have to ask how on earth you and Cody and your friends are able to afford this place and these decorations?” He was testing Andrew, seeing if he would crack. He’d already lied once.

“Hasn’t Cody talked to you about this?”

“Not a word.” Frank kept smiling with what he hoped was a jolly smile. “That’s why I’m here, that’s why I’m asking.”

Andrew put both hands on his hips. “I should’ve known he’d do something like this.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I told him he needed to be honest and straight up with you and let you know what was going on. Now you’re here and you don’t know.” Andrew stared at the floor.

“You’re telling me.”

“Do you want some coffee or tea or lemonade or anything?” Andrew asked. “Like I said, they should be back soon.”

“That won’t be entirely necessary.”

Andrew began grinding up coffee beans. Frank felt uncomfortable over the next few minutes, the smell of caramel and vanilla mixing in the air as the coffee brewed.

“Where is the bathroom here?”

“Upstairs, to the left, right by Cody’s room.”

He found the bathroom door. Taking a wild guess, he opened one of the white doors in the hallway to a room that held familiar furniture. It had to be Cody’s room. It was clean, not the messy place it had always been at home. Some of the older furniture even appeared to have been cleaned since Frank had last seen it. A bookshelf by the window that contained more books than Frank thought Cody owned.

One book stood out in particular, a black book with a giant letter J carved on the cover. Frank picked it up. He cracked it open. Scanning the pages he stopped and closed it again. His hands felt exhausted with the weight of the book. He sat in an armchair next to the book shelf and thought about what he should do next. Would he be considered a bad father if he opened this and read what was inside, even after what Cody had done to him? After some debate, he knew he didn’t have much time until either Andrew came looking for him, or Cody came home. If he was going to seize this opportunity, he’d need to do so now. With his sternness slipping he flipped open the cover and began to read.

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Inside Cover

This journal belongs to Cody Williams. Anyone not having this name and reading it is trespassing on something closer to my own heart than the flesh around my ribcage.

Do not read if you want my love, respect, or care in this lifetime. ~2008

October 12<sup>th</sup> 2003

My name is Cody and I am twelve years old. I received this journal from my aunt who said I should write in it every day because I can look back and think about happy memories.

May 16<sup>th</sup> 2006

I need to write in here. I know I've never really used this journal before, so I'm going to go ahead and tell you the whole story. I knew a girl for a few years, and then in eighth grade we finally started dating. Well we were doing good for a while and then we weren't. I was always being a jerk to my friends. I would push them away when they tried to tell me negative things about her. They said she was a liar, that she was cheating on me, that she did drugs, and that she told all of them that she felt all right telling them this because all she had to tell me was that they were lying. I couldn't stand for that so I dumped her. I hate to admit this but I started crying. When we first got together a respected teacher of mine tried to tell me about the cursed nature of your first love. I didn't listen. I wanted to prove everyone wrong. Maybe that's my problem. Maybe I just want to prove everyone wrong.

Which means I'm just like Dad.

May 17th, 2006

It really helped me feel better to write about my ex-girlfriend yesterday, so now I plan on writing each day.

Today I don't have much to talk about. I played some games with a friend after school and then Dad told me a bit about relationships and marriage, mostly things I already knew. I think the world would be better if parents kept a checklist of things they needed to lecture their children about so they could check it off and never bring it up again. But that's me being all stubborn.

April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2009

Journal, I know my parents are going to get a divorce. I see the way they look at each other. My mother cries in the shower each night, and I can hear her if I sit in my closet. I cannot focus on college, because every day at campus I think about what Mom is doing at home alone in her studio. I ask her how she feels each day, hug her, squeeze her even, tell her how happy I am for her success in the arts, and tell her she's the best mother in the world, that I would lose myself without her. She smiles the brightest smile every day. She looks at me and tells me she's proud of me.

I suppose I'm just like her. I haven't told her that my grades have slipped. I know what's making her unhappy. My father. I don't know this in words so much as I see it in their faces, in the way they bicker over how to wipe up a spill on the table, how they argue about the stains on bathroom mirrors, and how a simple text message in a car can send them into an isolated fury. I don't know if I could bring up my worries to either of them. Dad will never listen and Mom will never do anything.

Cody's Journal, June 25<sup>th</sup>, 2010

Journal, a lot has happened since I last wrote. My parents got that divorce. Mom is happier now. She has confirmed a lot of the worries I expressed in my last entry. She said that friends helped her get through most of it, that, though I saw her suffering, she was not suffering alone.

I tell her that I blame Dad. She seems to agree, but she never seems to have her heart in it. Perhaps I don't know everything that's gone on between them, but I know one thing: I can't stay here any longer.

I've lived with my father too long. With Mom gone there's nothing much keeping me at home. Mom has arranged some money from her career as a painter. I finally understand where all the house and school money came from. Mom even says that she'd pay for another attempt at college, but I'm not sure if I'm ready.

Either way, the less of my father the better. I have no sympathy for him. Whatever passed between him and my mother does not concern me any longer. My mother is happy. Now it's my turn.

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His hands shook around the journal as he closed it. He replaced it on the shelf and fell back to the chair. He felt like the biggest idiot in the world. Cody wasn't gay. Or if he was, there was no sign of it. He just hated Frank. Downstairs a door opened and Cody's voice drifted up, "Where is he?"

Frank wondered what he could do to convince Cody he was sorry. He knew he needed to tell him about Spain. Everything would make sense then. He would understand

and—Frank hoped—perhaps Cody could accept him. Footsteps that must've been Cody's came loud and urgent sounding. Cody appeared in the open doorway. "What are you doing here?"

He wanted to tell him how badly it had hurt to see his son's room empty after having seen it full for the past nineteen years. How that bareness had struck him and made him feel born again, but with no loving presence around. His emotion swelled into his throat, but he swallowed and closed his eyes. "I know I haven't been easy to deal with and, for the most part, I haven't made much effort to fix what people might not like about me." Cody crossed his arms. "I just want you to know that I don't blame you for moving out." He just wanted Cody to love him again.

"I have so much I could say to you."

"I have something I need to tell you, too." Frank swallowed. "Cody, whenever your mother was pregnant with you, I..." his throat closed up around the confession.

"No, Dad. Please. I don't care. This isn't about you and Mom anymore."

His lips felt salty. He played back his memory of Janine on the beach in Spain.

"Don't lie to me, Frank."

He looked Cody in the face. "I just need to confess this one thing to you."

"I don't care," Cody said. "After everything you've done, I just don't care. Get out of my room. Get out of my house. Never call me, never visit me, and never harass me again."

Frank felt his arm being pulled. Back on the beach in Europe, Janine's eyes shined at him, much like Cody's did now. "How could you do that to me?" Her belly had swollen between the last time they stood on a beach and now. How many paintings had



she sold of the embryo growing in her stomach? Frank had felt sick looking at those voyeuristic paintings of their son. She was already profiting on his life.

Frank stood up from the armchair. “I think what happened with us can explain a lot of things. Things you’ve questioned about... I... I read your journal. I’m sorry, but I know I can tell you something, if you’ll just listen.”

“Of course you read my journal. Why wouldn’t you? You have no idea what personal space is.”

Janine on the beach she covered her face with her hands. “Can’t you just...”

“Oh God, Janine!”

“Just pretend that it didn’t happen. Can’t you just be here for us?” her hand touching her stomach, as if she hadn’t already been doing plenty for the both of them. Frank felt sick to his stomach and stared back at the bar where a Spanish man sat in a yellow unbuttoned shirt.

“Cody I...”

“Oh God, Dad! Leave me alone!” They were in the hallway now and Frank saw Cody’s roommates peering around the corner of the staircase. It didn’t matter anymore. Frank was desperate.

Janine yelled at Frank, “If you don’t care about your son, then just go off and live with him, why don’t you?” Far away, the man in the yellow shirt drank a martini.

Frank told Cody. “I fell in love with someone else. Someone who made me feel alive, and then I... gave that up Cody. For your mother. For you.”

Cody stopped shoving and pushing. He looked at Frank, who now had slunk to all fours.

Frank grabbed his son's hand. "Please, son. Please. I just want you to understand."

Cody knelt down and said, "I will never understand. I refuse to understand you." He stood up and sighed. Frank was sobbing on the floor. "Come on, let's carry him outside."

As the real world became less of what he wanted it to be, Frank fully embraced his memories. He walked hand in hand with Janine off the beach, the man at the bar disappearing from sight and the sun hid behind clouds. They found themselves standing in the shaded trees. With every bone in his body screaming no, he kissed Janine on the lips, caressed her hair, then her face. He let his hands fall down her sides until he paused at her belly. "I am never going anywhere. I am never going to leave either of you again."

He was on the porch now and behind him the door closed. He felt empty as he heard Cody laughing from behind the door.

The waves fell against the beach, the wind picked up, and Frank fell, empty and desperate, kissing Janine in a dream like embrace, much like a vice grip, from which he could not escape.

## Departure

The day I left for college Mom told me to go down to the prison and see Dad. He had been locked up for a few years and I had made infrequent visits to see him. He always spent the majority of our time together explaining why he had been harassed by the police his entire life. My mom never fully explained how he'd been caught. All Dad had mentioned was a trailer in Kansas and something "fucking stupid." He always emphasized that he wasn't a criminal; he'd just been caught.

The visiting room of the prison had old chairs—black leather, spongy padding. He always sat in the third booth. I held the phone against my ear and picked out the spongy material. My Dad was a little intense to look at. He had scars on his forehead from being stabbed with a knife in the head. He wouldn't tell me the story, just to avoid "some crazy bitch" named Sheila if I ever visited Baton Rouge.

"I'm leaving for campus tonight, as soon as I leave here, actually. It's three hours away so I probably won't be by to visit for a while." My dad chewed the inside of his cheek on the other side of the glass, looked at the fingernails on his left hand. "You can still call me whenever you get a chance." He had never called the entire time he'd been in prison. I don't know why I threw it out to him.

"Well, you'll know where to find me." He leaned back in his chair. I could see the familiar tattoos on his knuckles spelling upwards "F—U—C—K" not unlike the racial epithet he had on his back. He'd shown me once when I visited him. Lifted up his shirt and I just stared awkwardly at the black security guard in the corner of the room.

“I guess it’s a good thing. Lots of pussy up at college. You’ll be nose deep in that, won’t you, son?” His laugh reminded me of a pothead’s, as if he had permanently shredded his vocal chords. I shrugged my shoulders but couldn’t hide the grin on my face. “I know you were in high school,” he said.

This wasn’t a statement that was actually true. Dad had always projected some of his own behaviors and thoughts on to me. And in reality I did little to deny this. He just seemed happier when someone wasn’t telling him no.

I was thirteen the first time I met my Dad. It was right after he’d been incarcerated for something my mother refused to tell me. Something about the way Mom kept saying we were going to visit “your damn father” had gotten to me. I cried the whole way to the prison, rubbing at my eyes as if they were irritated or allergic. I’ll never forget the first thing my dad ever said to me. “Are you stoned?” Before I could fashion a reply, he smiled. “That’s my boy.”

I checked the time on my phone and it was time for me to go. “Give me a call,” I told him.

“We’ll see what happens. Make them girls cream so much their jeans look bleached.”

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Let me tell you a little bit about me. I’ve never had sex. I’ve never been stoned. That much Dad had wrong. In high school I did go to parties. I just didn’t partake in more than a bit of drinking. I just couldn’t touch drugs. Every time they were offered I thought about Dad. That and Mom would’ve murdered me in my sleep. Also, my best friend and

constant wingman, Johnny, wouldn't touch the stuff either. He claimed he did it to stay attractive for the ladies.

In fact, if Johnny did anything it was always for the ladies. In the two years that we hung out in high school he dated no less than six girls. I don't know how he did it. When I asked him for help he just said that I'd have to figure it out myself.

When our senior years came around we both got accepted to the same university. Until about a month before leaving, we thought we'd be rooming together, then something happened that made me realize I wouldn't be okay with that.

We were at a party, someone's apartment, it was pretty tight, but there were about ten of us there, playing games, listening to music, shooting the shit, all that jazz. And drinking. There was a girl there with straight black hair that I had been eyeing all night and chatting with casually. When I tried to make a move she told me that she was actually more interested in Johnny than me. I was more than a little put off but I just spent the rest of the party pouting about it.

I didn't freak out over the situation but the next day I came up with a story to tell Johnny. I told him that I hadn't chosen a dorm room in time and the university just put me into one with a roommate already and that I couldn't change it. I don't know if he fully believed me, but he went along with it. A week or so later he had informed me he was researching room changes so that we could still get together.

Which meant that now I needed to think of some new way of getting out of it.

So as I pulled up to the dorm—my eye pausing on every attractive girl my age being escorted by muscled football dads across the parking lot—my phone buzzed with

Johnny's texts. I ignored them as I grabbed some clothes and boxes and headed to my room.

When I got there, a mousy looking kid with messy brown hair and a sharp, cliff-like nose stared at me from the other side of a computer. One half-of the tiny dorm room was already decorated. He slid blue headphones down from his ears to his neck. "Is it cool if I take the window bed?" I stared at the blue striped sheets he had already tucked around the mattress.

The window had been concealed by a black curtain that left the room lit by the overhead light and the glare of his computer. There were two twin beds and two desks. "Nice to meet you, roomie." I said, extending a hand over his laptop. "My name is Trevor, what's yours?"

He shook my hand with a light grip, only committing to the top three fingers of my hand. "Josh. Listen, I got a few ground rules I want to lay down."

"Do you think I could move in first?"

"Well, some of the rules are about the placement of things."

I started wondering how hard it was to get a room change.

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Johnny came by that night. He opened the door before I could open it and knocked a bag of clothes out of my hands spilling them all over the floor.

"Are you and your roommate butt fucking yet?"

"Don't ask if I'm all right or anything."

Josh just watched as I picked up the clothes. Johnny walked over and extended his hand, and got the same finger shake that I had received. "Just so you know," Johnny said,

“this one is mine.” He was pointing at me with his thumb. “We’re going to get a room change so we can live together and I’m not above planting drugs on you to open up a spot.”

“He’s joking,” I said, “in case you didn’t notice.”

“No I’m not. Why would I joke about planting drugs on someone? That’s serious business, man.”

Josh had gone back to focusing on the game he was playing, his mouse clicking away.

Johnny wrapped his arm around my shoulders, “I got the lowdown on some cool party going on at a guy’s house. Guy’s name is Logan, out in the neighborhood just west of campus. What do you say? There’s word that a lesbian sorority is going to show up.”

“First, there’s no such thing as a lesbian sorority. Second, I’m a little confused on how that would help us. Besides, I’m not sure I want to party so much anymore.”

“What? You? You hardly partied to begin with. And this is college! Weren’t you just going on and on about your virginity the other day?”

I tried to push my finger up to my lips but Josh had already over heard. He giggled to himself by the computer.

“Dude!” I said to Johnny. I pulled him out into the hallway.

“We got to get your dick wet, man.”

Sometimes, when Johnny spoke, I heard my father’s voice.

“I think I can get my dick wet enough myself.”

“Not as good as some hottie could.” He opened the door again and said, “Joshy boy, wanna go with us?”

“I don’t par-tay,” he said.

“Suit yourself, man.”

Johnny grabbed my arm and dragged me along with him. I figured, why not? One last party with Johnny then I could focus on what I wanted to focus on.

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The party was in a little four bedroom apartment a short walk off-campus. We could tell the place because other college age kids were decorating the steps up to the door. It was the craziest crowd of people I’d ever seen at a party. This couldn’t last very long. Especially not with the bass line that was pumping across the walkway.

There were girls galore, all made-up, with curled or straightened or pinned-up hair. There were a variety of deep and shallow cleavage shots. One girl in particular showed off her summer tanned legs in white shorts and black sandals. Another girl was pale and wearing an orange dress. A black girl had green eye shadow and I spent a good deal of time watching her drink something blue from her cup and dancing with her friends.

At some point Johnny and I separated. I drank in the kitchen, collecting a nice buzz, a slight looseness in the tongue, an urge to talk. Or was talking the last thing that I wanted to do at that moment? What if some girl came up and I tried some embarrassing pick-up line? I wondered about Johnny and the way he reeled them in. He was always so flagrant about his sexuality, always complimenting, but a little teasing too. I just didn’t understand. I just wanted to be sweet to somebody long enough for them to scratch my itch.



That was about the time that she arrived. She had olive skin, a red blouse that showed off her shoulders, brown hair that curved around her chin with bangs that fell over one eye. A group of guys followed her as she walked across the living room in blue jean shorts and cowgirl boots. She had come to the party alone and walked straight to the kitchen.

I was drinking cheap beer. She started opening cabinets and found a vodka bottle. I was intimidated. I was thinking of my approach when a taller, more attractive guy walked up, "Jenny, I was hoping you'd show."

I went to nursing my beer again, expecting Jenny to giggle, turn around, hug this guy, and start hearing the "oh my gods" and "it's so good to see you agains." Instead, Jenny said, "I can't say the same."

"Damn girl, why you got to be so cold?"

"Damn boy, how about you give me some fucking space?"

I'd never quite seen a girl shut down a guy so severely and quickly, especially not in a party atmosphere. The guy floundered for a moment, then said what most guys would. "You're a real bitch, you know that?"

"Hey," I said, I'm not entirely sure why. I wasn't drunk or anything, just a little looser. The guy turned around and looked at me. I was trying to think of something else to say, when this Jenny walked over to me. "See Clint, I got me a new man."

"This little pipsqueak?"

I was a little gratified by the way Jenny had glommed onto my shoulder, but looking at the size of this guy in front of me, whose shoulders made it quite a bit closer to the cabinets than mine did, I felt thrust into the sort of conflicts between people that I had

always wanted to avoid. I wondered what my Dad would say, but I wouldn't say it. That would've ended up in a fight.

“Oh, he's not small where it counts. Unlike you.” Jenny said then rubbed my chest and kissed my cheek.

Dad would've casually kissed her back and said something like, “I don't want to fuck this guy up, baby.”

I decided to take a more careful route. I whispered in her ear. “I don't want to fight this guy, lady.”

Jenny just gasped and laughed and hit my arm, “Don't be so rude.”

Clint's nostrils flared out and for a moment I was sure he was going to pile drive me through the floor into the apartment below. But then he laughed, too. Laughed louder and longer than Jenny did until she was flustered and stomping her foot shouting, “What's so goddamn funny?”

Clint rubbed his nose with a finger. “What is this, the fourth fucking guy this week? You think I'm supposed to be mad about you paying attention to him? It's your nature. It's what everybody knows you for and it's what you'll always be. I ain't going to ruin my good mood over some thirsty slut.” Then he walked up and patted my shoulder, “Good fucking luck, man. See you next week.” Then he walked out of the kitchen.

Jenny's cheeks had blushed bright red. She didn't look at me but returned to the vodka bottle. She poured a shot and slammed it back. When she turned around I saw how watery her eyes were and she said, “What a dickhead, right?”

“Yeah, definitely.” I was a little enthralled that she had talked to me.

“What's your name?”

“Trevor.”

“As you no doubt heard, I’m Jenny. Or Slut. Or Whore. Whatever you want to call me really, like I give a shit.”

“Don’t let him get to you.”

She was quiet and just stared at me.

I didn’t know what to say really. I had no idea who she was or what her story was. If anything, and I’m ashamed to admit this now, I was glad to hear that maybe I had lucked into talking to a girl with a bit of a reputation. What I had gleaned at the parties I’d been to and stories that Johnny told me was that a slut was a slut. But it occurred to me that a slut might be just what I needed.

Sometimes when I talk myself, I hear my dad, and think my mom was right. She always downplayed my dad’s influence, tried to steer me away. If anything, the reason I had been so chaste in my life until now was partly her influence.

Mom had me when she was seventeen and the guy had run off. She was a little averse to the idea of sex before marriage. But that carried over to telling me that relationships aren’t important and I needed to get an education first. Then it carried over to her becoming very pouty whenever I had a girlfriend for a period of time in high school. That girl eventually broke up with me and when I asked her why she said, “I don’t think your mom likes me very much.”

“Let’s get out of here,” she said. She grabbed the vodka bottle and my hand, and walked me out of the party. “I know a place we can go.”

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This place ended up being a little neighborhood playground. There were swings—which we sat on together—and a slide. She took a swig from the vodka bottle and handed it to me. I held it until she said, “Well, go ahead.” I tilted my head back briefly and swallowed the equivalent of a grease fire. I coughed a little bit. She smiled at me and we set the vodka bottle between us. “I’m not a slut, and I’m not trying to get you drunk enough to have sex with me.”

“I had no presumptions.” I said. It wasn’t a lie, I really felt that way. I wasn’t so simple I couldn’t recognize when a girl might want to just talk. That being said, I wasn’t entirely sure I could believe what she was saying. Maybe I should’ve gone with, “Oh, feel free.”

“I hooked up with that guy a few weeks ago. The only reason I did so is because I thought he could be different. He wasn’t.”

So she was looking for a guy who was different. Maybe I could be different.

“What do you mean by different?”

“I’ve just dated a lot of guys and they all treated me the same. They fuck me until they’re done and then they’re gone. Then when I move on they want to shame me for going somewhere else.”

At the time I thought about asking her if she always had sex the first time she met someone. I held it back, though, with the bit of inhibition I had left. “Assholes,” I said.

“Or maybe sweethearts.” She hid her face in her hands for a moment.

I wanted to scoff, to ask her how a guy could be a sweetheart if he treated her that way. Then I really wondered what she meant by different. “Do you want to go on a date sometime?”

“Has anyone ever complimented your timing before?” she asked. She stared at me blankly and I couldn’t tell if she was making fun of me or not. “You got to tell me a few things first.”

“Whatever you want to hear.”

“No. I want the truth.”

“That’s what I meant.”

“Where are you from?”

“A city about an hour away. Chesterville. It’s about twice the size of this place.”

“Have you ever had sex before?”

The blood in my veins ran cold. My brain kept offering up the honest answer, and I knew my hesitation would give it away too.

“It’s okay to say no.”

“I just... I want to, though.”

“Of course you do. Everyone wants to. I wanted to when I first got here.”

I couldn’t believe this conversation was happening. My most guarded and potentially harmful secret, given away to some girl I’d just met. Then again, maybe her honesty was inspiring me. I smiled. “It’s not weird is it?”

“We’re all virgins at some point. Besides I think it’s great.” She touched my arm and a shot of warmth not dissimilar to drinking shot through my midsection. “Maybe it means you’re not just looking for someone to hook up with.”

I twisted the swing chain a little bit. I couldn’t look at her now. Her touch had turned me on and for her to follow up with something like that. I changed subjects. “What year are you?”

“I’m a sophomore.”

“You’ve only been here a year? How many bad experiences can one year possibly have?”

“Don’t ask me that again.” She pulled her arm back. She stared into the street lights. She pouched her hands on her inner thighs and rubbed a toe in the sand.

“Sorry.” I said, but I wasn’t sure if she could hear me.

She lifted the vodka bottle. She drank again. I sat there wondering what to say. Now that I was exposed I felt vulnerable, like all of my confidence was gone. “I can understand if you don’t want to date a virgin.”

“I didn’t say that.” She touched her fingers together. “On a scale of one to ten, how badly would you say you want to lose it?”

This was easily the weirdest conversation I’d ever had with a girl. I didn’t know how to answer that honestly. Was eleven a choice? I felt like I was being tested. But I didn’t owe her the honesty I probably should have provided. We had only just met. I didn’t even know her. For all I knew, she may use me and forget me like the guys had done to her before. “Let’s go with six.”

“Six? Is that all?”

“Well...”

“Ah, there it is. There’s the honesty creeping back in your voice.” She giggled, which just made her all the more attractive to me. “There’s a coffee place at the student union. They have little tables. Maybe we can meet there and talk and figure out what to do. I don’t know about you but. I feel a little too tipsy to make any big decisions tonight.”

She threw the vodka bottle into the sand. I was surprised to see that it was only about half full. We exchanged numbers. "I'll text you about the time," she said.

I watched her walk off down the street. I wondered for a moment if she were nervous about taking a chance on me. She must have lived off that direction, but the way she walked and wandered and held back momentarily to adjust a boot, I wondered if she weren't wanting me to make some bigger display.

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"So all we got to do is find a room that has two spots open. Which is pretty much nowhere. I'm reconsidering the drug planting alternative." Johnny's voice sounded snide over the phone.

"Hey, it's not all that bad." I was lying on my back in my bed. It was raining outside the window, at least from what I could see through the little slip in the parted black curtains. Josh was in his normal position behind his laptop, mouse clicking like a fan slapping against a hand.

"Not that bad? This is horrible. We're supposed to go to college together. Frowny face. Kill self emoticon."

"Drama queen." My phone buzzed against my ear. I looked and it was Jenny's text. She wanted to meet at twelve-thirty. That was about twenty minutes from now. I sat up in bed, "Johnny, I'll call you later."

"Hey, I heard that buzz. Who's texting you?"

I wasn't telling him. "Just another guy from our Chesterville."

"Which guy?"

"Call you later?"

“I’ll not be denied—“ Johnny was saying as I hung up.

I started peering through my clothes for something that wasn’t too laid back but wasn’t too classy either. “It’s just coffee,” I said to myself.

“What’s just coffee?” Josh asked.

“Oh, I got a date with a girl last night. She’s a super hottie.”

“I’m sure I’d disagree.”

“Come on, man, you haven’t even seen her yet. You probably wouldn’t know a hot chick if she slapped you in the face with her tit.” I wondered for a moment what I would get tattooed on my knuckles. I sat on the bed and a phone flew and landed nearby. A little confused, I picked it up and saw that a photo was open. It was of a girl wearing a plaid skirt, and a white button up. Except that the skirt was lifted and the shirt was unbuttoned, leaving her very exposed. “Jeez,” I said. Placing the phone back on his desk.

“That’s what anime club is all about, friend.”

“Well... congrats on your success. I guess.”

“Don’t be jealous, my friend. But don’t think I don’t know a hottie when I see one.”

As I left the building I texted Johnny. “Even that nerd has had more sex than me.”

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The union was brimming with people. They met in various groups and I just sat in front of the coffee shop. It was about twelve-fifty and she hadn’t shown up yet. I checked my phone and hadn’t received any texts. I was avoiding the inevitable text to Johnny. I didn’t want his advice. Dad’s voice continued swimming in my head, “Don’t ever let a woman make a fool out of you.” Well, sorry Pops, here I am.



“Sorry I’m late,” Jenny said from behind me as she sat down. She was wearing a green t-shirt and a pair of shorts that looked nearly identical to the ones from last night. Her brown hair was tucked behind her ears from her sunglasses and her olive skin looked smooth. It was just the most recent evidence of how out of my league she was. “I was a little nervous to show up,” she said.

“I was pretty nervous, too.” I said more into my hands than at her.

“I was thinking, oh my god, I just totally threw him into my own dramatic situation and he was just there, I’m such a horrible person.”

“You’re not a horrible person. If anything that guy. . .”

“Hey, screw him, right?” She laughed to herself for a moment.

But I was hardly hearing her at that moment because I’d made eye contact with Johnny who was approaching the table now. “Oh, God.” I whispered.

“What?” Jenny asked following my gaze.

It was over. I’d lost. Jenny was going to make eye contact with Johnny and fall for his spell. I drank my coffee and Johnny came up, “Hey, man!”

“Hey, Johnny.” I already felt like retreating into my hidey hole. I looked at Johnny and hoped I was communicating how much he should disappear or die or anything else other than hover over me in that way.

“And what’s your name?” That was the exact opposite thing I wanted him to do.

“It’s Jenny. And you’re Johnny. Do you guys know each other or something?”

I had slumped to the back of my chair. Johnny laughed and said, “Well, considering this guy won’t return my calls. I thought we shared something special, bro. But no, you’re just a filthy little heartbreaker.”

I just wanted to know where the nearest noose was. Red in the cheeks, I pushed Johnny's arm off the table. I stood up and dragged him away. "Johnny, you have seriously got to buzz off."

"Woah, chill, cherry pants. That girl is fucking amazing. Where the hell did you find her?"

"Johnny, we can talk later. You have got to go, seriously."

"Whatever, man. You got to chill! Girls don't like an uptight man." He waved to Jenny, then planted a kiss on my cheek, ran a hand over my nuts and left, laughing like a maniac.

I sat back down and Jenny was giving me the strangest look. "What was that all about?"

Mom would've said that honesty is the best policy. I rarely ever listened to my Mom. "Just some guy from my hometown, always buzzing around, always just..."

"Stealing your interests?"

I felt a little bare in front of her. "How did you know?"

"It's pretty easy to sniff them out. I've just seen all types of guys. At least his type of guy. He thinks he can get anything he wants just by barking loud enough. Also he seems to have a strange affection for your crotch."

I laughed. I loved Johnny to death, but she'd read him like an open book. "Well, you know us guys."

"I suppose I do." She readjusted her arms on the table. "So I'm going to be honest I don't exactly date very much. Not that I haven't at all but I don't really know how it works so much."

“I just figured we talk a little bit. Figure out what each other is like see if we connect anywhere or like each other. I mean I think, I haven’t really dated very much either. So I guess, tell me about yourself.”

She leaned her head on her hand and I wondered if I wasn’t boring her. “There’s not much I can say you haven’t already heard. I mean, I came from a small town in Texas where there was nothing to do. It was literally sand and tumbleweeds and the worst type of stereotypical place you can imagine.”

“So I mean, what are your hobbies?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I like music, I like dancing, I like...” she stopped and laughed and then frowned. “I like drinking, you know. I like to party.” Then she looked into my eyes. “I like sex.” She covered her hands again. “I feel so embarrassed. Please, just ignore me. Tell me about yourself.”

I couldn’t think of much so I told her about my hometown, which led to talking about Mom, which inevitably led to talking about Dad. “I think there’s a little part of me that always wanted to impress him. And a part of me that wonders why I even bother trying to win his affection at all. Like, why should I care?” She had been silent ever since I got onto the subject of dads. “What’s your dad like?”

“He’s a guy.” She blinked for a moment. “My dad is like your dad, only no one’s really caught him doing anything. I never really knew my mom. So growing up it was always Dad, but Dad just didn’t know what to do with me.” She crossed her legs and I admired the skin there again, even as I wondered what this history was. “He told me once if I was going to succeed at life it was basically all up to me. He said he didn’t care what I did. Once I was eighteen, I didn’t wait around. And now I’m here.”

“So you don’t really talk with him much?”

“I don’t talk with him at all. And maybe we should switch subjects.” She peered at her phone. “Wow, it’s been an hour.”

“Oh god, I must’ve talked forever.”

“Yeah, but that’s why I asked you out. I wanted to hear you talk.” She switched her posture again and leaned over the table. “Look, Trevor, I like you. I don’t want to mess anything up. So what should we do next?”

“Maybe next we should plan to get dinner.”

“I can do that. Where should we go?”

“I don’t really know the places around here. How about...” and then I remembered a time when Johnny had set-up a date with a girl. “How about you don’t worry about it. Let’s set up a time and I’ll figure it out.”

She smiled showing her teeth a little bit. She wiped hair out of her face revealing an ear which just melted my heart. She was adorable. I wanted to pinch her cheeks. But I had to stay in cool mode. She pulled up her purse. “All right, lover boy. Pick me up at my place around six?”

“Six it is.”

She left me with a smile and I watched her walk off. I had cinched it.

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So I picked an Italian restaurant in town and drove over to her dorm around six. She asked me to come up so I ascended to the third floor on an outside stairwell. I knocked on the door until someone came along and opened the door up for me.

I walked through a commons area that had couches. There I saw three girls sitting in the armchairs and sofas and talking among themselves. “Do any of you know Jenny?”

“Who doesn’t know Jenny?” one of them said and the group all rolled their eyes.

“Which room does she live in?”

“Second door on the right, down that hall.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey, what’s your name?” asked one of them.

“Oh... umm, it’s Trevor.”

“Good luck, Trevor.” They continued talking among themselves and to be entirely honest, I felt weird. How much luck does one guy need to get one girl? I mean, really.

I knocked on Jenny’s door and she opened it up. “Hey,” she looked down the halls on either side. “Come on, get inside.”

She pulled me in a little bit. “Don’t mind if I do,” and I was standing inside her dorm like that. Some gonzo mechanisms activated all over my body. I was instantly nervous, horny, and perspiring. Jenny was standing in front of a vanity and applying dark red lipstick. She rubbed and puckered her lips. “Make yourself at home, lover boy.”

I looked around. It was a solo room, but it was as square as the dorm I lived in. There was a bed and a chair. There were clothes laid out in the chair so I continued standing and watching her in the mirror. Her eye kept floating upwards to look at my reflection behind her. She turned around, “Is something wrong?”

“No. Nothing.”

“Why don’t you sit down?”

“Sure.”

I sat on the bed. I started wondering if I was being awkward. I realized that thinking that definitely meant I was being awkward. This was awkward.

I rubbed my hair back a little bit and looked around the room. There was a stuffed animal, a semi-realistic portrayal of a German Shepard. On the desk there were pictures of Jenny with some younger girl; probably a sister. There was also a black and white picture of a man in a frame. "In loving memory," was scrawled around the edges.

Then there was an odd moment where I realized that, if I played my cards right, this would likely be the place where I lost my virginity. This room with its smell of lavender perfume, within sight of Jenny's family portraits, with the one purple sock in the corner of the room.

She turned around having finished her eye shadow. She walked up to me, her legs and hips swaying as she approached and then she pushed me back on the bed and laughed. "Hey, what's the big idea?" I asked. Then she did something I never expected. She straddled me.

"Oh, I don't know..." she said. "How do I look?"

I was confused. I thought this girl wanted to approach her relationships differently, but I wasn't going to complain either. Something in my head just kept telling me to go with the flow. "You look like a million bucks."

"Am I green?" she asked. "How do I resemble money?"

"Well, I mean you look really fabulous."

"Now we're getting somewhere." She leaned down and rested her hands and chin on my chest and stared at me. "What else?"

“Where are we getting?” She had to feel the erection poking her in the stomach. I wanted to readjust but she just wiggled where she was which only made it harder. I couldn’t stay quiet much longer. “What are you doing?” I asked.

She sat up again. She bit her bottom lip. “I don’t know.” She brushed her hair back. “I just really like you. This is how I am when I like somebody.” She pulled on her fingers, “Do you like me?”

I had to contemplate the question. Not the answer, but why she was asking it in the first place. “I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t like you.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. It was maybe the first instance of a girl my age asking me a question that annoyed me.

“Of course. I mean, you want proof?”

“Well, I’ve got your proof,” she said, and stood up looking down at my crotch.

I sat up feeling incredibly warm. My cheeks were probably red. I felt them with the backs of my hand. Oh yeah, redder than wine. I remember once when my Mom had made fun of how red my cheeks got. Jenny turned around and giggled to herself a little bit, too.

We started to head out. When we left the room Jenny stopped to lock her door.

“Oh hey, do you know those girls over there?” I asked.

“Don’t talk to them.” She turned around and looked at me. “Have you?”

“Well, I asked them where your room was when I got here.”

Jenny sighed and crossed her arms. Her cheeks seemed to droop and her hair wilted around her ears. “Damn,” she said.

“What’s wrong with them?”

“They think they’re better than everybody else here. When the reality is they’re mostly just jealous of me.” Jenny said it the same way my Dad talked about the police.

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As we walked into the restaurant, Jenny was playing with her purse zipper. It was a flat loud zipping sound and set me on edge. The interior of the restaurant was all black wood and dark red walls. The tables had candles on them and the light from overhead was minimal. It looked like the restaurant version of those love cave rides.

We sat down and instead of looking at the menu I just watched Jenny. I was on a date with probably the most attractive girl I’d seen. I just needed to be impressive. The curse of my virginity could be gone forever. No more feeling second rate compared to Johnny. No more being quiet when my dad sent his verbal elbows into my rib cage. No more feeling stuck in a corner by my mom, or anyone.

“What are you looking at?” Jenny asked me. My focus snapped back.

“I just feel like the luckiest guy in the world.”

“Oh well...” she was biting her bottom lip. Her hair fell over one eye again and she rubbed her cheeks a little bit. “Thanks.”

“So,” I scratched the back of my hand, “who was that picture of in your room?”

“The one on my desk?”

“No, the one on your wall. The guy. The in loving memory one.”

“That was my uncle. And the only reason I have that picture is because my grandma sent it to me herself. She was originally going to send it to my dad, but she knew what would have happened there. He’d have destroyed it.”

“Is it his brother?”



“No. It was my mom’s brother. And it was the only connection to my mom that I have left.”

“What was he like?”

Jenny paused. “He was a guy. I mean, he was nice, but he was just like any other. He wasn’t all that different from my dad, but he never acted like he was annoyed when I talked to him. Almost like he wanted me around.”

I didn’t have any uncles. The only guy who really wanted me around was Johnny. “Sounds tough,” I said.

“What’s that?”

“Only having a few reliable role models in your life.”

“Well, I mean, it sounds like you understand. You’ve only had your mom around.”

I thought about my mom, her hard worked feet and hands. She’d gone gray after my dad had arrived back in town. I thought about her jello desserts, her lemon smoothies, her shampoo bottles. “Mom hasn’t always been easy, but I’ve always appreciated her.”

“Now that,” she said, “That must be nice. See, I’ve always had this theory that moms without dads do just fine, but dads without moms got no idea.”

I thought about the times my mom had broken down. The first time I came home inebriated. The first time I told her about my girlfriend. Really, anything to do with girls. I thought about the time she’d slapped me when I told her she wasn’t a good mom, long story. But then I knew that my dad being my only parent would’ve been horrid. “I can’t honestly say.”

“I definitely would’ve preferred a mom.”

I decided now was a good time to take a chance. I reached across the table and grabbed Jenny's hand. She looked at it and blushed. She pulled her hand back. "Oh, don't be cheesy." Then she grabbed my hand again. "Well, not too cheesy."

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On the way back from the restaurant Jenny put her hand on my crotch. "Oh!" I straightened out the car which had veered a little. I had jumped at first. "What's that all about?"

Jenny's warm lips touched my cheeks. There was an impure heat spreading throughout my stomach, like a rush of blood, and I wanted nothing more than to pull the car over and throw her in the backseat. I settled for taking a deep breath. I ran a hand through my hair. She patted me and said, "Just a little reward for now. More where that came from."

"Oh, man." I shook my head.

"You okay?"

"I'm really fucking hot and bothered."

"Didn't mean to bother you."

"Oh, not a bother."

"That's all right, I won't do it again."

I suddenly felt like I was speaking Spanish.

"I really wish you would do it again."

"No, that's all right."

I looked over at her and she had the biggest smile on her face.

As soon as I parked the car I turned towards her and she looked at me and I leaned over and kissed her. I realized halfway through the following make out session that it was really the first time I'd kissed her, and that kiss had turned into a hundred kisses really quick. Sure, it wasn't perfect, we were a little sloppy, I couldn't figure out where to put my hand. It moved from her shoulder, to her neck, to her waist, to her ribs—which just made her laugh a little bit.

I felt the stickiness of her lipstick on me and she giggled a little when we had separated for a moment. “Okay. Do you have a condom?”

I was flabbergasted by the question. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, if you keep kissing me I might just have to take you for a ride.”

“I didn't think we'd be having sex,” I said. “I don't have a condom or anything.”

“Don't worry. I've got some. In my room. But first here,” she handed me a tissue from her purse. “Wipe off the lipstick. I really don't want those bitches from my floor to see you like that with me.”

I realized while I was wiping at my cheeks that they looked like they'd been set on fire. “What's their deal anyway? Can't they mind their own business?”

Jenny paused for a moment. “Let's go.”

She got out and I followed her. The anticipation was absolutely killing me. It was like my body had dumped bottles of nail polish into my stomach. I wanted to vomit. I wanted to fuck. I wanted to tear off every item of clothing separating me from Jenny's body. I was so, so, so ready.

We walked into the hallway and Jenny's walk was slaughtering me the whole way. Her hips gyrating back and forth, I could practically hear the grinding of her bones

against each other. I could have prayed. She opened her door. I saw the owl eyes of the “bitches” spying us from down the hallway. I stepped inside and closed the door.

“The upper right drawer. That’s where the condoms are. I’m going to step into the bathroom a moment and be right out.”

I sat on Jenny’s bed and reached over. A few minutes had gone by since our make out session in the car had ended and I found that my thoughts were coming back to me in waves. Nervousness struck first, especially when I looked at the little plastic packages of condoms. Were brand names important? And, man, there were quite a few here. How much sex does this girl have? I both couldn’t and wanted to stop thinking.

I looked up at the picture of her Uncle. The eyes of a dead man peered into my soul and the nervousness gave way to peevishness. My breath must have smelled like pasta. Jenny’s had actually tasted like marinara. I plucked out a condom and hoped it would work. I thought about asking Jenny to tell me how it worked. I was about to show someone my penis, my wrinkly old man, my walking cane. Should I have a name for it? Should I just whip it out like a magician and say “voila?” I didn’t know. I didn’t know how any of this worked and my chest was tightening every second until my breathing became shallow.

Then Jenny reappeared. She walked over and sat on the bed. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m fine.” I said. I wasn’t sure if I was going to have a heart attack first or not. Jenny kissed my cheek. I wanted to say something, but I didn’t know what to say. I could hardly even bring myself to look at Jenny.

“Do you want to help me out of these clothes?” she asked. I looked over at her. I placed my hands on her waist and kissed her. The cloth of her shirt felt magnetic. I lifted the shirt up and kissed her belly. Then I lifted the shirt over her head and dropped it to the floor. She stood up and pulled down her jeans.

I laughed a little awkwardly and it made Jenny snort a bit. We both looked at each other through our fingers. “Oh god,” I said.

Jenny’s face was the same deep red of her panties. “Now the bra,” she said.

I leaned back and played with the mechanism. “I haven’t done this very much so, you know... don’t make fun of me.”

“I’ll get you started,” she said, and reached back. It was a double-hook, and I played with the last hook until it slipped away. I think I looked at the bra on the floor for a moment and only then looked up.

There they were. Jenny’s breasts made the moment real for me in a way that nothing else had so far. This girl was genuinely going to let me have sex with her. I closed my eyes and laughed, “Oh, thank you.”

“Thank you?” Jenny laughed. “What are you talking about?”

“I just I...”

“On second thought, just keep it to yourself.”

I could do that. We lay back on the bed and we started kissing again and then the motion all became like fast forward. Soon Jenny was naked and I was naked. And I was between her legs on top of her and she reminded me about the condom. I sat back and looked at her body. There were rays of moonlight revealing her body in stripes of light. Then I rolled the condom on and then she grabbed me and led me to her.

There was a shock of realization that this was actually happening. Jenny grabbed me around my neck. My mind raced through thoughts and passion and experience. This was great. But why was I here? I thought about the girls out in the hallway. Jenny had a reputation. And why? Was it deserved? There was a phrase echoing in my head that Clint had said to Jenny, “What is this the fourth fucking guy this week?”

The last thing I expected to happen was that Jenny would start crying. I stopped and pulled out, pausing only slightly to wonder if it counted as me losing my virginity if I didn't finish. “What's wrong?”

She sighed. “I didn't want to do this.”

I stood there awkwardly holding a limp dick. I pulled myself up next to her. “Why not? Is it because of what Clint said?”

She sobbed a little when I mentioned his name. There was a snake of meanness in me that wanted to ask her how she could get half way through sex only to stop and start crying. I heard my Dad's voice in my head, hurling insults and calling her filthy names and finishing the job anyway. I heard Johnny's voice talking about how much of a bummer this was. But I wanted to focus on her. “Jenny, look, I really like you. I don't care about sex. I just want to make you feel good.”

“You want to know something? Clint was right about me. Those girls, they're right about me, too.” She got up and pulled a shirt on over her head. I followed her, pulling on my pants. I walked over to her. “When I got here my freshman year, I met a guy. He was nice, he made me feel important, like he really cared about me.” She turned around poked me in the chest, “I was a virgin, just like you.” She had tears in the corner of her eyes and periodically wiped at them. “And I gave that to him. Even though he was

more experienced than me. I even ignored the whispers heard about him. I was in love with him. I felt so incredibly swept up in him in that feeling in desiring and being desired that I allowed myself to be hurt.

“When he left, I had nothing. I felt like nothing. But I wanted that again. I couldn’t find anyone I liked, though. They all seemed like him. The only thing I could do to keep a guy around was have sex with him and even that didn’t work. They all left. And now, I meet someone who is actually different, someone who maybe I actually like, who maybe actually likes me, and what do I do?”

I couldn’t say anything. If we’d been on more than one date, maybe I could’ve said something about her. “That’s not true,” I said, but didn’t know what to add to it.

“Tell me one thing that you like about me.”

“You’re smart.”

“No, I’m not. If I was smart maybe I wouldn’t fuck every guy on the first date.”

“That doesn’t mean you aren’t smart.”

“Sure it does. That’s not... I don’t even study, I hardly do at college what you’re supposed to do at college. And if you knew me you’d know that. You don’t know me. And your pants were off minutes ago, we were having sex. And we don’t even know each other.” She sighed and pressed her hands to her temple. “Please leave, I’m completely disgusted with myself.”

“Please, Jenny, don’t throw me out.”

“Please,” she looked at me. “I don’t want you here right now.”

I just looked at her figure. I didn't know what was up with her. Then I realized how alien she really was to me, no matter where I'd been moments ago. I gathered up my clothes and got dressed. "I'll be in touch," I said. She didn't reply.

As I left, I passed by the girls in the common room. They all giggled when they saw me. I thought about making a scene, about telling them how useless and insulting they were. The only thing that stopped me from doing so were Jenny's words. "They're right about me." And I had no evidence to argue against it.

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When I got back to my room, Johnny was waiting outside. I saw two sheets of paper in his hand. "Room changes, man." He waved the papers in the air and I just blew my breath out and walked past him. I opened the door and he followed me inside. "Hey, you all right, man?"

I put my hands on my hips. My roommate was zoned in on his laptop as usual. I turned to Johnny who looked concerned. "Look, Johnny, I'm going to be straight up with you," I rubbed the back of my head and found I couldn't look at him. "I don't want to be roommates with you. I'm sick of the parties. I'm sick of the games. I'm sick of feeling inferior to you everywhere we go. I just hate myself for not being like you. And that feeling has probably just resulted in the worst experience in my life just a while ago, so you are literally the last person I want to see right now."

Johnny nodded. "I just want to thank you for the straight up honesty after giving me the run around for months." His foot tapped on the floor. "I always thought you were different."

"Yeah, you're the second person to tell me that tonight."



“It’s funny that you say you always wished you could be me. Because I always wished I could be a bit more like you. I mean, maybe your mom and dad are fucked up, but you always seemed to have it figured out. But this, now I really don’t know what to think about you.” He rubbed his eyes. “But, fuck it, man. Whatev.” Johnny left the room and I sat on my bed listening to his footsteps down the hallway.

I looked over at my roommate. The glare of the laptop was in his eyes. “Am I just a fucking life ender?” I asked.

He lifted up one side of the headphones. “What?”

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That weekend I decided to go back home. Just a visit. I called and told my mom. “Of course, honey, anything you need.” When I got home she could tell something was up. “What’s wrong? Is something bugging you?” When I didn’t answer her direct questions that’s when she’d start prying with indirect questions. “How’s Johnny? Make any new friends? Any girls?”

I think my mom moonlights as a psychic. I waited a day and then went out to the back porch where she sat in a lawn chair smoking. “You’re not going like what I have to tell you.”

She sighed out nothing but smoke. I sat back and told her what had happened, everything since I’d left her home. She didn’t say anything through the whole story. Then when I finished she sighed more. “Mad doesn’t even cut it, Trevor James.”

I felt the prickly pressure of being a child with an angry parent. Her looks were like sharp water passing over me like bladed waves. “I’m sorry,” I said.

“I’m sorry, too. Do you like this Jenny girl?”

“I have no idea who she is.”

“My mother told me something once when she was mad at me for being with your father. She said, ‘It seems the past has a way of repeating itself right under our better intentions,’ and I think she nailed it on the head.” Then my mom hugged me. I never thought in a million years that telling my mom I’d directly disappointed one of her hopes for me would end in the most comforting hug in the world. “Sex complicates everything. I was just a girl when I had you, alone and strange in a world with no one to help. And I blamed your father. I don’t want you to be like him.”

“I don’t want to be like him, either.” It may have been the first time I’d said it aloud to anyone. “He’s gross, Mom. I don’t even like visiting him. I told him on the way down that he could call me whenever, but I don’t think I want to pick up.”

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

I stared through our chain link fences to the backyards around us. “What do you think I should do about Jenny?”

“You got to decide if she’s worth it or not, I expect. And then move on from there.”

“Johnny?”

“Same thing.”

I breathed out and placed a hand on my face. I laid my head on my Mom’s shoulders.

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The first thing I did when I woke up was text Jenny. I told her I wanted to meet for coffee and that I just wanted to talk. I also texted Johnny and said I was a shit best friend for what I had done and said.

As I drove back past tall trees and hills and a gray sky, I thought of what I could say to Jenny. That her past was an unimportant weight on an unknown future. That I wanted to get to know her better before we ended up in that situation again. That if she wanted someone she could cling on when she was upset, or hurt, or bullied by anyone, that even if I wasn't big, if I wasn't strong, if I felt self-conscious about my own life, I could be there for her. I just needed to know who she was.

I waited at the same table in the union drinking the same type of coffee as before. I saw her when she arrived, dressed very differently than last time. She wore her sunglasses and her hair was a bit messy. Her t-shirt was too big for her. Her pants looked like they'd been slept in. "Hey," she said. She took off her sunglasses and had deep bags under her eyes. "I've got a bit of a hangover. Can I have some of that?" she pointed to my coffee.

"Sure." I scooted the cup over to her and she drank from it slow and deep. "I'm sure you're wondering why I asked you out here."

"No," she said. "Not really. It's pretty typical, actually."

"Well, I just wanted to tell you that I'm sorry about what happened the other night. But I think you're a worthwhile girl. I liked our date. And I know I don't know much about you but, I want to. I want to try with you for real. I want to have sex too, but we shouldn't rush it like that."

She coughed a little bit into her hand, which turned into laughing. “Know what your problem is?” she asked. “You just ramble. You have no idea what you’re talking about.” I stayed silent while she just narrowed her eyes at me. “I know everything I’ll ever need to about you, Trevor. You aren’t different than any other guy here. And what could you possibly want to know about me? Nothing I ever tell you is going to change what you think about me or what happened between us.”

“I don’t want to change anything. I just thought maybe we could give it a real try.”

“I did give you a real try. I don’t know any other way of trying. And I don’t need to learn another one from you.” She grabbed up her purse and leaned in as she passed by me. “Congratulations on losing your virginity.” She ran a hand through her hair as she walked off, her flip flops clicking against her heels. It no longer felt like everyone in the room watched her go and that made me sad.

The single hottest girl I’d ever met, the woman who’d taken my virginity, and someone entirely unreachable. I finished my coffee and tossed it in a trash can, and wished I could jump in with it.

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When I got back to my room, the laptop and black curtain were gone. My roommate was gone. In his place was Johnny. He sat on the bed and shrugged when I came in. “I had no choice once you wouldn’t move in with me willingly. That guy was perfectly happy to sign the other form I had with me, in case of emergency, which included swapping rooms with someone.” There was a black line of tape down the

middle of the floor. “I think you know how this one works. Also I have little baggies of dish soap that I can plant on your person at any time, so don’t fuck with me.”

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to explode with anger first or just tell him I was sorry. “I’m angry that you went behind my back. And entirely sorry about what I said the other night.”

“I knew you’d probably say something like that.”

“I was worried if we had to be together all the time that the things I wanted, you know, focus, girls, wouldn’t happen. And I was silly to think that I couldn’t talk to you about that.”

“Damn straight.”

“So, I’m a big pussy who should’ve been better.”

“Gigantic pussy, I insist on the adjective.”

“Speaking of which,” I said.

“That girl? Didn’t turn out so well?”

I guess I felt like I was at a final moment of saying something. Johnny didn’t know that I’d lost my virginity. And I could tell him or not. I looked at my feet. “I got to get rid of this virginity man.”

“Shot you down, huh?”

“Let’s just say that she wanted me to be something I couldn’t, didn’t know how.”

“You know what, fuck it man. I know about this party and it is the day before first classes so, what do you say? One more party? One more keg stand for this old duo. And some super hot chick, ten times hotter than that Jenny girl.”

I tried to imagine what that could be like but couldn't. "Bro, if you could find someone like that, I'd consider it."

## Smoke

Azalea bit her fingernails in Doctor Green's office. She bit her nail from her finger and turned her head to spit it to the side. Dan grabbed her shoulder and said her name. She crossed her hands, making sure to fit her bitten nail under the palm of the other hand. Her legs were crossed as well. Doctor Green repeated the last thing he'd said. "Dawn's illness has reached a terminal stage. There is nothing more we can do."

"We heard you the first time," she said. Her husband hadn't removed his hand from her shoulder. She shrugged as if removing a fly.

Green cleared his throat. "We can continue giving her medicine to help with the pain. But it is important that you prepare yourselves for what will happen."

"I'm sorry," Azalea said, rubbing her temples and leaning forward. "Are you telling us we can't do anything about this?"

Green stared at her from across his desk. His polished pine desk. To his left, on the wall, she could see his useless family photo with his two healthy children and his useless Harvard degree. They matched his stupid, useless face that wouldn't betray any sympathy for Azalea or Dan or any other pair of parents that were going to lose a child under his care.

Azalea bit her fingernails.

"We have services for these sort of things. Grief counselors can be made available to you. They can even talk to the girl."

"Why would my daughter..." Azalea interrupted. "Need grief counselors?"

“Because she’s going to die.” The doctor stared at Azalea over the black rims of his glasses.

“She doesn’t know that.”

She could feel Dan watching her, but didn’t care. She wasn’t going to be quiet. She wasn’t going to calm down. She wasn’t going to squeeze his hand and pretend that everything would be okay.

“This is a tough process,” Green said “but—“

“No buts, doctor. My daughter is going to die. But she doesn’t need to know that in order to do so.”

“Is it important that she know?” Dan asked.

For the first time in the six months that Azalea had known Green he looked visibly disturbed, having leaned all the way back in his chair, gripping both arm rests. “Are we discussing the idea of not telling your daughter that she is going to die?”

“Not the idea. I am not telling my daughter she is going to die. How would that help her? She is going to die regardless. Do you know that she still tells our son she can’t wait until she gets to go back to school? How could I take that sort of thing away from her? Especially in the face of... in the face of...”

Dan stood and pulled her in close to him. As if that’s what she wanted. She cried a little into Dan’s stomach, which had grown steadily throughout their marriage into what was now a grief pillow. As if she wanted to be held by a man who’d given her a sickly daughter. As if she wanted to be reminded that she was breaking down in the doctor’s office at the idea of having to tell their daughter she would never go back to school. After three years of being sick at home, she would never get to see the friends she missed.



“If I were your daughter, Mrs. Fields, I would want to know.” He stood and left them in the office.

“Don’t let him tell her.” Azalea said to Dan. He let her go. “I don’t want her to know. Isn’t that my choice?”

“Shh, hey, sweetheart, shh.”

Why did men always tell her to hush when she was upset? She wanted to express herself without being treated like an annoying puppy. “I’m not going to be quiet. This is our daughter. I don’t want these doctors or nurses, or you, for that matter, to tell her.”

“I won’t. They won’t. They shouldn’t.”

“Then go stop him.”

“Good idea.”

Dan left and Azalea was alone in the doctor’s office. She took a deep breath and covered her eyes. She didn’t want to see his pictures, his degree, or his books. She looked again at the picture of his family then stood and took it off the wall. She put his family down on his desk next to his computer which had open a program containing Dawn’s medical information.

She wanted to take everything in the office and burn it. The degrees with the words “distinguished award” written in golden plaque lettering. The books that contained on-the-dot information of deadly diseases and their symptoms, but not one word about their cures. The computer with the information about the details of Dawn’s medical life now to be held forever as some sort of horrible record. Azalea stared headlong out the window and thought about throwing the office chair out. She imagined it tumbling

through the air and bouncing off the doctor's Ford Tundra. She could hear the alarm, like the piercing veil of screaming angels rising from the earth.

She would've prayed if she thought anyone would hear her. She'd prayed enough already—every night for the past three years—as her daughter was sapped of her energy by simple acts: going to the restroom for a vomiting session, eating a bowl of oatmeal that made her jaws cramp, writing how she felt in her journal, telling Azalea about the soap operas she watched in her room. Each minor thing making her more breathless, more sleepy.

Azalea wanted Dawn next to her. She wanted to hold her so tight she couldn't go anywhere. What if she ran out of energy on the way to heaven? What if the afterlife was just reliving your death again and again?

If she was going to die, why not just push her off a cliff? Dawn was just going to get sicker. Sick enough that she couldn't leave the house or bed at all. Sick to the point she couldn't breathe properly. Sick to the point that she would need Dan, her brother, and Azalea herself to lean down and breathe right into her and that breath would hit her lungs and stagnate and never be absorbed because it would be a skeletal breath.

Azalea couldn't breathe into her daughter. She was sobbing too hard now to even breathe herself. Dan opened the door and she caught her breath immediately. The oxygen rushing into her body refused to inflate her. She was guided away from the window towards a chair by Dan, who started crying himself, and they crumpled on the floor of the doctor's office.

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Azalea knew she was going to have to go into the hospital room eventually. Room number 532. Five-three-two. Five-thirty-two. She tried to find meaning in the number, something else to be mad about, some sort of fateful connection like you found in almost every book or TV show. She wondered if the hospital had a room 666. She couldn't imagine any hospital having a room 666. People would want their loved ones moved immediately. Even if they weren't superstitious, everyone had a point where they weren't willing to bet on logic versus fate.

She knew there was only one thing that had power over people; germs. Germs were all around. Azalea examined the dark lines beneath her jagged finger nails. What deadly disease lurked in that grease-colored grime she'd collected from scraping at the dirt on every door knob?

She stared at her daughter's door and walked away to the smoker's balcony. She pulled a cigarette out and stared at it. She would've laughed at herself, blown it off. Staring at her own fingernails and thinking about disease and fear and death and here she was going to suck on some little white stick. She was going to use it to "de-stress," the same way some use the drink, or self-harm, or harming others.

She dropped the cigarette over the edge of the balcony then slammed the pack down on top of the trash can and stepped back inside. A moment later she returned muttering something about a waste of money and lit a cigarette and smoked it full on until it was just an orange nub. Then to make up for dropping the other one, she smoked a second and went back inside.

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Azalea stepped into the hospital room. The curtains were drawn and the outlines of the room were shaded. The TV cast a white glare across the floor and onto the bed. Dawn was sitting up in bed. Her hair was almost flat against the rounded shape of her head. She was fourteen but her illness had robbed her of her natural growth so that she was shorter than she should have been and skinnier than she should have been—though Azalea knew she herself had been quite skinny at Dawn's age. The edge of Dawn's lips were decorated with a deeper pink, a fleeting sign of womanhood. There were freckles on her cheeks and temples, a sprinkle of freckles here and a sprinkle of freckles there. From helping Dawn bathe, Azalea knew there were freckles on her shoulder blades, her under arm pits, the insides of both knees, and the top of one toe. She got them from Dan whose toes also featured several little red-orange dots.

On the bed was a tray of mashed potatoes, chicken, macaroni and cheese, red jello—a designation Azalea had spent days straightening out with the nurses; Dawn hated green jello—and mandarin oranges. She had eaten one mandarin orange. Azalea could still see the hollow where it had been. The bones of her arms almost visible through her skin, fingered at the handle of her fork and stared at the food. Azalea wondered where Dan was. Maybe he'd found the doctor and they were having a good stern heart to heart.

“How are your pillows?” Azalea asked.

“Fine.”

“The one on your back is flat, let me fluff it.”

Azalea pulled the pillow out and imagined shoving it over Dawn's face. She imagined how weak Dawn's fight against her would be at this stage. Her skinny arms

flailing at first, maybe grabbing Azalea's hair, her little freckled hand grasping Azalea's wrist, each action slow, uncoordinated, and like a child of much younger age.

"What did old Docky Green have to say?" Dawn asked.

"Could you please not call him Docky? It's not funny."

"I think it is."

"He didn't say much. We need to increase the dosage on your meds."

"Just what we need, more medicine."

"You've been talking to your aunt too much."

Dawn rolled her eyes and focused on the TV again. Another soap opera was on, but they'd all run together in Azalea's head. She couldn't tell the difference between the bitchy blonde and the bitchy brunette. And every attractive guy looked like—what's his face? From Days of Our Lives?—to her. "Did he say when I was going to get better?"

"Dawn. . ."

"It's been a while, I know, since anyone said anything about getting better, but you said that as long as we listen to the doctor I'll get better."

"Please," Azalea leaned over and stared into Dawn's face, "Enough of this. He didn't talk about you getting better. All we can do is keep taking the medication and keep you healthy."

"I hate being in bed all day."

"I know." Azalea pulled Dawn's head against her and kissed her forehead. She could feel Dawn resisting the pull, but not having enough strength to do much about it. Azalea sighed. She couldn't cry here. She couldn't let Dawn know. She had to keep it together. There was a knock on the door. "Who is it now?"

A nurse came inside. “Just checking vitals.” As she walked around the machines Azalea stood there with her arms crossed. The nurse smiled at Dawn who smiled back. “I bet you’re glad.”

“Why?”

“Oh, you’re going to be released tomorrow. You get to go home.”

Dawn turned her head to Azalea. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Azalea barely heard her. The nurse had said “released.” She’d said, “Go home.”

The nurse turned back to the machines and left when she was finished, flashing a look of sympathy at Azalea.

“I have to use the restroom.” Azalea said, and stepped to the door. “You can turn up the TV if you like.”

“It’s fine, Mom.”

“Right.”

Azalea sat on the toilet and felt the tears clinging to her chin. She hoped that Dawn couldn’t hear her if she ended up sobbing. She tried to keep quiet, her body shaking in odd places, her inner thigh, her left bicep, her third toe. She blew her nose into some tissues and just wished she would stop, that time would stop, that sickness and death could just call it off for a moment, sit back with a drink and forget about everything for a while. She needed to smoke again.

She heard the room door open without a knock. Someone’s heavy footsteps echoed across the floor. Azalea stared at the bathroom door and thought someone was going to come in. “Dawn,” said Doctor Green. Azalea felt like she could kick down the door and literally bite the doctor’s ear off. “Just double checking some vitals.” Bullshit!

He was there to tell Dawn she was going to die. He was there specifically to defy Azalea. The tears dried up immediately. Azalea wiped her face with a tissue paper opened the door.

“Ah, Mrs. Fields.”

“Did you need to tell us anything, doctor?” She crossed her arms and leaned against the doorway.

“Nothing serious.” He stopped looking at Azalea and seemed to focus on the heart rate monitor. He ran his finger along some of the tubes. “You should be able to go home very soon Dawn. We’re going to keep you here one more night.”

“Why?” Azalea asked.

“I think Dawn is exhausted.” He readjusted his glasses and rubbed his eyes. “I think perhaps if Dawn had a chance to rest without stressed parents around it would do her some good.”

Azalea imagined the sound his glasses would make if she slapped him hard enough to make them crash into the wall. “May I speak with you in the hallway?”

“Mom. . .”

“Dawn, not right now.”

Dawn looked back and forth between them. “What is going on?”

“Nothing is going on. The doctor and I just need to speak privately for a moment.”

“Let’s speak, then.” Doctor Green said, tucking a clipboard under his arm and stepping outside.

“Mom, you’re really scaring me.” Dawn said, straightening herself and holding her arms.

Azalea watched the pulse rate on the heart machine raise. “Hey, sweetie, look at me.”

Dawn looked up at her with eyes that seemed to belong to an infant. The same infant that Azalea remembered bringing into the world. She remembered how the pink thing had stared at her for the first time, how she had grabbed it and kissed its forehead, its nose, its hands. When she breastfed her for the first time, her first born, it was a pain so satisfying and exciting. For months Azalea had loved her, every little bit of her, and it was there, when she was nourishing Dawn, that she felt like her daughter was another limb, another organ, something inseparably her and her own that the two were a synchronized being and essence. She was her Dawn, who was born at midnight. Her Dawn, who had seen her final afternoons. Her Dawn who was going to approach the horizon unwillingly and settle in the dust of the Earth.

Azalea kissed Dawn’s face. “I’m going to be right back. I promise.” They squeezed hands and Azalea walked to the door.

Doctor Green was standing in the hallway outside. He leaned against the wall and twirled a pen in his fingers. “Just who do you think you are?” Azalea asked. “You think you can just sneak in and tell her somehow? Or that you’re really going to send me home while she stays here so you can just pick a convenient time? I am her mother. I gave birth to her. I raised her. I treated her for two years before anyone even mentioned bringing her to you. And now you think you can disrespect my wishes? It’s my choice.”



Doctor Green replaced the pen on the clipboard. “Mrs. Fields, I want to make something clear. I believe—well, really, I know—that it is unethical not to tell your daughter she is terminal. My responsibility as a doctor is to ensure that she can die in peace. Do you not realize what’s going to happen over the next few months? What are you going to do when she starts asking why her body is giving out and you aren’t rushing her to the hospital? What are you going to tell her when the medicine stops working?”

“I’ve been with patients in this hospital time and time again. I don’t want to know what sort of pain she’d feel when she figures out that Mommy knew she was going to die and didn’t tell her.”

Azalea was speechless. She wanted to throw the clipboard over the nurse’s station. She wanted to clench his hand and claw it with her nails. She wanted to be sarcastic and call him “big man” or “Docky Green” or “smart ass” or “know-it-all.” Before she could settle on anything, he straightened his glasses. “Excuse me, Mrs. Fields. I’ve got other patients to attend to right now.”

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They had stayed for the night. Dan was beginning to doze in an armchair next to Dawn’s bed. Dawn had been sleeping as she always had with no visible difference. She slept often throughout the day and Azalea had kept both bedroom doors open so that she could hear her daughter breathe. Azalea wondered how they knew she was going to die, how they were so sure. Hadn’t there been some little girl, some poor thing, that she’d read about in the local news, who had no chance of survival and yet miraculously recovered?

Dan snored in the chair. His snores were never loud, never upsetting or interruptive. For the longest time Azalea had found it cute, it was his own nasal noise, almost flutelike. She stared at Dan and wished that she could sleep like that. Then she wondered how on earth he could possibly snore in these circumstances. She'd stare out the window and watch a plane pass overhead, its wing lights flashing blue and red like an ambulance; distant emergencies coming to fruition.

She opened her pack. It was empty. If their son had accompanied them, he'd complain about the way her clothes smelled. She thought about what Dawn had said about her Aunt, and suddenly wished she had gotten someone other than her own sister to watch the boy. But what other options did she have? Dan's jobs didn't afford enough for them to keep a babysitter. Azalea hadn't been working ever since Dawn couldn't leave home.

She worried about what would happen when Dawn passed. She had been sick for three years. Her sickness had changed everything. Dan wouldn't have to work two jobs, but Azalea didn't know if she could work. How long was it appropriate to wait, after a child dies, to go back to working? And wouldn't she rather just raise her son full-time so that if he ever died she wouldn't have to regret every second she didn't spend with him?

She didn't even know if Dan and she were in a good place anymore. He worked eighty hours a week and slept fifty six. They hadn't done anything beyond fuck in months. She imagined what it would be like to strangle Dan. Then she could strangle Dawn, too. She recognized the shadow of Dan in Dawn's name. Had they done that on purpose? She couldn't remember now. She wondered how Dan wasn't feeling sadder

than he was, sadder than she was. His daughter, his baby girl, was dying and taking his name to the grave.

She imagined what the pulpy fat around Dan's neck would feel like on her fingers, the sweat greased slick on her hands, glossing her fingernails on it, and the sound he'd make as he realized he couldn't breathe and the look in his eyes when he saw her refusing to let go. He wouldn't be surprised. He had always thought she was a mean nasty bitch. It was his favorite thing to say when he was fucking her on the sofa after they watched a shitty comedy movie they rented. He used sex to get his frustrations out against her, often pulled her hair, or bit her ears and neck. She could imagine doing these things back to him, biting him until he bled, until she had to turn to the side and spit the flesh out on the ground, and saying, "How mean and nasty am I now?"

Dan stirred. He opened his eyes. "I thought you'd be asleep by now," he said.

"I can't sleep. I keep thinking I'm going to wake up and she's going to be gone."

"Get some sleep, sweetheart."

Sweetheart. As if he was in any position to call her that. As if he cared. "Where do you get off?" she asked.

Dan shook his head and closed his eyes again readjusting and smacking his lips a little. He always smacked his lips when she'd said something that pissed him off. She kept looking out the window. "I just feel like everyone has already given up on her."

Dan sighed and sat up. "I'm going to go smoke. Want to join me?"

"You can't. We're out of cigarettes."

"Shit." He sat back down and rubbed his eyes. "Goddamn it. Maybe one of the nurses around here has some."

“Just give me the keys, there’s a store right down the road.”

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She hadn’t realized how long she’d gone without sleep until she started driving the car. She hadn’t felt so foggy and delayed since college. She stopped at an all-day convenience store and stepped inside. There was one teenager behind the counter watching something on his phone. He didn’t even look up at her. She saw the display of a security camera overhead.

She was here to get cigarettes. She remembered telling her son that Dawn didn’t have cancer, but that cancer was something that made people really sick. She’d told him that so he’d think about it in the future when someone inevitably offered him a cigarette. She wanted it to seem nasty and awful. Now he just watched her when she smoked and asked if she wanted to end up sick like Dawn.

Couldn’t she have just one thing? One little habit that was her own? She wanted to feel that warmth between her mouth and sinus. She wanted to taste the smokiness of her own breath. She had started smoking before her children, but after them felt like she couldn’t live without it. It was a good way to take a break, to take a walk outside, to have some “me” time. Maybe it was unhealthy, but wasn’t foregoing those breaks just as unhealthy?

She had never felt so confronted with her own bullshit. She looked at the display of cigarettes behind the counter. The various boxes, white and squared, non-threatening. So what if it killed her? She was just going to die somehow. Dawn was just going to die somehow. Her son was just going to die somehow. Dan was just going to die somehow. This teenager with his dumb face—why did he think that lip ring looked cool, anyway?—

and his stupid phone was going to die somehow. She just wanted to enjoy it a little bit, a little longer. Hadn't she earned it?

She was wiping away tears when she asked for the cigarettes. "Are you okay, ma'am?" the teenager asked.

"No, but there's not anything you can do about it."

He rung her up and she left. She smoked a cigarette on the way back to the hospital and felt better.

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Dan was standing in the hallway outside the room when she got back. "Get the smokes?"

"Here."

He took one and tucked it between his lips. "Thanks."

She wanted to slap him and watch the cigarette tumble to the floor. She wanted to laugh in his face. She wanted him to look at her with disgust as he walked to the smoker balcony. She wanted to think about anything other than going back in that room alone.

"Want to smoke with me?" Dan asked.

"I think I'll try to get some sleep." She was feeling very winded, as if she had just jogged a mile. Dan just walked off without saying anything. It wasn't like it was strange for him to do so, but it got to Azalea a little bit. He didn't want to convince her or change her mind, had maybe given up hope that he could.

"Mrs. Fields?"

She turned around and saw Doctor Green, now wearing a blue t-shirt. He had arms that he'd clearly worked on, the chiseled bicep muscle showing itself easily. He

stayed in shape, probably drank a smoothie with wheatgrass in the mornings, something fruity enough—strawberry, kiwi—to make him strong and healthy. He would probably live for a long time. Azalea wanted to slam back three big macs, or cut to the chase and jump off the roof of the hospital. “I don’t want to talk to you.”

“I know that you don’t think so, but I can help you.” She closed her eyes and turned her back to him. He reached out a hand and touched her shoulder. “I want to emphasize the word help. I’m not going through it myself but it is part of my profession to help with situations like this.” She looked away from him. “We can’t let this sit.”

She felt tired and sleepy. She realized he looked like one of those soap opera characters her daughter watched on TV. Is that what her life had become? How much trouble had she been giving Doctor Green? His hair was matted and his eyes had bags under them. Had she done that? Was he awake because he was thinking about her and Dawn? “Okay. I’ll listen to what you have to say.”

He led her to an elevator. “I think we should change the environment a little bit. It should help you relax.” They went to a courtyard where a fountain sat in between a few benches. Cigarette butts littered the pebbly rock beds. The walls of the hospital stretched up around them, but a segment of the sky was visible above.

They sat on a bench facing each other. He ran a hand through his hair. “I do not know what it’s like to lose a child. I hardly even know what it feels like to be sick. I was a healthy child and my mom never had to worry over me. I’m saying this so you understand where I personally come from. I need your help to help you.”

She pulled a cigarette from her pack. It was sweet of him to give her the power but it was so obvious to her. “Do you mind?” she asked, holding up the cigarette.

“Go ahead.”

She lit the cigarette and made sure to blow the smoke away from him.

“I’ve been treating Dawn for a while. I didn’t want things to turn out this way either. She’s a happy young girl and very optimistic. Medicine is our best bet against nature but it didn’t work for her. She has hardly gotten any chance at life.” He kept pausing between sentences. It was getting annoying to Azalea, but she also imagined he was giving her a chance to speak, to react if she needed to. As if she was supposed to cry, to respond, to say something. Hadn’t she taken those opportunities before?

“If I were you, I wouldn’t want to tell her, either. I don’t want to deliver bad news. I became a doctor so I could greet someone’s family and tell them how great a success our treatment was, that everything is going to be fine that their grandpa, grandma, cousin, sister, child is going to live comfortably for the rest of eternity. We took them in with this great chaotic fucking mess and we did everything we could. And I don’t get to do that this time. I have to tell you, and Dan, and Dawn that our best wasn’t anything.”

Azalea figured if she could just focus on that little burning cherry that maybe, just maybe, she could keep herself composed. What was this confession to her? It wasn’t like she could forgive him for not helping her daughter stay alive.

The day Azalea had learned she was pregnant she was overjoyed. She felt like she’d done nothing to deserve such a thing. This angel that was now growing within her was not just a thing she had made, she would be just as much a part of Azalea as its own entity.

And now she was gone.

Azalea dropped her cigarette, half-smoked, to the ground and stomped it out.

“I’m going to go back to Dawn’s room.” She stood up. “Thank you for everything Doctor Green.”

As she made her way back up she felt like a stranger in the halls. They all seemed the same, white washed. Each wall felt like it was leading her nowhere. She ghosted along for a while until she found a room number that seemed familiar. Was she that tired, or was it something else?

She hoped partly that she could open the door to Dawn’s room and the light would be bright overhead. Dawn would be awake and her skin tone would have returned to normal. Her eyes would be brighter than they’d been in years. She’d be breathing easily. She would be tied to no machines. Maybe she would be eleven again, as she had been when the disease had started. Or maybe she’d be seventeen and radiantly beautiful. There would be balloons, a bouquet, or something festive. Or maybe she’d be a little girl again, and they could crawl on their hands and knees and hug each other. Azalea could wrap her adult body around her baby girl and enclose her again in her heat and protection, her warmth and her body, her love and her wishes. She wanted to kiss Dawn’s forehead and Dawn would say, “Surprise, mommy.”

She opened the door and found no lights. It was just Dawn’s sleepy breaths in a dark room. She stepped inside, fearing neither the darkness nor the going of the light. She closed the door behind herself. She navigated next to Dawn and sat all night listening to her breathe.



## The Red Ball

Jim arrived at his cubical that morning without breaking routine. He woke up at six-thirty, brushed, showered, drank his coffee, ate a bag of Little Debbie blueberry muffins and was on the bus at seven-fifteen. At seven-forty-five he arrived across the street from the industrial building that held his office and cubicle. He sat at his desk at seven-fifty, ten minutes early, as planned. He stared at the blank desks and walls high enough to make him feel alone. He leaned back and kicked up his feet, thinking about nothing, a privilege he knew he wouldn't have once he dove into the insurance policy papers and claims files. It wasn't long before he followed a trail of thoughts that led him back to his empty home, empty cubicle, empty job, and empty life. He found himself thinking about Art School again. Then he leaned forward, opened the drawer, and pulled out Red.

Red was a ball made of simple bouncy rubber. He was the color of whoopee-cushions, but compact and squeezable. "Hey Red, how are you buddy?"

Jim thought about the day he'd found Red.

It was a day in which the lack of definition in Jim's life had gotten to him. He'd looked in his bathroom mirror and considered strangling himself with his tie. Then he had realized he didn't need to do it himself, the tie did it naturally. He thought about how long it had been since he'd held a paintbrush. He thought maybe he'd swing by a crafts store and buy some later. But hadn't he said the same thing last month only to chicken out a block from the correct bus stop?

So he had boarded the bus as if it were any other day, slightly behind schedule. Coming into the heart of downtown, the bus had braked when a passenger car swept across two lanes and ended in front of the bus, the shrill of the brakes screaming in Jim's aching ears. He felt a little bump on his foot, as if something of great weight had hit him. He looked down and saw Red.

He had picked him up and felt something internally—like a swelling in his chest cavity—something soothing, calming, and understanding. He didn't recognize or think about it for more than a few seconds. He pocketed Red and had kept him ever since.

Red never gave Jim direct responses to his questions.

"Oh yeah? That sounds like fun. I've been thinking more and more about what we talked about last week. About quitting my job and going back to art school."

The office was filled with the clattering of a keyboard and the loud throat clearing that designated Frank. Jim, who'd been surprised by the noise, let his breath go. Frank was always early in and always late out. It was as if he hated being home. He was hands-down the hardest worker in the office.

"Jim," said a soft voice behind him.

He swiveled in his chair and saw Sherry standing at the entrance to his cubicle. Her hands were behind her back as she strolled in. She pulled her arms around and revealed a small glass cup holding a single red peony. "Oh, that is beautiful," Jim said, pulling his face into a practiced smile. "Did someone give that to you?"

"No," she took a breath, "I'm giving it to someone." She pushed the flower outwards to Jim.

“Oh,” Jim said, allowing a pensive moment to settle between them. “Sherry.” She placed the gloss and flower on his desk where it spread color throughout the cubicle. Jim became aware he was holding Red and he placed him on the other side of the keyboard.

He knew he should say something, but he found empty space where the words should have been. Sherry was only a little bit older than he, give or take a couple of years. She was a human, always a plus. She had always been there giving him hints towards a romance. He didn’t know if he knew how to do that anymore. He was an empty man with an empty life and he didn’t want to make hers any emptier. He knew he had no right to complain. She’d divorced her husband a couple of years earlier, and yet here she was, directing him to fill the empty space. “Thank you,” he said.

“You’re welcome.” Frank’s disciplined keystrokes filled the office. There were still two minutes before the clock struck eight and Jim could hear each tick of the second hand. “There were a whole bunch of them like that outside of Petals, and I thought ‘y’know, why not’ and so I got one and here it is.”

“I’ll make sure to keep it.” He felt like an automaton who was only capable of stating the obvious. “It’s very nice of you, Sherry. A welcome surprise.”

“Yeah,” Sherry bit her bottom lip. She took a deep breath and stared downwards. Her feet were packed into short and reasonable pink heels. She had pink pearl earrings on under her reddish-brown hair. “I thought you could use some decorations in here.” Her face blushed making it pinker than before. “Not that you don’t have a lot of decorations, just... I just wanted to see if I couldn’t help cheer the place up a little bit.”

Jim was the first guy to acknowledge the emptiness of his work space. It was just like his life. Having it pointed out, however, made his stomach sit a little weird. He knew

he'd need to control the tone of his voice. "I appreciate it." He wanted her to know that's how he truly felt. He must've. Somewhere.

The office clock gave off a high pitched alarm signaling the change of the hour. "Well," Sherry said, "I suppose I'll get to my own cubicle." Jim watched how quick her feet moved and her eyes darted. He felt weird being an audience member to someone else's nervous performance. She stopped at the entrance. She placed one foot behind her and leaned against the wall. "Do you want a coffee or something like that?"

"I'll get myself one in a few minutes, thanks."

"Oh, no, I meant... never mind." Sherry left Jim's cubicle in a rush of clicking heels.

He leaned close to Red. "I think she was trying to ask me out."

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At eight-thirty Jim made good on his promise to get a coffee. The employee lounge was down the hall from the cubicle area and two large sponge boards flanked the coffee machine. On them were a number of Dilbert comic strips. Jim wondered if employees brought them in, or, if in an act of irony, they had been posted by the boss.

A large ground-to-ceiling window showed off the world outside. The gleaming glass office towers of downtown reflected the brilliant sunlight and oxygen rich blue sky that Jim and everyone else were missing out on for the sakes of their jobs. Jim wanted to paint something in satire. Something that showed off the concrete jungle, the complacency. He became aware of a sensation of flight, an image in his own mind, flying like a bird. Or maybe it was flying like an office worker who'd just slipped himself off the top of the building.

He felt a warm vibration in his pants. “Woo!” He pulled Red out of his pocket. “I didn’t even realize I brought you with me.”

A heavy handed pat on Jim’s back shook his arms. Red slipped from Jim’s grasp as he turned around. It was Gerald, a VP’s son. “So I heard you got a flower from Sherry.”

“Good morning to you, too.” Jim picked up Red and set him on the counter. “I didn’t realize I was still subscribed to the inter-office gossip newsletter.”

“Come on, Jim, did you really think I wouldn’t be paying attention to the only person in our office to have some sort of life outside these walls?” Gerald’s back was still turned to Jim. Jim wondered if Gerald knew what he was saying. Gerald was constantly getting called to the boss’ office and had pictures in his cubicle of golf games, outings with his Dad and the boss, and various corporate looking events that Jim, Sherry, and Frank couldn’t claim to have ever received invites. “I just pay attention because I’m glad to see someone getting any sort of action.”

Jim scowled and frowned. “For your information, there is no action. She gave me a flower and asked if I wanted to get a coffee.”

“What was your response? I’m too busy going home and being alone?”

“What would you know about my home life or my love life for that matter?” Jim had forgotten about getting a coffee. “Just keep your nose out of other people’s business for once.” Jim left Gerald standing in the room.

“Didn’t realize it was that personal to you.” Gerald called down the hall.

Gerald was now alone in the lounge. He sat in one of the wooden chairs, looking over a public copy of the newspaper. Then something caught his eye. Red was sitting on

the counter. “Looks like Jim forgot his favorite little play thing,” he grabbed it, rolling it around in his hand. He bounced it a couple of times.

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Gerald opened the office door quietly, hoping not to alarm Frank, that office watch dog. The door closed without a hitch and Gerald slipped into his cubicle. As he rounded the corner he saw Frank sitting there stirring a coffee. “So, Gerald. Glad to see you could make it to work this morning.”

Gerald set his briefcase in the corner. “Is there a reason you’re in my cubicle, Frank?”

“I needed a few claims forms—because I do my job most days. But I see,” he waved a few papers in his hand, “that you have some extra.”

“Not all of us are workaholics.”

Frank chuckled and rose out of the seat. “One of these days you’re going to mess up in a big way and daddy isn’t going to be able to pull enough strings to save your pretty little Cadillac or your 401k. I don’t say that because I genuinely hope and wish you’ll fail. I say it because I want you to know that when you pack away every one of these pictures of you and the boss, I’ll be there waving you out. And I’ll know that what goes around comes around.”

“All that big mighty talk and you finish with a fortune cookie?” Gerald sat in his seat, “And here I thought you had work to do.”

“What goes around,” Frank said checking his watch. “Don’t forget.” Then he left the cubicle.

The sound of typing filled the office and Gerald pressed his middle finger into the gray wall. He grabbed Red and tossed the ball up and caught it. He thought about tossing it over the walls and imagined the surprised noise Jim would make if it suddenly fell from the sky. "I wish you were Frank's disembodied head."

He sighed and put Red down. He opened his e-mail. After a few minutes he wished he could check Facebook or YouTube. He wanted to do anything other than work. He couldn't afford to slack. Every second he wasn't working he wondered if his dad would find out. How many times had his Dad's hand landed on his shoulder and praises of Gerald's accomplishments fallen out of his mouth? As if he were just filled to the brim with compliments that felt neither true nor earned

He had the strange feeling of being watched. He turned around and saw no one. He turned forward again and like a ghost it was back. He turned again, but felt himself drawn to Red. He lifted him up, squeezed him, checked his weight, checked for a camera. "What is it with you?" He set Red back down.

He sighed. He sat back in his chair and looked at the lights in the ceiling. He listened to the clock tick on the walls. He felt stagnant. Stagnating. Like he was achieving a state of stagnation. "I just wish it wasn't like this. I'd gladly do this anywhere if my Dad wasn't somehow involved. This doesn't feel earned. Each time I get some raise I ask why and the boss just smiles and says, 'because you're our best worker, or course.' I just want to feel like I've earned something for once."

Something seemed different in his head. He felt almost possessed by the idea to run out the doors and down the streets. His anxiety receded. The noise of air vibrating in

his ears filled his head. He felt a cold chill. He shook his head. "Weird." He picked up Red and sniffed him. Then he opened up a word document and got to work.

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At ten-thirty, Sherry walked in Gerald's office. "Hey, I heard that little exchange you and Frank got into. Are you feeling all right?"

"Yeah, never better." He crossed his arms and stared at the screen.

"You do any work today?"

"You know I work."

"Just asking. Can you hand me some claim forms. I'm out again and you know how supplies are."

"Here you go."

As Sherry was leaving, Gerald said, "Hey."

She turned around and as she did she heard, "Think fast!" and then something red hit her in the face. She winced and rubbed her cheek. She looked down and saw Red then looked up to see Gerald's hands over his face.

She gritted her teeth. She bent over to pick up Red. "Ha!" she laughed. Then she leaned over into Gerald's face. "Ha! Ha! Ha!"

"I'm sorry, Sherry. I didn't mean to nail you like that."

"You couldn't nail me if you wanted to." She stomped out of the cubicle and crossed the aisle over to her own. Her anger was still high and she threw Red roughly onto her desk.

Her cubicle was very pink. She had picture frames that contained photos of her parents and her sister. Her mouse pad displayed a field of pink flowers. Her calendar had



pink numbers and pictures of kittens. Red, she realized, threw off the whole scheme. His shade of red was much too dark. “You sure are distracting.”

She could imagine Red sprouting a face. But not just any face, a face like Antonio Banderas. She imagined him speaking to her. “My dear woman, you too are distracting. Distractingly beautiful.”

Sherry turned around to see if anyone was in the entrance to her cubicle. Then she picked up Red. “Why, whatever do you mean?”

“I mean, Sherry—can I call you Sherry?—that you are a strong intelligent woman. Your potential is wasted in this place. How many years have you been working here? And yet you aren’t being recognized. You should be running this place. You are beautiful and powerful, striking and stunning, you have to let people see these strengths. I can see your determination in your skin, in the way your fingers and closing around me right now.”

“Oh, stop.”

“It’s true. You are lovely. You should be a model.”

“What?” She touched her face. “I’m not pretty enough to be a model.”

“Look at your figure. Nice hips, great features, your curly hair. What makes you think you aren’t pretty enough?”

“It’s just my lips.”

“Your lips?”

“They’re flat and not poofy.” She puckered them at the ball. “See? They’re small and look like discolored scars.”

“I think they’re the most beautiful part of your face. Let me inspect them closer... closer...”

Sherry leaned in and closed her eyes. She kissed Red. She giggled and smiled. She opened her mouth and reaffirmed her lips against his outer shell. She imagined she were kissing Jim. Then she imagined her ex-husband and pulled away.

“Ahem!” said someone behind her.

She dropped Red to the floor and turned around. She crossed her arms and touched her hair. Frank was standing there with a bored look on his face. “I don’t mean to interrupt anything. Could you file these for me? If it’s not too much trouble.” Sherry took his papers and didn’t say anything. She didn’t look Frank in the eyes. Frank laughed as he left the cubicle.

Sherry’s face grew hot and she waved a hand in her face. She was worried she’d sweat or get sick. She found Red on the ground. “If you were really Antonio Banderas, I’d show you how powerful and beautiful I can really get.”

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At ten-fifty Jim realized he’d forgotten Red. He left his office and went to the employee lounge where Frank was filling his coffee with sugar. “Hey Frank, have you seen my ball in here anywhere?”

His face twisted into a red caricature and he chuckled to himself. “Why don’t you ask Sherry?”

Jim wondered if Frank was making fun of him. “Does Sherry have it?”

“You have no idea.” Frank sipped his coffee. The joy in his face seemed to leak out of it. He poured the coffee in the sink. “I think that damn coffee machine is broken.”

Jim went to Sherry's office. Sherry's face was slightly pinker than normal. "Hey, Sherry, have you seen my ball?" He frowned when he realized how that had come out. "The stress ball that is. The red one."

Sherry didn't turn from her seat, but shook her head. Jim stood there looking at the back of Sherry's head for a moment. He wondered if he shouldn't say something. "Sherry?"

Sherry turned to Jim. Her eyes fell from his face to his feet. "Yeah?"

"About, well, about coffee."

Sherry looked up at Jim.

"Maybe we could grab some after work? Not like in the employee lounge but like maybe at a shop somewhere?"

A fly was buzzing near the ceiling. "I'd like that," Sherry said. Jim smiled and Sherry seemed to smile also.

"Awesome. I guess I'll see you then?"

"I guess so."

Jim left Sherry's cubicle with a smile.

Once he was gone, Sherry reached into her shirt and pulled Red out from between her breasts.

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Frank found Red sitting on top of the trash in the employee lounge. Flecks of cloth stuck to his exterior. "How in the world did you get here?" On the counter next to the trash Frank saw a pink hair clip.

He returned to his office and set Red on his desk. He went back to working. He worked until the clock on his computer reached noon and then he kept working for ten minutes. He retrieved a brown paper bag out of the mini-fridge under his desk. He pulled a peanut butter sandwich out and ate it while looking at Red.

“I don’t understand why you’re here. Like, why didn’t I just give you to Jim, or squeeze another laugh out of Sherry?” Frank paid too much attention to the sound of his chewing. He swallowed and heard the stretch of his esophageal muscles as the bread and peanut butter combo slid downward. He thought he heard the sizzle of stomach acid. “I guess I just don’t get how they have the free time to bother with you. You’re a toy. Nothing more. Jim treats you like a long lost friend and Sherry...” but Frank stopped talking because he got a shiver thinking about Sherry. He wondered if he had any plastic gloves to handle Red with.

“Fine. I’ll treat you like more than what you are. You know who Sherry reminds me of? My wife. She keeps telling me all this working is a problem. That I need to be home more often. This job is all that keeps my family afloat. The extra work hours? It’s not like they pay me more, but if I work hard I could,” he shook his head. “I was going to say get that promotion but what are the chances of that happening? And that would mean more working and harder working too. I don’t even know if it’s worth it anymore.”

Frank heard a telephone ring. Gerald’s voice came through the walls. “Yeah? Right now? Okay, I’ll be here.”

“I really wish I wasn’t here,” Frank said to Red. “I hate this job. I hate all these tools I work with. You know what I’d do if I wasn’t here? I’d work on cars. Just get an old red Mustang and work her engine real good. Then I’d go for a drive and I’d forget

responsibility. I'd pop on some dance music find a spot in the country and just break it down. Then I'd drive back and hand wash my car and maybe if I could just get relaxed I'd forget about work, my wife, my family and just feel better."

Frank threw the ball up and caught it. He squeezed it a little bit. "I guess you're just a ball at the end of the day. Thrown around by all these brutish humans. Ever wish you could leave this place? Get thrown out of a window or something?" He sighed. "I guess that won't ever happen."

Frank shook his head. "What the hell am I doing? I must be a nut." Then he resumed working.

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Frank knocked on Jim's cubicle wall. "Catch!" He tossed Red. For a moment, Red hung in the air and he could see the office workers around him. He fell back and Jim caught him. "Hey, wow, where did you find him?"

"Around. Try to keep it in your space from now on."

"I'll try. Little guy has a mind of his own."

The main door to the office opened. Jim knew it had to be the boss.

"Can I have your attention please, dear workers."

Jim walked to the center where he saw the boss. He was an older man with a large nose and a black suit. Sherry and Frank stepped out of their cubicles also. The boss straightened his tie and cleared his throat. "Where's Gerald?"

Gerald stepped out of his cubicle with a box full of his things. "Come here, my boy." Gerald bowed his head and stepped close to the boss, who placed a hand on his

shoulder. Jim wondered if he was about to fire Gerald. Good riddance. He gave Red a little squeeze.

“I want to make an example out of this man. Gerald has worked here maybe four years now. That makes him a slight veteran to the three of you and it’s important to understand what acceptable work place behavior is. We have standards here, and I want to make sure you all know them well.”

Frank crossed his arms and smiled.

“Which is why I’m making Gerald your new Supervising Officer. You will all answer to him.”

Gerald’s face drooped. “Sir, I don’t think I really deserve this.”

“Sure you do.”

“Well, what about the way he’s always late?” Frank asked. “How about the fact he doesn’t get nearly as much done as us?”

The boss seemed startled by the question. “Now, surely you understand that sometimes people just aren’t in the appropriate positions. We need to feel energy and motivation for our roles and some of us just weren’t born to be worker bees.”

Jim felt acid course through his veins. “I can’t believe your promoting this guy.”

“You don’t seem very happy about my decision,” the boss narrowed his eyes.

“What was your name again?”

“It’s Jim.”

“Why are you dissatisfied, Jim?”

“He pesters everyone. He makes office rumors his past time. I don’t understand why he’s getting promoted.”

“He may not be the hardest worker but he has the most consistent dedication to the job.”

Jim grew more and more frustrated. He squeezed Red tighter and tighter wishing it would relieve the stress like it was supposed to.

And then it did.

For a moment, all time seemed to stop. Jim was aware of things he wasn't before. There was a fly in the upper corner. A gear in the office clock had begun to slow and would increase the work day accidentally by forty seconds. Sherry was imagining Antonio Banderas in a speedo. Frank imagined he was strangling the boss. Gerald felt extreme embarrassment for all of them, but wasn't planning on speaking up.

Then Jim heard a voice from somewhere deep. It was coming from his own head, or maybe somewhere else in his body. He imagined himself free. No gray cubicle walls, no routine, no white collar. It could all go away. He pictured himself flying, but where? Out of an office window? Off the top of the building? No. Like a bird. Like Superman. He saw himself flying and then he saw Red with wings flying with him. They were flying through the city, away from the office building, shedding the complacency, the silence, and filling themselves with some spiritual energy.

Jim felt it in his arm first. He wanted to move his arm like making a broad stroke on canvas. He wanted to pitch like he had in middle school baseball. He wanted to swat the air like a cat swats a red dot on a wall. He wanted to be anywhere else but here.

Jim heard a voice and he knew it was Red.

“Let me fly.”

As he began to raise his arm the last of the spiritual energy showed him what he felt were the desires of all of them collectively, deeper than their present imaginations. He could see the date with Sherry going very well, good enough to see each other again, and maybe good enough for him to invest in a speedo and practicing his Spanish accent. He could see Gerald leaving the job and returning to college to pursue a different degree. He could see Frank driving an old red mustang. Then he pitched his arm forward and Red left his fingertips as did all the spiritual energy and knowledge of others.

With a loud smack, Red bounced off the Boss's face. A red mark appeared on his cheek and his eyebrows arched. As he realized what he'd done and felt the typical air of the real world rushing back to him, he noticed that he felt okay. This was the only way to see if what he'd just imagined could be real or not. Red rolled along the ground and stopped at Jim's feet where he picked him up. He gave it a refreshing squeeze. He had somewhere to be.

“Sherry, I'll see you when you get off of work.”

“Where do you think you're going?” the boss asked.

“I gotta fly.” Jim said and left the office.

As he boarded the bus, he felt happier than he had in years. He had a bus stop to get off at before town and there was no way he was going to back out again. He could already imagine a completed painting of a little ball with wings high above a city landscape. He was imagining the blue and white of the skyline, or should it be red and yellow?

He didn't realize until after he'd stepped off and the bus had disappeared from sight that Red was gone.



## Slow Burn

At ten on a Friday morning, Portia's—the cheap bar across the street, with white walls that resembled an old butcher shop more than a bar—burned to the ground. Derrian, our bartender, had barely gotten out before the roof collapsed. I sat her down in the employee lounge and got her some water. When we were alone, I hugged her and kissed her cheek. “What happened?”

She shook her head. “I don't know. I was just cleaning when I noticed a whole lot of smoke and then I was calling the fire department and freaking out.” She was shaking a bit and I took her hand. She pulled away. “Seriously, I don't want Barney to see us.”

“Forget him.” But I pulled my hand back anyway. If Barney saw us, he'd tell my wife.

“Was anyone else in the bar?” asked Barney, as he rounded the corner. His hands were stained from an oil change and he flopped a rag into the sink and started washing up. “Or just you?”

“Just me,” Derrian said, raising her shoulder a bit in a cute gesture. “I was getting the bar ready for tonight.”

“Shit,” Barney said, leaning on the sink. “The hell are we going to do now?”

He was asking me. Every Friday night our group of buddies, mostly acquaintances, people I wouldn't call “friends” in any context other than drinking, would go to Portia's, get drunk, and sit in a stony silence, forgetting our lives, our families, our troubles, and just enjoying the world as if it were a sinking ship.

“We’ll have to ask the guys.”

“They’re headed over to see the wreckage.”

“I need to go.” Derrian said.

“What? Why?”

“I just do. Call me later?”

“Yeah, of course.”

She smiled at me and walked out. Barney crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow at me. “What?” I asked.

“She keeps looking at you like she wants a piece. You got to be careful about showing any affection for her. She’ll jump at the first bite. That is her reputation, after all.”

“That’s unfair,” I said. Besides it seemed like it described me better than her.

“Why do you got to be so negative about it, anyway.”

“Your brother wanted me to look after you, Fred.”

“Phil ain’t got nothing to do with this.”

I usually just let Barney lecture me, but my mind was racing. Derrian had almost died, the bar was gone, and Barney was bringing up my brother. “Look, I’ll take care of myself, always have.”

“Whatever you say. If you find yourself in a tough situation, you can count on me to help you out. You know that.”

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Our group gathered in the parking lot to watch the fire department root through the steaming ashes and put out the remainder of the fire. It was me, Barney, and a few other guys we'd drank with for a while. "What are we going to do now?" Barney asked.

"We could go to the strip club," Gary said. "Booze and titties always mix great, man, plus lap dances, fuck yeah."

"Some of us happen to be happily married and want to keep it that way," Barney said. I wished I'd said it first.

"What about Sparkyz?" I offered.

"The blue neon hurts my head. Not to mention the shitty techno music. No way."

"It's not that bad," Barney said.

"They don't even have billiard tables, man, fuck that."

I rubbed my chin. "We all got houses, right? We could just meet up and drink there."

"Not I," Gary said.

"You're the bachelor. No way I'm going to disturb my wife with our drinking. She'd gut me like a fish," Barney said.

"Well, wait. Ain't your garage mostly underground? We could play music and everything and still be pretty quiet. Maybe you can talk to your wife about it," I offered.

"Why don't you talk to yours?" Barney said.

"Man, no way."

"Is there some beef between you two?" Gary asked. "Come on, Barney, Phil is right." It was a slip, Gary had accidentally called me my brother's name.

“Come on, man,” I said. “How long have we been drinking together and you still ain’t got my name right?” I knew it was because I always wore my brother’s old work shirt. It had his name on the tag, hand stitched in white and red.

“Pushy pushy pushy,” Barney said. He cracked his knuckles and ran a hand through his graying hair. “I’ll talk to Jeanie and see what she thinks.”

“You do that,” Gary said.

We saw a police car pull up across the street. Out came Officer Grant who walked up to the fire men and started having a discussion. Barney sighed. “Five bucks he comes over here just to fuck with me.”

“Hey, calm down.” I said. Barney had always had trouble with the law and with Grant in particular, who had arrested him a couple of weeks ago for public intox in the parking lot of Portia’s after a particularly late Friday night. “Don’t let him get to you. He’s just looking for a reason to drag you off to jail. Don’t give him one.”

“I’ll give him one if he wants one. I’ll punch him right in his fucking jaw.”

Grant waved at us from across the street. He started crossing his way over. “Look, go inside, change a gasket or something. Gary go on with him.”

“Let’s go, Barney.”

“I want to stay right here.”

“Barney, fucking go,” I said, pushing him.

Grant had walked up in the parking lot and tipped his hat at Barney. “Hey there, Barn Burner.” Barney spat on the ground then walked inside. Grant looked down at the spit on the asphalt and sighed. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to arrest him before the week is out.”

“I’ll try to keep him straight, officer.”

“Speaking of straight, how have you been lately, Phil?”

“That’s not funny, officer.”

“You got to learn to laugh at yourself. You still seeing the counselor?”

“Ain’t no better shrink than a cold beer and some good music.”

Grant nodded without saying anything. “This bar scene here is a mess. I was standing over there for a few minutes and got ash all over my damn pants.” He patted at his leggings then looked at me with one eye. “Seen Derrian?”

“She stopped by for a few minutes. Then she took off before you guys got here. Wouldn’t say why.”

“That didn’t seem suspicious to you?” Grant asked.

“Not really. Why?”

“Well, if you were in a building on fire and disappeared before the authorities came around, wouldn’t you expect someone to suspect you?”

“Derrian barely got out before the roof came down. She told me she was just cleaning when she noticed smoke. It was probably an electrical fire. You know how old that damn building is. Or I suppose it’s ‘was’ now.”

“We’ll see what the fire marshal says. Until then, if you see Derrian—and I’m sure you will.” Grant winked at me. “Let her know that if she doesn’t want to be considered a suspect, she should come talk to me.”

“Hey she almost died so lay off of her. You always suspect people who barely survive of doing awful things to others? Or themselves?”

Grant placed two hands on his hips. “You talking about your brother? Because if you are I can assert the evidence to you again.”

“I don’t need to hear the evidence again.”

“He wrote a note, Fred.”

“I never read it.” I said, crossing my arms. “It was confiscated by you gents.”

“You refused to read or acknowledge it.” He sighed and crossed his arms and looked at the ground. “But whatever. He’s dead and he killed himself and I’m sorry you can’t see that.” Grant fingered his gun latch. He readjusted his belt. “As for Derrian, maybe you should just be careful, lest you get scratched by the cat’s claws.”

“I wouldn’t know what you’re talking about.”

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We agreed to meet at Barney’s garage around seven. It was enough time for me to slip back home. I kissed my wife on the cheek when I got there and told her the news about Portia’s. “Yeah, I saw on the news. Is everyone all right?”

“Yeah, everyone’s fine.”

“I guess that means you’ll be at home tonight?”

“Nah, we’re going to go to Barney’s garage.”

“Jeanie is cool with you guys drinking in the garage?”

“Barney’s going to sweet talk her about it.”

“Good luck with that.”

I leaned over and kissed the same lips I’d kissed for fifteen years. She grunted when I did. “I’m going to go wash up.”

“Go wash up, then. I hate it when you kiss me smelling like the garage.”

I grabbed Jeanie's waist. "Want to join me?"

She sniffed at me. "Not when you smell like that."

"You could wash me off."

"Fuck off, you horn dog."

"I love you too, honey."

"Love me later, would you?"

I got to Barney's garage before anyone else. As I walked up the driveway, I saw Barney and Jeanie fumbling with a speaker and a radio. It had been a while since I'd seen Jeanie from behind and her smooth, shaven legs were visible from underneath a pair of jean shorts I'd have never guessed fit her anymore. When she turned around I felt a heat of embarrassment. It was Mary, Barney's fourteen-year-old daughter, who'd been helping him out. She waved at me and I waved back before she went inside. I set a twenty-four pack down on a workbench. "Man, they grow up so fast."

"Yeah, they do. Hey, I want to ask you something. You ever get upset about the fact that your brother left his garage to me?"

If I felt that honesty was the best policy I'd have told him that it was one of the most upsetting things in my life up to that point. But instead I just said what I always did.

"Nah, you deserve it, besides you two were closer than him and me."

"It just makes me wonder sometimes. I've always said this, but just know you'll never go hungry so long as that garage is mine. I promise."

I could practically retire if he'd left it to me. But I smiled. "Thanks, Barney."

"Anytime."

Besides me and Barney, six other guys showed up. We more or less reverted to our normal bar behavior. Everyone had brought lawn chairs and we sat around and held vigil or group conversations. Every now and then a song would play and someone would lament about the death of the eighties band. We all nodded along.

Maybe thirty minutes after we'd started, Mary came back out and whispered in her Dad's ear. "Sweetie, tell your mother if she wants to say something she can come to my face, okay?"

I looked at Gary who looked at someone else who looked onwards until we all were shooting back the beer we currently held and some started making excuses about, "how it was pretty late anyways," and, "maybe this wasn't the best idea."

Barney growled. "Everyone, sit the fuck down."

"I thought you told Jeanie we were going to be here." I said to Barney. He smiled and raised an eyebrow and drank his beer. I felt like that was a pretty good reason to not feel so bad about Derrian. Even Barney lied to his wife from time to time.

It was then that Jeanie appeared. She was wearing a tank top and had washed off her make-up for the day. A cigarette half smoked hung in the corner of her mouth. She inhaled deeply and blew it out when she was closer to where Barney sat. She started pacing around him, observing him as if he were an animal, then looked at us. "You want me to tell you in person?"

Barney blinked a few times and put a forced grin on his face. "What was that, Jean?" He cupped one hand around his ear and leaned a little closer.



She leaned over and said, “Sweetheart, buddy, husband,” then she patted Barney’s head, “Get your fucking friends out of the goddamn garage. Just because Derrian torched the bar doesn’t mean you can hang out here.”

“Wait. What?” I asked her.

Barney pulled her hand off his head and stood up, breathing heavily. He took a beer bottle and slammed it on the ground. Jeanie didn’t flinch, just shook her head and lit another cigarette. Barney threw his hands out to his side. “Damn it, Jean, these are my friends. Our bar burned down and we can’t just drink anywhere. We have to go someplace. Why not here?”

“This ain’t Portia Jr.’s. So out with you and your friends. There’s five other bars within driving distance, pick one.”

“Kitty’s!” shouted Gary.

“Shut the fuck up, Gary.” Barney shouted.

“Look, I don’t care where you go.” Jeanie said. She slammed the off button on the radio and flicked some ashes at Barney from afar. “Go drink on the damn slab for all I care.”

We exchanged a look.

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The slab had been cleared of the earlier wreckage. Ashes had been blown around the edge of the foundation and it was smoky and grayish. The foundation had been in good condition and was flat enough for us. We set up our chairs and our twenty-four packs and started drinking up. There was something spiritual, even if the walls and

dressing weren't there, it felt like home. It was the right place to be at the right time of night and we all became livelier as a result.

Maybe a little too lively.

"Jeanie sure showed you," Gary said. He made mock whipping noises.

"Yeah, and when I get done here with you fuckers, I get to back home and make love to that babe. What are you going to go do, Gary?"

Gary sighed. "You fucking guys and your wife talk. I can go get whoever I want."

"You just spend all your time drinking with men voluntarily then?"

"Fuck off."

"You want a kiss, pretty boy?" I asked.

"You gay or something?" Gary asked, taking a sip of beer and looking away.

We all made mock kissing noises and laughed.

It wasn't more than ten minutes after that we saw Officer Grant's police car pulling up to the slab. Barney muttered to himself.

"Hey, just be cool," I said.

The spotlight lit up and shined upwards in our faces. Officer Grant rolled down the window and said, "Boys, doing a little bit of drinking this evening?"

I got up and went and leaned in the window. "Hey, Officer Grant. How's your evening going?"

"Well, you won't believe this, Phil." He laughed to himself. "Seems as if I've been called out to a few noise complaints. And what do I find but a group of good old boys laughing and having a good time and all completely drunk in the middle of a now public area. Be honest with me, what the hell were you boys thinking?"

As I was about to say something a bottle smashed on the top of the car, denting in the hood and shattering all over the ground. I turned around and Barney had one hand over his mouth. “What the hell are you doing?” I asked.

He looked at his hands and just balled them up. He kicked a beer pack. The other guys gave him some room to walk around. Grant sighed and stepped out of the car. “You know, I was just going to say, you boys go on home. And now I got to take you in, Barney.”

“Hey officer, look, I’m just... I’m drunk. Let me go home and sleep it off, will you?”

“No can do, Barn Burner.” Grant stepped up on top of the foundation. “Turn around.”

“Come on, give me a fucking break. This is my fucking problem with police, man, they just don’t know when to take a fucking break.” Then Barney spat at Grant, who in one quick motion pulled out his night stick and whapped Barney’s shin. Barney immediately fell to the ground and grabbed his shin screaming.

Grant turned Barney over and cuffed him then led him back to the car. I was sitting on the side of the foundation and once Barney was in, Grant came back over. “I’m going to take this one down to the station because he doesn’t know how to keep his head on straight. As for the rest of you, you have my utmost sympathy. But the bar is gone. This place is public. And you cannot drink here anymore. I’m sure you feel a little displaced in your universe,” Grant chuckled to himself a moment. “But I got every right to arrest each of you were it in my bones. I ain’t going to do that tonight. But I ain’t going

to pass it up again.” He spat at the side of the foundation. “Go home.” Grant tipped his hat to me then got back in his car and drove off.

We bumbled around a bit, but we didn’t say much to each other. I felt empty. I’d have to call Jeanie before too long and tell her what had happened and help her not feel guilty or responsible as I was sure she would. Guys sort of gathered their own stuff and I stayed sitting on the foundation looking at the stars for a bit. When I was the only one there, I sighed and kicked around in the ash piles next to the building. I guessed that I was opening the garage in the morning.

I kicked a particularly deep pile of ash, and when I did, I saw the glint of something as it flew out. There was a metallic noise as it skipped across the parking lot a little bit. I walked over and brushed at it. It was a bronze lighter with an eagle carved into the front of it. There was message engraved on it, “Free to fly in the eagle’s sky.” I flipped it open, sniffed at the gasoline air, and lit the flame.

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Jeanie almost laughed when I told her not to feel bad about the arrest. “Let him rot for all I care, the dumb ass.”

“What about bail?”

“He’ll get out eventually, don’t worry about it.”

“But what about the garage?”

“I think you can handle that.”

The next week zipped by because aspects of the business that I’d never been in charge of before were open to me. As much as I wanted to go to the jail house and get

Barney out myself, I floundered because there was a sense of control, a functional bit of connection that I'd never had before.

It was the first week I didn't keep in contact with our drinking friends either. They usually cycled around or came in to the garage for one reason or another. But I realized that now that Barney was gone, very few of them seemed interested in interacting with me. So each night I just went back home and watched TV and talked to no one but my wife.

All week I thought about Derrian, but I was so busy at work I couldn't find time to give her a call and there was no way I was going to call her from home.

When Friday came around I got a call. It was Derrian. I wasted no time. "I want to see you."

"I don't know."

"What do you mean?" I was at the front desk so I couldn't be too loud. I turned my back on a customer who was reading a magazine and said, "What's going on?"

"Nothing's going on," she said. "I just... I just keep thinking about your wife."

It wasn't the first time she'd said this to me, but I thought it had been settled. It hadn't stopped her last time and it wouldn't stop her this time. "We should talk about this in person. Please."

"No," she said. "I'm busy. I'm not in Independence anymore."

"Where are you at?"

"A place."

I was growing more and more frustrated with her. She'd never been this hard to get. I fingered the outline of the lighter, which I'd kept on my person ever since I'd found it. I remembered the engraving on it, "Free to fly in the eagle's sky?"

"What?" I could hear rustling on the other side of the phone. "What did you say?"

"It's a cool little engraving on this lighter I found. You won't guess where." I just listened to her breathing on the other side of the line. "So, remind me about when and where we're meeting again?"

"You know the new piano bar in Coffeyville?"

"The Reverie?"

"Meet me there tonight. Nine o'clock."

\*\*\*

The Reverie was a storefront in the middle of downtown Coffeyville. I walked inside and saw oddly painted walls, a redwood bar, and a slightly raised stage with a big black baby grand piano. There were candles on the small square tables surrounding the stage and one bright light over the piano itself. The only other lights were a few neon advertisements and the bar lights.

I sat down at the bar and Derrian came over in a black vest and white shirt. It was the classiest thing I'd ever seen her in and resulted in a few shared laughs. "Makes me think of those times you said you'd never be caught dead in a monkey suit."

"Shut up," she extended her hand, "Give me the lighter."

"What if I'm thirsty?" I asked.

She frowned. She grabbed a glass and filled it with Shinerbock. I drank from it, never letting my eyes leave her. I set the glass down on the bar. "You go silent for a

week, and I got to basically twist your hand to get you to make a meeting. What's going on with you lately?"

She touched my hand and I rubbed the back of hers with a thumb. I felt like I was in the middle of a scene in Casablanca. "When you finish your drink meet me out back."

I did as she asked. It was an alleyway wide enough for a box truck and nothing else. There was an overhead light and a cat sleeping by a dumpster. She was there smoking a cigarette and held out an extra one for me. "I assume you got a light, right?" she asked.

I pulled the lighter out and as I raised it up to her cigarette she grabbed my hand. I watched her pupils turn red as I lit her cigarette, then she grabbed the lighter and lit mine.

"I didn't burn Portia's down." She dragged on the cigarette. She blew out her smoke and stepped closer. "This isn't my lighter." She pocketed the lighter and grabbed my hand again. She twisted her fingers into mine and squeezed it. "You never gave it to me. And you don't know where I am."

"Why'd you do it?" I asked her.

"Why'd I do what?"

"Seriously, Derrian." I pulled out my cigarette and touched her hair.

"To be honest, I wanted people to think I was dead." She dragged from her cigarette. "But when the roof nearly collapsed on me I panicked. I needed to sit. I needed some water. You were nearby."

"That's not really an answer," I said. "And it's really stupid, too."

"There's nothing stupid about being depressed."

"Why didn't you tell me you were depressed then?"

“Maybe you’re what I was depressed about.”

I threw my cigarette to the side, then reached up and plucked hers from her mouth. I ran my hands through her hair and rested them on the back of her head. I pressed her forehead against mine. “I love you.”

“Your wife loves you.”

I pushed Derrian against the wall. She stared at me as I reached down to her pants and unzipped the front of them. Her hands met me, but I wanted to push them out of the way. I kissed her against the wall and she bit my lips. I stopped and took a breath. I stepped back. She gave me the nastiest look I’d seen on a woman. “I’m sorry,” I said, not able to think of anything else to say.

“I’m going to leave in a few days. I’m going somewhere far away where you won’t find me.”

I sighed and looked down at the ground. “Why are you going to leave me when I want you?”

“You’re sad, Fred. Not like in a pitiable way, but you don’t realize how depressed you are.” She touched my face and I looked up at her. “I’m so sorry about your brother.”

“Oh, god.” I said. My voice quivered as I said it. I wiped at my nose. I didn’t want to hear her talk about Phil.

“But I can’t save you from that tragedy. And it’s not what you need. You need to be here, you need to be a good husband and forget about me.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Just do.” She said. “And if you ever want to think about me you can come here. This is the last kiss you ever got from me.” She kissed me. Then she stepped back.



“Thanks for the lighter.” Then she slipped into the back door and left me to stew in the alley until I decided to leave.

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The next night I went to Wal-Mart and grabbed a twenty four pack of Milwaukee’s Best. I planted a cooler filled with ice next to the couch and just started cracking them off and down. As I washed each watered down and bitter gulp with another and another, I thought about the atmosphere at Portia’s. Its white walls made green by the billiard lights, the black stools, the whiskey pyramid in front of the glass, the nut bowls that were categorized into cashews and peanuts and repeating from there. In particular, I missed the broken jukebox, which only played one minute of Elvis’ “Hound Dog” successfully. Terence would always bring his stereo and set it on the corner of the bar and play whatever we requested.

I thought about Derrian’s bedroom. She had lived in a tiny apartment building on the corner of a busy road. The wood was old and discolored. Two of the other apartments had cardboard in the windows. Her door wouldn’t entirely lock and I always worried about her. Her bedroom had a big frame poster of Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy, signed by Jim Henson. She kept a red box of make-up and some jewelry. “For special occasions.”

I could still smell her scented plug-ins, the heat from her curling iron. She had a single mole inside her left thigh, and it brushed my jaw when I went down on her. I brushed my finger across my face and let the feeling linger.

The front door opened and in came my wife with some groceries. “Oh, jeez,” she said when she saw me.

“Hey, babe.”

“Let me guess, you didn’t buy anything other than beer.”

“I didn’t know you wanted me to get groceries.”

“I’ve just had the worst day.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Help me with the groceries?”

“I’ll try.”

I stood up, a little loose equilibrium leaned me over. I touched the arm of the sofa.

“Whatever, I’ll get it myself,” she said.

I stood up. “Sweetie, I’m fine. I’m not drunk or anything I just had a few.”

“You know, I really wish Portia’s hadn’t burned down.”

“Well sucks for you, then, doesn’t it.” This was such a bullshit argument already.

Derrian never criticized my drinking. She’d get beer for me anyway, job or not. “I’m just trying to enjoy myself, okay?”

“The one week you actually have extra time at home and you can’t enjoy it without being drunk?”

“I’m not drunk.”

“Were you planning on getting drunk?”

“No.” I threw my hands up. “Maybe.” I stomped a foot. “Goddamn it, why the fuck can’t I get drunk in my own home?”

“Barney is in jail because all you guys do is get drunk and act fucking stupid.”

“Well, I don’t know when the last time you were drunk was, but you didn’t act like a prom queen yourself.”

She placed her keys on the key holder and carried the groceries to the kitchen. Coffeyville was only twenty minutes away. Maybe Derrian was still there. I watched those keys shake back and forth on the hook. I grabbed them in my hands. When she came back she put her hands on her hips, then she walked up and grabbed at them. "Give me those."

"I'm going for a drive."

"No, you're not. You've been drinking." She pulled on my arm, jumped up a little. "Give me those fucking keys, Fred. This is exactly how Phil killed himself."

I had slapped her before I realized I was doing it. She gasped. Then before a second had passed she punched me in the face. She hit me again as I fell backward. "I'm sorry," I tried to say. "Please, babe."

I crawled out to the porch then pushed her inside and closed the front door. I ran to the car and jumped in. I tore off as she came up beating the door, and I drove like my life depended on it.

When I'd gotten about a mile away I slowed down. I was breathing heavy and could already feel my cheek swelling. I smacked the steering wheel and screamed until I was hoarse. I cried into the steering wheel. Eventually the sound of my phone going off broke me from my spell. It was a phone number I recognized. The police station. "Hello?" I asked.

"Hey want to give me a ride?" Barney asked.

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"Jeanie just wouldn't come get me." Barney said, as I walked into the jail house. Grant was releasing Barney from the cuffs. "So, you know, she's pretty mad at me."

“Hey, I know how you feel.”

“You talk to Derrian?” Grant asked me.

“I can’t even get a hold of her, officer. My guess is she’s blown town.”

Grant just stared at me and nodded. “Well, you take care of yourself then.”

Barney looked at me. “What happened to your face?”

I avoided his look for a moment, but found the anxiety and shame in me was so shallow it didn’t last long. “I got in a fight with my wife.”

“Well it looks like she kicked your ass. I hope she don’t look like that.” Grant said, laughing.

I half-smiled and Barney pulled me along. When we were in the car he turned toward me. “You didn’t hit her did you?”

“No. I would never do that.”

“Because if I heard you hit her, I’d have to beat your ass. I’m not joking.”

My face hurt. “Why the hell do you care so much?”

“Why do I care so much? Do you hear yourself?” He rubbed his head and looked out the window. “Oh man.” He raised a fist to his mouth and bit it. “Did I ever tell you about the night Phil died, what it was he said to me?” Barney asked as we were driving back to his house.

“No.” I said. Blinking hurt my eyelids. I looked at myself in the mirror for the first time since the fight. She’d socked me pretty good. No way I deserved that much punishment.

“I don’t mean to bring this up, it’s just that, there wasn’t much else to do these last few days but think.” He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “He came into the

lounge at work, he sat back in his armchair and said, ‘You’re looking at a man who thoroughly cannot care about anything anymore.’ And so I asked him, ‘What you mean by that?’”

But I already knew what Phil must’ve said. It was a phrase I’d heard a hundred times growing up. Anytime he got in a tough spot, emotionally or otherwise, he would say the same thing. “I’ll bet he said, ‘Been feeling like a dog with its wiener cut off.’”

Barney nodded in his seat. “So I asked him what he meant by that and he just shook his head.” He sighed. “Phil killed himself and never told us why.”

“Did what?” I asked.

Barney looked at me. “You know he did it to himself, Fred.”

“It was winter.”

“There wasn’t no ice on that road.”

“It was an accident.” I said.

Barney sighed. I thought about the wreck of my brother’s car in the river. “I’m never going to call it a suicide.” I said. “It just wasn’t like Phil.”

“Then what would you call it? Who was it like?”

“Maybe the world failed him,” I said. “Maybe it got so bad with everyone around him constantly thinking he was stupid or couldn’t do nothing right that he just decided he had no place in it. Maybe the world murdered him.”

“Is that what’s happening to you?” Barney asked.

I refused to answer.

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When we got to Barney's house, Jeanie opened the front door, her hair wrapped up in a towel and wearing an oversized t-shirt and some patterned pants. Barney patted my shoulder. "Be my wingman?"

"Sure."

"You're looking lovely, Jean," I said.

"I don't want to hear you speak again, Fred," she said.

"Jeanie, why you always so mean to my friends?" Barney asked her.

"Your friends are dumbasses."

"She's got a point," I said to Barney.

"I ain't disagreeing." He stepped up on the porch and I stayed down in the yard with my hands tucked in my pockets. "You know what I thought about every day I was gone?" he said to her, touching one of her hands and pecking her cheek, which she extended to him.

"Beer?"

"I mean besides that."

"I have no idea." She crossed her arms and turned her back and walked across the porch. "Cleaning up that mess you left in the garage? Explaining to your daughter why Daddy went back to jail? Something useful?"

"I was thinking about how much I was gonna make it up to you." He walked over to her, started massaging her shoulders a little bit. She complained at first, shaking her shoulders, then relaxed her arms and let him rub her a bit. "I'm gonna do all that stuff you just said and more. I missed you guys so much."

“I’ll get you a broom then.” She walked towards the door then stopped. She came back and kissed his cheek. Then he gave her a full kiss. Then she walked off.

I shook my head in the yard. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“You just got to know her, Fred. Jeanie’s never half as mad as she seems.”

“Sort of like the opposite of you?”

“You know I can still fire you when I want to.”

“Big words for a big man.”

“I think you’ve got a similar confrontation in your future?”

I shrugged. “We’ll see. It’s always a little strange to me, I never know what I’m going to get.”

“Well, maybe, since Portia’s is gone, you can be around at home a little more often?”

I smiled. “Maybe you’re right.” Only I wasn’t thinking about Portia’s. It had only been a day. Derrian could still be there.

“I’ll see you at work. Let me know how it goes? I can always talk to Viv if you need me too.”

I waved bye and got in my car and took off.

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When I got home the front door was open. I walked inside and there were pictures gone from the wall. In the bedroom half the drawers were pulled out and thrown everywhere. I walked through my clothes which had been dumped on the ground. A puddle of nail polish had been dropped on top of my garage shirt. Phil’s name was blotted out.

There were several windows broken. It looked more like someone had broken in than had stormed through it in a fit of rage but I found a note from my wife on the counter.

“Fuck face,” I read to myself. “Gone, not coming back. Divorce papers headed your way. Yours never again, Vivian.”

I sat at the kitchen table. I saw the box of Milwaukee’s Best at the couch and walked over. The cans were gone. I went back to the kitchen and saw each one, having been cut open with a knife and poured out in the sink. I could still smell the scent rising out of it.

I thought I was going to feel sad, and there was a residual anger within me, but I felt liberated. I thought about Derrian in Coffeyville. There was nothing holding us back anymore, I knew. I left the house without closing the door. I thought about calling her but I knew she’d tell me to stay. I looked at the house and wished I’d kept the lighter.

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For years Phil had asked me why I disconnected with the world around me if something wasn’t going my way. “I don’t,” I said, argued, pleaded with him, depending on the situation and how much I’d had to drink. He’d ask it when he felt bad for me, was mad at me, and when he felt bad for himself. “I just don’t feel like what I think is terribly important, or maybe I don’t think what someone else feels is terribly important.”

The worst time had been our Dad’s funeral. It was ten years before his own death and we were both younger, in our mid-twenties, and still getting fresh with the world. I drank. I drank until all I could do was ramble on and on the same memories I’d been sharing all day. Phil pulled me aside. “I liked it better when you’d shut up.”



We fought. Maybe a little expected for two brothers on the day a parent dies, especially as estranged as we were. I landed a good right on him, but it was the only thing I could argue for being on my side of the fight. We sat against the house, dirt on our jeans, and blood in our mouths. “You ain’t going to make it,” Phil said. “You ain’t going to make it through life the way you are. You’re either too quiet or too loud and I can’t figure you out.”

I can’t figure me out either, Phil. But for some reason you’re dead and I’m still alive.

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So I drove to Coffeyville. On the way I found the bridge which caused me to pull over and stop. It was the bridge where Phil had driven his car into the river. I walked along the rail feeling the spots where the old guardrail stopped and the new guardrail began. I remember seeing the picture in the newspaper of Phil’s car, upside down, in the shallow water below. I took off my wedding band and tossed it in.

When I got to the Reverie I was nervous. I was showing up unplanned and unannounced. I wondered if Derrian would have switched shifts. I stepped inside. I didn’t see her at the bar. Instead there was some blonde guy standing there. He hardly looked old enough to service a bar. I sat down. “Can I get you something, sir?”

“Are you the only bartender working here?”

“For tonight, I just joined. Last bartender just didn’t show up, I heard.”

My head began to ache. I managed to ask for a beer. I didn’t even have money in my pocket to pay for it. He served it and I took a deep drink. It was cool and cold but it was tasteless. I knew she was gone and wasn’t coming back.

“You feeling all right?” the blonde kid asked.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Did you know her?” he asked. “The bartender that is.”

I took a drink. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-six.”

“Yeah, I knew her. Not that it matters anymore.”

“Sorry for your loss.”

“You don’t know the half of it. I’m feeling like a dog with its wiener cut off.”

The kid smiled and went off to serve someone else. I drank the beer until it was empty. I waited until he wasn’t looking and slipped out.

I climbed into my car. I drove along the dark highway not heading towards home and not heading away from it. I waited until there were no other cars around and then flipped my headlights off. I would drive like this for a while and wait to see another pair of headlights on the horizon to blind me to the darkness of the surrounding empty plains.

## Camouflage

It was six in the morning when Trevor arrived outside the house where Sarah lived with her parents. He saw the garage was open and a black Jeep with open doors stood in the driveway. As he approached it, the figure of Sarah's dad, Gary, appeared holding a bag of gear and a bunch of camo gear. He looked at Trevor and waved.

"Thought you'd never get here."

Gary was a staunch old dog and appeared that way most days. He'd be propped in an armchair or against a counter with a beer in hand and his gray hair spiked in front. His goatee was well trimmed and his clothing was normally reflective of a dignified individual. "Morning, Mr. Burns."

"You don't look ready to hunt at all."

Trevor was holding a small cup of coffee and wearing a black coat and hoody underneath. "I just figured I could use some of your stuff. I thought we'd agreed to that."

"You going to freeload your whole life?" Gary asked. There was a moment of silence between them during which Trevor felt his feet lose heat to the snow covered ground. Then Gary laughed his usual raucous rousing laugh, his head tilted back.

A door opened in the garage and Trevor saw Sarah tiptoe out in nothing but a t-shirt and sleeping pants that were both too big for her. She yawned and stretched up one arm, her unmade blonde hair both curly and messy. "Good morning," she said to Trevor.

"Sweetheart, it's colder than hell and you come out in bed clothes?" Gary asked.

"I just wanted to see you two off." Trevor walked over to her and gave her a hug. She held him for a moment then let go and crossed her arms. "You're cold."

“Hey, your Dad was right.”

“I need to talk to you for a moment, inside.” She eyed Gary who putting things in the Jeep.

“Sure.”

They stepped inside to a laundry room. She turned around and kissed him. When she stepped away he pulled her closer by the hip and kissed her, spinning her towards the dryer and leaning a little bit. She smiled. “Do me a favor today?”

He kissed her neck and she giggled and pushed him away. He licked his lips and smiled. “I promise not to shoot your Dad.”

“Not funny,” she said. He leaned in to kiss her neck again and she pushed harder against him, more unfriendly. She stood up and tucked her hair behind her ears. “Look it’s not my Dad. I was thinking more about the animals. The deer. Could you just... do whatever you can to not shoot them, okay?”

“Kind of kills the point of hunting doesn’t it?”

“I don’t know. You told me you weren’t even interested in hunting in the first place.”

“That’s true.”

“So the only thing I could think is you want to get my Dad alone to ask him something.”

“Maybe.” He leaned in to kiss her again and this time she put her hand on his face.

“You have coffee breath.”

“You have morning breath and you don’t see me complaining.”

“Get out of here, before my Dad thinks about shooting you.”

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They'd been together for about nine months. They'd met in their last year of college and after graduation Trevor had taken a nothing job so he could stay in town while she completed her master's degree. “Why don't we move in together?” he asked.

“My parents would never agree to it.” Trevor had learned to take any utterance of “my parents” to mean “I.”

“My parents would never forgive me if I had sex before marriage.”

“My parents would throw a fit if they knew we were doing this.”

“My parents just won't accept it if you don't ask for permission first.”

This last memorable line was in discussing marriage. Trevor had agreed to the hunting trip so that he could pop the question while he and Gary were out, alone, just the two of them. It was something that had never happened because Trevor just couldn't stand the thought of it.

Trevor had been nervous the first time he'd met Gary. He didn't know where to sit. It was almost like he'd forgotten how. He stood with his hands in his pockets until Sarah had pulled him down beside her. Trevor didn't know if he should be so close to her. Would it imply they'd had sex?

"Tell me about yourself," Gary said.

"You could try and pretend this isn't a job interview." Samantha's mom said.

"Sure it is. I'm trying to see if he'll... be the right man."

"Well I'm a Liberal Arts Major."

"I guess that's why you went to a big engineering school, right?"

"Gary!" Samantha's mother said.

Gary slapped his belly in laughter. "I apologize. What are you thinking about doing with it?"

"Well I'm not decided yet. I was thinking about going onwards to grad school and specializing in something else."

"Well," Gary said looking at the television. "Good for you."

An advertisement on the TV ran for the presidential election. Gary took a wad of dip and spat into an empty soda bottle. "Fucking spineless liberals. Who'd you vote for in the last election?"

"No one, I was too young."

"Who do you usually side with?"

Trevor was aware from the way he was looking at him that there was a right answer. "Well, I usually side with the Democrats."

Gary played with a button on his shirt, cleared his throat, and sat up a little straighter. "Okay, alright, well." Trevor could see his forehead muscles working. Samantha's hand was on his arm now holding him in a half hug. He looked at her and she rolled her eyes. "Well, why, like what's got you so convinced that anything they say is correct?"

Trevor thought about his grandmother and her job as a waitress. He thought of her feet and how her toes came out sideways from all the standing she'd done. Trevor looked at the man attempting to peer into his soul for an answer. His pupils seemed blue from the TV. "I like the idea of health care reform."

"Let me tell you," Gary said, placing one hand across his chest as if he were a public speaker, "exactly why that will never work."

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They drove about twenty minutes out of town. Along the way Gary went over the basics of deer hunting. "You find a good tree, perch in it for a long time, and then when you see a deer, you shoot it. The entire time you got to be dead quiet. Also there's some calls and scents and trash like that. Easy, even a spineless liberal like you can do it." Three years of the spineless liberal jokes had taught Trevor to just smile when provoked.

In fact, it was one of the first things Samantha had told him, that he called the "Rules of En-Gary-ment."

"If he provokes you or insults you, just take it. He doesn't like a man who isn't willing to stand up for himself, but he hates opposition more."

"If he discusses politics in any way, don't engage him. The answer is that he's right and he always will be."

"If he laughs, laugh with him. Talk to him about rock and roll, his car, his job, anything that pertains to him and nothing that really pertains to you. It's not that hard once you get used to it."

Sure, he'd thought, just get along with the Father-in-law and you can just sex up his daughter to get out the frustration. The only problem being that Trevor was still working up to the sexing his daughter part of the plan, and meanwhile, he was finding himself more and more silent when Gary was in the room. And it wasn't that Trevor wanted to talk so much, he just didn't like being criticized when he did.

They arrived by a snow covered dirt road to the hunting area. There was a forest nearby. The entire ground was covered in white and Trevor imagined what it would look like with spatter of blood, deer blood. He was going to be out here for hours. He tried to scratch through the layers of hunting gear, but couldn't get any meaningful friction.

“Hey,” this wasn't a graceful start, “I need to ask you something.”

Gary turned around and put a finger to his lips. He pointed into the woods, put two hands up and imitated pointy antlers, then he put his hand up in the shape of a gun and made a little shot animation.

“No I know but—“

Again the finger came up. It was going to be a long trip.

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A few months into the relationship, Sarah's cousin had gotten married. Trevor and Sarah went together, Trevor wearing an old suit of his Dad's, which felt big in all the wrong places. “We have to get you your own suit one day,” Sarah told him.

He'd never been to a wedding and didn't spend much time in church either. It was a small tan bricked church that was only as wide as the sanctuary but still had room for an entrance hall, a reception room, and several other back areas. After walking around a bit and meeting or catching up with Sarah's family members—with the usual questions—

“How's school?”

“You and Sarah doing good?”

“Let me tell you about this time that...”

Sarah grabbed his hand as he was answering and dragged him to the reception room. It was a window lit room with white chairs and tables and a kitchenette. Gary sat at



one of the tables staring at the windows which had their blinds down. “You two should talk.”

“Why me?”

Sarah raised an eyebrow and put her hands on her hips. “You guys are a lot alike. And he’s grumpy because he has to be around our family. I know you’re stressed talking to them too, so maybe you can unwind.”

It wasn’t the worst idea. He was glad that she knew he was stressed out by her family, but didn’t understand how she didn’t understand he felt the same way about her dad. Or maybe she did.

He walked up and sat next to him. “Hey, man, how you doing?”

Gary rubbed his eye. “Hey. Thanks for coming along. It’s good to have you here.”

Trevor was surprised. His words had seemed genuine. Still, Trevor wasn’t sure what to say. He hadn’t been expecting much. “Pretty special day, huh?”

“Special, yeah, pretty special. I’m thinking about... well, to be honest, I’m thinking about Sarah. I’ve often thought about what I would say to the man who marries her.”

Trevor sat up straighter in his seat and placed his hands on his legs.

“Don’t get any ideas.” Gary said.

“I wasn’t thinking about it. It’s a little early I’d say.”

“Right.” Gary regarded him for a moment. “For dads it’s a lot like some young—sometimes, liberal—punk is just coming in to try and steal one of the most important pieces of your life from you.” He took off his glasses and Trevor counted the wrinkles on the bridge of his nose. “You don’t realize it, because you’re young, but a man’s soul is

made of limited pieces. Young men try and keep these pieces all to themselves, bunched up,” he held his arms out, his hands in fists, the black gemmed ring on one pointer matching his tuxedo. “And grown men, they,” he let his arms fall. “Give them away.”

Trevor nodded. He didn’t know if he bought it, or if this constituted a good moment. He was too busy wondering why he shouldn’t have any ideas. Maybe he did have ideas.

“My daughter is a piece of my soul and I wonder what sort of man is going to take that piece away from me. You understand what I mean?”

The room was hot. It was summer, but not particularly hot. It was just these clothes he had, too big. There was an oppressive layer of heat on his chest. He stood up. It was just him and Gary in a big dark church and Gary was talking about soul, and all Trevor could think about was how hot it was and how his soul was ineffably for Sarah, more so than this man who was an on again off again nice guy. “I understand. And I agree. I think you’re absolutely right, Gary.”

The older man smirked, crossed his arms, kicked up a leg, and leaned back in his chair. “Good lord,” he muttered. “We got ourselves a kiss ass.”

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Trevor looked at the rifle in his hands. Then he looked at the back of Gary’s head. He tried to imagine the shape a red splatter would make on the snow. “I need to talk to you for a second.”

“Look, I know it’s your first time hunting, but it’s really important that you stay qui—“

“I’d like to ask your permission to marry your daughter.”

Gary raised his eyebrows as if Trevor had thrown a rock at him. He set his rifle down against a tree. He rubbed his nose. "Didn't think a spineless guy like you would really want to hunt anyways." Then a frown decorated his lips. This only made Trevor a little angrier. Where did he get off being upset? They were total opposites, two people with little in common. Of course, Trevor didn't want to go hunting. That just wasn't who he was.

"So what do you think?"

"You want to know what I think?" Gary smirked. Now it was Trevor's turn to frown. "How about we make a deal?"

"What kind of a deal?"

"I want you to shoot a deer."

Trevor swallowed. He looked at the gun in his hands again, looked at the tree trunks all around them, looked at the tree stand on Gary's back.

"You either do it, or you don't get to know what I think."

Trevor reconsidered the blood splatter on the snow. Gary pointed to the trees. "Now, let's find a good spot, huh?"

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The wedding party ended up not being in the chapel's reception room. Instead, they drove across town to a different venue, an old-farmhouse-looking place with wood walls and a big dance floor and many tables to accommodate the guests. Trevor sat with Sarah and her parents at a square table. Sarah and Trevor held hands under the table. Trevor was still upset from the earlier exchange, but hadn't said anything to Sarah.

After the wife danced with her husband and father, Sarah pulled him to the dance floor, where they did what they did best—gyrate awkwardly and embarrass themselves together. Trevor was fine with that. He could be ashamed, dressed down, embarrassed, and awkward, so long as he could do it with her. It was only when she tried to point out how bad he was at “Walk Like an Egyptian” that he felt a little self-conscious. They slow danced to a country song.

Then they returned to the table. Sarah scurried off to the bathroom, excusing herself. The garter toss was announced. Trevor felt put on the spot. “Bachelors come on down.” He looked around.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Gary asked him.

Trevor thought about their discussion in the reception room. As he walked by he leaned over. “Don’t worry. I won’t catch it.”

Gary recoiled a bit from him, but Trevor couldn’t tell if it was because of what he’d said or because he was whispering close to his ear. Either way he made his way up to the group of other guys of varying ages while the husband grabbed the garter and tossed it up. It floated to the floor in a wilt. Not one of them stepped out to grab it.

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They hung two tree stands on a couple of trees close together. The sound of the metal sticks as he planted them in the bark made him wonder why he’d had to be quiet in the first place. But he knew why. He didn’t even have to ask. Climbing the tree made him realize how out of shape he was. He sat in the stand breathing hard enough that Gary looked over and held his finger up again. He waved his hand at him.

There was nothing left to do but wait. Wind blew in the trees causing the branches to clack together and Trevor thought about cherries. He thought about Samantha running a cherry around her lips like she'd done one time in his dorm. There had been a six hour session of making out one time where they took each other's clothes off down to the underwear and cuddled on and off between vigorous bouts of kissing, pinching, scratching, massages. He remembered the warm afternoon sun fading to evening, the crinkle of bed springs. He wondered about the age of the mattress and how many other college students had found themselves as enraptured in another person as he was. "Why not just do it?" he'd asked at one point.

"You know why," she said, as she kissed his neck. "It's wrong."

"Is this wrong?" he asked, dipping a few fingers into her under wear.

"Yes," she said, her breath catching in her throat, "but not as wrong."

He restrained only when she grabbed his wrist and resisted his gentle loving pushes. He sighed into her back and played with her hair until hunger led them to a restaurant nearby where they wondered if their reddened cheeks would betray their escapades.

He saw Gary raise his rifle and look through his scope. Trevor followed the direction of the gun and saw a buck. It was nosing around on the ground, pushing the dirt. The way it tongued at the uncovered dirt made him think of the gap between Sarah's underwear again. It walked up to a tree and started rubbing its neck against it and he thought of the way they often did something similar in an embrace.

Gary gave him a thumbs up and lowered the rifle. Trevor lifted the rifle. He'd only shot a gun in his grandpa's backyard a few times. He peered through the scope. The deer had no idea what was about to happen.

When he'd adjusted his aim he knew this was it. He was about to shoot a deer. He and Gary would go back and no doubt Sarah would hear about it. His bullet would penetrate straight to the vital fluids and she'd be upset with him for it. He thought about her kiss on his forehead, and how great it would feel to be merged with her. Forget this trial by gunfire. Wasn't it worth it?

He knew the answer was no before he pulled the trigger. The deer looked in his direction as he pulled it and for a moment it felt like he just stared into Trevor's eyes. Then the sound of the explosion reached Trevor's ears. The buck tore off through the snow and trees.

"You missed." Gary said.

"I know."

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At the wedding, Sarah had heard, of course, what Trevor had said about the garter. When they arrived back at her home they left to go to dinner together. "Why would you say something like that?"

"I'm sorry. He just got to me, all right?"

"There's nothing he could've said to you to make you say something as awful as that." She hugged her knees in the car seat. "Do you not want to marry me?"

"Of course I want to, one of these days."

"Then act like it."

His mind hung on that word act. If only she knew how much he bit back, how much he refused to say, how much he just tried to be agreeable, to be... but that was silly too, wasn't it?

As they ate dinner he wondered who she wanted to marry. If he held back so much just to be palatable and agreeable for her, then what would she think if he shared his real opinions and feelings?

“Your dad is mean, manipulative, and I hate him.”

“I think it would be more appropriate to fuck before we got married.”

“Your old school ideas of this are ridiculous, archaic, and could you please stop using your parents as an excuse for not forming your own opinions?”

Every sentence was awful to him, deplorable, the types of thing he'd never ever say or want to say to someone he loved. He'd drop her off later than night with a kiss on the cheek without coming inside. He was too upset.

And then, as he often did when he started worrying about them, he got over it and kept smiling even if he didn't feel like it.

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There were no more deer. Trevor knew there wouldn't be even before Gary explained how loud a gun shot was. They took the tree stands back to the Jeep, unloaded the rifles, and the whole time Trevor wanted to explode.

“So, about my question.”

“What about it? You missed.”

He wanted to shout at him. Wanted to scream. Wanted to bash him with the tail end of the rifle until he fell down then keep swinging until every bone of his corpse was

mushed into crunchy pieces. He wanted to bash him until that stupid smirk didn't exist anymore. "I still need an answer."

He wondered if Gary understood what he was asking. It wasn't about Gary's soul, it was about Trevor's ability to do what he wanted. But all Gary seemed to care about was playing gatekeeper. He smirked, held up his finger. "Guess you shouldn't have fucked up, then."

Now they clambered into the jeep. Trevor felt sick to his stomach. This wasn't worth it. He would never be able to get along with this man, and he was scared to think of what that meant for their future. Sarah loved her dad, practically worshipped him. Trevor was always going to be second to this man, no matter how many concessions he made for him, no matter how prickly Gary ever got. Gary was a dad and better at it than Trevor was at being a boyfriend, no matter how he felt about that opinion.

Gary lifted a cigarette up to his mouth. He popped in the car lighter. At some point it would pop back up full of hot electric fire. Trevor had watched his mom do the same before. He thought about the glow it reflected in the pupil of the eyes of the person lighting it, a red spark in a darkness of perspective.

"You really want to know what I think?" Gary asked.

The truth was not really. He wasn't sure about any of it anymore. He wasn't sure he could keep doing this, keep playing nice. He wanted to tell the truth; he didn't care what Gary thought. If he wanted to marry Sarah, there was nothing Gary could do about it, approve or disapprove. And now, Trevor realized, maybe he didn't want to marry her. Maybe he was right to let the garter float to the floor.



Gary patted Trevor's shoulder. He blew the smoke of the cigarette out into the cab. "Well?"

"Give me your worst," Trevor said.

He turned his head and leaned on the door and watched the fields of snow roll by, untouched, unmarked, and without any meaning. This was how he felt. He wanted to touch, and whether that was Sarah or not was her choice, not Gary's. It didn't matter what the old man thought because Trevor didn't need his permission. Not for anything.

Gary flicked his cigarette ashes into the car tray. He blew out the smoke filling up the car. He laughed. "Let me tell you exactly what I think."

## Punishment

Ronald, in the middle of April when Spring was fresh and the days were still pendulums between warm and cold, moved from Chicago to a little suburb in Columbia, Missouri. It was a necessary move, facilitated by “a friend of a friend” of the Chicago chief of police, to a two-story fifteen-hundred square foot house to be filled with the belongings he couldn’t pack quickly enough—even though he was trying his best not to seem in a hurry. “Keep your head down, keep your mouth shut, and expect someone, some young dumb upstart who doesn’t know how to keep his own head down, to find you. Be ready. Here’s a list of questions they’ll likely ask and here’s how you should answer. Silence.” That’s what the chief had told him. “Remember, we know what you did and that’s why you’ll be protected.”

Ronald felt dislocated. As a police officer he felt like he was always fighting to serve his people. But he’d grown up in the city streets, constantly witness to the “truths” that his mom and all her friends told him about coming from the lower class. The language of being poor, Ronald eventually learned, was excuses.

“Check hasn’t come in yet, though it should have. That’s why the payment is late.”

“I pull out. That’s why I don’t need condoms.”

“I wasn’t doing nothing wrong. The police just have it out for me.”

It was day after day of the endless cycle of bullshit, and that’s why he couldn’t tolerate hearing that, not from anyone. Not to mention the violence. The real way that some of the poor kept all the other poor down, by making life into a big game.

He climbed the stairs to the second floor running one hand along the curving white wall of his circular entrance hall. He imagined what the white wall would look like with star burst patterns of head shot blood. His mind drifted to the idea of what it would be like to be a coma victim and wake up after two months. He knew about the stiffness from every coma story out there, but what did it feel like to really let loose, to really unwind, to really try and move on with the rest of your life, to not remember well enough what happened to you to tell some detectives asking about it.

As he deposited another cardboard box upstairs, marked to indicate that its belongings belonged in the bedroom, his doorbell rang. He wondered if this was the aforementioned upstart, the one who'd trailed him here to get yet another statement. He descended the stairs and saw through the crystalized windows a blurry figure. He opened the door and a woman stood smiling in the doorway. He quickly catalogued her appearance as he'd been trained to do—black, five foot five, about a hundred and forty pounds, wearing a green shirt

“Hi!” she said. She placed her hand into the space between them and he grasped it noting how smooth her skin was and the smell of mangos about her. Her bright white teeth shined under her red lipstick like a toothpaste commercial smile, something practiced. “I just wanted to introduce myself, it’s been a while since we got any new neighbors close by. My name is Suzy, I live across the street there.” She pointed to a two-story brick house with a broad bay window. Ronald noted the two black SUVs in the driveway and their license plates which read: MMABER and BBYBER.

“I’m Ronald.” he said. “Do those stand for Mamma Bear and Baby Bear?”

Suzy smiled and nodded. "Yeah, it was my son's idea. He's a big old momma's boy." She looked past his shoulders into the house. "Do you have a wife or a kid or anything?"

"No, nothing like that," he said. "Well, not anymore." He wondered sometimes why his mouth was so big. Suzy cocked her head to one side. "We broke up right before the move," he added. More accurate would've been to say that she couldn't handle the fact that Ronald had put a guy into a coma. He could still hear his screams.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Suzy said. She seemed to look everywhere but at him.

"So what's your son's name?" he asked.

"It's Jimmy."

"Any dad in the picture?"

"No, ain't got no man in my life right now and haven't for a long time." Ronald noted the downturn in her voice as if she were somewhat ashamed of admitting that. Her eyes looked to the corners of his porch.

"Single mother? I respect that. My mom raised me by herself, too."

"Well I bet she's a strong woman."

"Yeah she was a strong old girl."

"Well, hey, I actually wanted to mention. I'm part of the neighborhood committee. Head of our neighborhood watch and we do barbeque pretty regularly at the neighborhood park just down the road. It should would be great if you could show up. We get a lot of the neighborhood together and all."

"Oh really, neighborhood watch? Anything I need to know about?"

"I don't want to scare you off." She laughed and Ronald laughed with her.

“I’d be surprised if you got anything that could scare me.”

“Now, there’s a story behind those words.”

“Well, maybe I can tell you at the barbeque?”

“Sounds good.” She smiled. “I guess I’ll see you there, then?”

“For sure.”

He closed the door behind him and caught his breath. This was just another thing he could train himself for. Be casual, be normal, and don’t get caught up in anything illegal. The last thing he could afford now was someone figuring out he was here.

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He continued to work as a policeman at the local station. The chief knew why he was there, but the other guys just heard that he wanted to move out of Chicago to find somewhere nicer to play police officer.

The night before the barbeque he heard his doorbell ring. Again, his mind went to the idea of a young upstart or a private detective. He opened the door and it was Suzy, again. She was wearing a white shirt and red lipstick. She smelled of perfume and Robert was a little surprised by her smile. “Hello, Suzy.”

“Hey Robert, I was just wondering... have you had dinner yet?”

“No, not yet. I haven’t been grocery shopping yet.”

“Well that’s just unacceptable. I was just about to start making dinner at my place if you’d like to come over for a bit.”

“Oh, you know, I’m not sure if...” he paused for a moment, saw the readiness for disappointment in the way she sunk on her heels and the way that her shoulders had already drooped lightly. She really looked pretty good and Robert imagined how she’d

look in bed. The scent of her perfume was something like plums or magnolias. “Actually, give me a few minutes and I’ll be right over.”

Her face brightened. “I’ll see you soon.”

After he put on his shoes his cell phone went off. The number was one the chief had told him would be contacting him. Not a detective, but a confidant. He answered the phone.

“The sun has risen, but the weather’s all cloudy.” Then the call ended.

It was the chief’s man. Robert pulled out a notepad from a desk drawer. The phrase was code for something. The guy had woken up, but he couldn’t remember what had happened. Possibly he’d suffered enough brain damage he wouldn’t ever remember. Robert sighed. He thought about that night. The smell of smoke from the car engine as he gripped the man’s hair in his hand. He imagined the way his arm shook each time he slammed his head into the steering wheel. He remembered feeling sick to his stomach.

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“Come right in and make yourself at home.”

Suzy’s living room was almost a mirror of Robert’s own, but with far more homeliness and furniture. She had a green couch with a redwood coffee table. It was a color clash, as far as Robert was concerned, but he turned to Suzy and raised his eyebrows. “Very nice.”

“Dinner should be ready in about twenty minutes. Jimmy!” she called.

“What?”

“We got a guest for dinner. Come meet him.”

Jimmy, muttering something Robert couldn't quite hear, appeared from the hallway. Jimmy—five foot nine, maybe ten, wearing a gray shirt with a gray hoodie, and jeans—took one look at Robert and huffed a little bit. It was the type of huff Robert knew meant he was going to have to work to get Jimmy to like him. Robert extended his hand. “James? Or Jimmy?”

“Jimmy’s fine, and uhh...”

“Robert.”

“Robby?”

“Whatever you feel like.” The handshake ended shortly after it began. “How old are you Jimmy?”

“Nineteen, you the neighbor across the street?”

“Yep. That’s me.”

Suzu spoke from the kitchen. “Why don’t you show Robert your little studio, Jimmy?”

“I don’t know if he’d be interested in...”

“You guys have got to do something while waiting for dinner. Besides, what if Robert has some connections? I’ve been telling you about networking, young man, it’s important.”

Jimmy blew his breath out. “Come on, Rob.”

They went through the hallway where Robert made a mental note of the pictures. A baby picture, no doubt of Jimmy, sat in a blond wood frame. “That’s cute.” Jimmy didn’t respond. He disappeared behind a door frame and Robert instantly flashed back to a time he’d raided a house with a suspect, believed to be armed. He’d seen the man

disappear behind a door frame, and, fearing for his life, Ronald had turned the corner and fired his handgun. It was the first time he'd fired his gun at anyone. His bullet went high and he saw that the guy didn't have a shotgun at all and was cowered in a corner, tears and snot falling from his face.

He turned the corner and saw a mass of wires on the floor. Various instruments and microphones were wired across the room and a big laptop sat on a desk. There were some extra monitors which had digital soundboard programs sprung up. Robert saw the Gibson Les Paul sitting in the corner, a vibrant yellow pick nestled between its strings. There was a cherry wood drum set in the corner of the room. Several wires ran between speakers and consoles throughout the room. "Wow, this is a pretty pricey set-up."

"Yeah, this is what I got. Just about every dollar I make goes into my music."

"How long have you been working on this?"

"Since I was sixteen."

"Really?"

"You got to sound good to get anyone to listen to you."

"So what kind of music you make?" Robert spotted a couple of guitars in the corner.

"Mostly focus on rock."

"Like Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath?"

"Those are like old bands, man. I'm thinking more recent, System of a Down, Avenged Sevenfold."

"Ah, yeah I tend to be a little more old school, even for people my age. If there's a mosh pit during the concert, I'm not interested." Ronald thought about the feel of hair



clenched between his fingers, the soft thud of a forehead against a hard plastic steering wheel, the almost comical sound of a broken nose setting off a busted and flat horn. These were things he'd done, things he'd seen himself do. "You ever been in a fight or anything?"

"No. I'm a goody-two shoes, man. You can't fuck up when your mom's in the neighborhood watch. I've been getting that lecture since I was a kid."

"It's not a great idea." Robert examined Jimmy's shoulders. He felt the shoulders were the body's map. Jimmy stretched his arms up and to the side and seemed to look anywhere but at Robert. This could've been normal nervousness but Robert thought of stretching and looking away as a sign of lies about to be told or already out there. "I was arresting this one guy once when..." Robert paused. Had he really just said that?

"Oh, you're a cop?"

"Umm... yeah..." He nodded as if he were going along with a story. "Yeah, so I was arresting a guy once and he puts up a fight, tries to get away from me, so I drop him, like, you know, like you've probably seen in cop films or on TV a thousand times. Anyway, when I get him handcuffed I search him and I find this massive switchblade, I'm talking six inches of jagged metal."

"Damn, that's crazy."

"You know, there's lots of crazy shit you see as a cop."

Jimmy nodded. "You want to hear a tune?"

"Play it for me, man."

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“Jimmy’s music is really great, don’t you think, Ronald?” Suzy asked him. There were bowls of mashed potatoes and corn, chicken fried steak and biscuits.

“It’s as great as the food. I can tell you’ve been working hard on it.”

“Thanks, man.”

“How long has it been since you had a good home cooked meal?” Suzy asked.

“It’s just been too long. Probably before Police Academy.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask about that. How come you didn’t mention you were a cop before?”

“Ah, well,” Ronald shrugged. “You know it just doesn’t come up very often and sometimes people act weird when they know you’re a cop.”

“That’s true,” she nodded. “People act weird sometimes when I talk about the neighborhood watch. I couldn’t imagine actually being a cop. So why did you move here when you live in a great place like Chicago?”

“Well you know, I just wanted to get out of the city. I’ve always liked the country side. Like around here you guys got those trees out on the edges of town and it’s just all scenic. I bet you have great hiking trails.”

“A few, for sure.” Suzy said. “Jimmy would know better than I would. I don’t get out that much.”

“Pfft, more like at all.”

“Jimmy!” she slapped at him, and giggled.

Jimmy laughed and shook his head. “It’s true, Mom, you spend all your free time watching TV all day.”

“Well excuse me, mister active. When was the last time you actually took a girl somewhere besides your bedroom?”

Ronald was biting back laughter.

“That’s cold, Mom. You know I don’t mess around that much.”

“No, of course not. Ronald, I’m proud of my Jimmy. He’s going to be with his high school girlfriend officially for two years in just a couple of weeks.”

“Hey congrats, Jimmy.”

“It ain’t that special.” He stuffed his mouth full of food and looked away from either of the other two.

“Well,” Suzy said, “Longer than I ever had a guy.” She laughed mostly by herself then looked over at Ronald. “What about you?”

Jimmy turned to look at Ronald. “Well, I’m not that different really. I was with my last girlfriend for maybe three years or so before we decided our lives were going in two different directions.” He felt himself choking a little. He coughed. “Well, you know... people go different directions in life, got to choose what they want for themselves and others. Not to get all serious.”

“You both are nuts.” Jimmy said.

“You love your girlfriend, Jimmy?” Ronald asked.

“Of course I do. You heard that song I wrote for her.”

“Good, man. I think the best thing anyone can do is just love.” He felt the lie slip through his teeth. He wanted to rescind it, but Suzy smiled from across the table with a knowing look.

“Love is what makes the world go around,” she said. “Now don’t be giving me grandbabies anytime soon, you hear?”

“Jesus, Mom.”

They all laughed.

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The next night, the barbeque took place in a park in the middle of the neighborhood. It was as newly constructed as everything else in the suburb. The paint on playground equipment was fresh and unchipped, windy walkways, and benches of plastic coated mesh. There were at least a hundred people at various grills and tables, all eating chicken, hot links, ribs, and brewing chilis, beans, and, of course, burgers and hot dogs.

Ronald had found some guys handing out beer from a giant cooler. He was sipping on a Blue Moon and looking for either Suzy or Jimmy. He profiled the people he walked by. A huge portion of them were younger than he was—fresh graduates in a new neighborhood with nice jobs and cute spouses. They smiled with whitened teeth and the women wore sundresses or jean shorts to show off their hairless sometimes tanned legs.

Almost everyone was as white as Ronald, and the lack of diversity surprised him.

He saw Suzy wearing a white baseball cap and form fitting jeans. They made eye contact and she walked up to him. “Hey, glad you made it.”

“I wouldn’t miss it for anything.”

“Have you seen Jimmy?” she asked.

“Not yet. I thought he’d be with you.”

“No his girlfriend met him at the house and they said they’d walk here together, but I can’t see them anywhere.”

“Maybe they’re doing what kids do.”

“He needs to be here to help me cook up. Come on I’ll show you what I’m making.”

Suzy had set up her own foldable table next to one of the park grills. “Jerk chicken, spicy just like my mom showed me. This is the sauce,” she said, holding a glass container with a red glaze that had pepper flakes floating in the mix. “Go on, take a whiff.”

Ronald leaned in and the air met his nose hairs and set fire to the skin. He pinched his nose and his eyes watered. “That’s some powerful stuff. Smells great, though.”

“You know it’s hard to let go of your kids.” Suzy said.

“What do you mean?”

“Jimmy’s nineteen, he’s working, he’s got a girlfriend, he keeps talking about moving out. I spent the last nineteen years ensuring he grows up, he’s healthy, he’s right in the head. Now I just get real lonely when he’s out doing other stuff. We don’t do much together anymore. He’s just distracted now with his own life.”

Ronald saw Jimmy across the park. He seemed to have just arrived holding the hand of a girl wearing a purple t-shirt and some black framed glasses.

“I guess, I’m just realizing how lonely I am.”

Ronald felt lonely too. He looked at Suzy who was looking at him. He smiled. “I know what you mean, mama bear.” Then he pointed, “I think I see Jimmy.”

She looked. “That would be him.”

“I really liked your dinner last night, Suzy. Maybe we should do that again.”

“I think I’d like that.”

“Want me to go fetch Jimmy?”

“Sure.”

Ronald headed over to where Jimmy was. But something had changed, the girl had crossed her arms and stood with a hip leaning out to the side. As Ronald got closer he could hear that her voice was raised. “And let me tell you another thing, I’ve spent nothing but the past two years being with you and putting up with it, and now you’re going to do this to me?”

Ronald thought about turning around but Jimmy waved at him. “Hey, Ronald.”

“Hi, Jimmy.”

“Let me introduce you to the greatest girlfriend who ever lived. Linda, this is Ronald.”

Linda didn’t look at Ronald, acknowledge Ronald, or do anything in response. She just stood and stared coldly at Jimmy. “Well, I don’t mean to intrude on any conversations going on, I’m going to be with your mom over there.”

“No, forgive me,” Linda said. “I’m clearly not wanted here.” And with that she walked away from the two.

“Shit, man,” Jimmy said.

“I don’t want to pry or anything, but what was that all about?”

“Stupid shit. I don’t want to bore you with it. It’s a party right. Let’s make some food and eat it. I’m fucking hungry, man.”

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Around a week later, Ronald was looking at the cardboard boxes he still hadn’t unpacked. He couldn’t bother to open any up and just thinking about it stressed him out

to no end. He had no idea how long he'd be here. He wasn't ready to call it permanent yet and he longed to return to Chicago.

So he lazed on his couch and watched re-runs of sitcoms. That's mostly all he did at home. He was waiting for information regarding the coma victim, or some sign that he might come back soon. He wanted each and every vibration to be a text from his ex-girlfriend saying she was sorry and she'd be there soon to be with him. But he knew it wouldn't happen, it would never happen. He was irreversibly alone. Except for Suzy and Jimmy, but they hardly knew him and he was worried that getting closer would only lead to them not wanting to be friends with him.

Somewhere between ten and eleven at night he saw the red and blue flashes of light on the street outside. He walked up to the blinds and opened it up and saw a cop car stopped on the street. There were two cops with flashlights and they were looking at an older teen. Then Ronald realized it was Jimmy. He had his hands up but one of the cops was patting him down.

Ronald grabbed his badge off his table and walked outside. He crossed the streets and heard Jimmy talking. "Man, I didn't do anything."

"We'll be the judges of that," one of the officers said.

Ronald recognized the officer, a short guy who worked nights. Ronald usually talked to him on the way in as he was on his way out. "Officer Carter," Ronald said.

He looked up. "Sir, please... oh, Ronald?"

"Hey, what's going on?"

"I didn't know you lived here."

"Yeah, just over there, across the street from him, actually."

“Ronald,” Jimmy said, “Tell these guys I didn’t do anything.”

If it had been anyone else, Ronald knew he probably wouldn’t do it. He’d roughed up a few kids in his day though. He knew the ropes, the calls, the ones you could get away with harassing. “Carter, what’s up? Why’d you stop Jimmy?”

The two officers looked at each other. Carter wiped his upper lip, “Well, we umm... there was a call a few neighborhoods over about a suspicious looking fellow.”

“A few neighborhoods over?”

“Yeah well... not really a few. Like the very next one behind this one. We got a few units out patrolling the area for other suspicious individuals.”

“Jimmy, were you in any other neighborhood tonight?”

“No. I was just returning from my girlfriend’s house, I walk her home at nights. In case of,” he cleared his throat and looked up at Carter, “suspicious individuals.” Then he shrugged, “Why does it even matter? How exactly am I suspicious looking?”

“Good question,” Ronald looked at Carter and lifted an eyebrow.

“Can I speak to you a moment, officer?” Carter said, waving him over behind the car.

“Why not?”

They walked over behind the car and Carter said. “Look, I don’t know what sort of stick you got up your ass, or how you know this kid. This is my stop, though, and I can do the question asking.”

“You know Carter, I can’t fucking stand cops like you.”

“Excuse me?”



“It really is guys like you who make a bad name for us, make my fucking job harder. Look at that kid. Sandals, shorts, striped t-shirt. His girlfriend lives literally two blocks away from here. His house is right there,” Ronald pointed to it. “I’m sure you searched him and didn’t find anything, right?” Ronald leaned in closer and whispered, “Give me one good reason why you stopped him that isn’t because he’s black.”

“You’re interfering with a police investigation.”

“I could get you fired tomorrow. And you know it.”

Carter licked his lips. For a moment they stood in silence and Ronald wished he’d grabbed a weapon or something. Carter laughed, patted Ronald’s shoulders. “Expect the chief to talk to you about this tomorrow.” He walked over to Jimmy and said, “You’re free to go. Good thing Ronald here was kind enough to bail you out, kid.”

Jimmy sneered at him. Ronald came over and stood with him until the two officers had gotten back in their cars and drove off. As soon as they were gone Jimmy blew out his breath. “What a fucking asshole. Shit.” He stomped the ground and kicked at some grass. “Shit.” He sat down on his feet and covered his mouth with both hands.

“Hey, you all right?” Ronald asked.

“I never thought in a million years... I always heard fucking stories, man, but to actually be there, to have some fucking cop tell you you’re a suspicious individuals in your own... I’ve lived here for five fucking years.”

“It’s a real disgusting thing,” Ronald said. He thought about a routine traffic stop a few years ago that had gone awry. A guy Ronald had pulled over for a rear light malfunction had refused to get out of his car for Ronald to search it. The man asserted there was nothing the police needed, so the stop got delayed for half an hour while a K9

unit was called to sniff around. Eventually, they ascertained there was nothing, but the man became very heated and angry and yelled at Ronald.

“No offense, but I’m going to go home.”

“You want me to come along?”

“I don’t really want to think about any cops at all right now.”

“We aren’t all bad.”

“Maybe.”

“Jimmy...”

“Look, just fuck off, man, I’m not in a good mood. First I fight with my girlfriend, and now this. Tonight’s just shit, dude, so, please?”

Ronald sighed and nodded at him. He watched Jimmy walk home.

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It was a couple of weeks later and Ronald had heard nothing from Suzy or Jimmy. As he pulled in one night, he saw Suzy across the street in the yard checking her mailbox.

“Hey,” he said and waved. She waved back and he approached from across the street.

“How’ve you guys been?”

“I’ve been all right, but as you can imagine, Jimmy’s been a little more confrontational lately.”

Ronald frowned and nodded. “I wish I knew something I could say to him.”

“I think you could probably say the smartest, brightest, most wonderful thing anyone’s said to him, and he still wouldn’t listen to you.” Suzy smiled as she said it, but Ronald looked back to the MMABRR license plate.

“I’m just worried about him. He was really affected by what happened.”

“As he should be. I’ve got it under control Ron, really.”

“Do you think we can ever do dinner again?”

“Probably not for a while. But I know Jimmy. He’ll get over it eventually. Now, I do got to get back inside, so I’ll see you around.” Suzy left him with a smile and walked up the stairs. Ronald thought for a moment it looked like she was moving more quickly than usual, as if getting away from him. He crossed his own street, walked into his own house and blew out his breath.

There was a call from the hidden number and he picked it up. “Hello?”

“Ronald, it’s the Chief. Look, he’s brain dead. Whatever you did to him was more permanent than anyone thought. Without his confession there’s too little evidence against you. Still the case is open and there’s some general hostility. But you should be able to come home soon. Just hang in there, pal.”

“Thanks, Chief.”

The phone hung up. Permanent brain damage. Ronald sighed. He sat at the kitchen bar and grabbed a bottle of whiskey he’d been nursing. He still imagined the cracking of the skull on the steering wheel, the tension of his muscles, the way his knuckles had bruised. He hadn’t even killed him.

He sifted through his phone and found his ex-girlfriend’s number. He called it. He got a notification that he could not reach the number. He set the phone on the bar. He stared at it while he took his shot.

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That night, Ronald was slightly drunk and watching re-runs when the doorbell rang. “What?” he said aloud. He grabbed his gun, tried to peer out the windows. He could

only make out a small silhouette and noise of a woman breathing heavily. He flipped on the porch light and saw Jimmy's girlfriend, Linda. Linda's right eye was blackened.

Ronald opened the door. "Are you all right?" he looked out behind her.

"You're a cop, right?" she asked. "Please let me in."

"Yeah, come on." He guided her in then closed the door and turned off the porch light. He kept looking outside. "Sit on the couch. Is someone chasing you?"

"No. I mean, I don't think so."

He turned off the kitchen light and checked out of those windows. "I don't see anyone else."

"No one's chasing me. I don't think."

"Well. What happened? Why'd you come to me?"

"I just thought it would be easier than calling the cops." Then she leaned forward and started sobbing. Ronald saw the way her shoulders bobbed and the strained note in her vocal chords. It was fake, he knew it. He'd seen it every time he gave a teenager some traffic ticket.

"I'm going to need some facts, sweetheart."

"Who do you think would hit me? Huh?"

"I have no idea. I need you tell me."

"It was Jimmy, okay? Jimmy beat the shit out of me. You happy?" She lay out on the couch and buried her face in the pillow. Ronald wanted her to stop that. Those pillows were new.

"Look, can you sit up and tell me with a straight face?"

"Excuse me?"

“So you say Jimmy hit you.”

“Jimmy did hit me.” Her words were accompanied with little head bobs on the stressed syllables.

“Why would Jimmy hit you? Like what led up to it? You guys had a fight?”

“Ever since Jimmy almost got arrested he’s had like this really shitty attitude. And especially towards any mention of you. Do you know how many times he’s called you pig over the last few weeks? Like every other word out of his mouth.”

Ronald waved it off. That didn’t make any sense. He hadn’t done anything to Jimmy. He already thought she was lying so why would he believe this?

“Linda, stay focused please. What happened tonight?”

“I came over and he was just mouthy again. I’ve been putting up with it for two weeks so I tell him to stop acting like that. And then he gets all mouthy and he slaps me. So I say, ‘You fucking asshole, don’t fucking hit me again,’ and then he punches me in the eye.”

“Come with me.” Ronald said. He guided her to an inner office and turn on the light. He looked at her face and adjusted it with his hands. It was a shiner all right. He looked at other parts of her face. There were no indications of a slap. He looked at her hands. They didn’t look like she’d been in a fight either.

“You say you got slapped and then he hit you. Did you hit him at all?”

“I smacked his arm when he slapped me.”

“It really doesn’t look like you’ve been slapped.”

“Wow, are you calling me a liar? I have a big fucking black eye from getting beat my boyfriend and you’re calling me a liar?”

Ronald grabbed her arm. “Listen here. I’ve been doing this for a long fucking time, all right, and I’ve listened to liar after liar. They all act like you’re acting, all right? So if you’re serious, I suggest you stop questioning how I do my fucking job.”

She’d gone stiff and now the look on her face had shifted. Before it had been righteous or fake righteous anger, she now looked shocked and lost. Her eyes darted from him to the open door. He realized he was still holding her arm and he let her go. She rubbed her arm. They stood there silent for a moment. Ronald sighed. “Look, I’m not on duty right now. I highly doubt Jimmy wants me to go over there and start prodding him with questions. So, I’ll call the police, someone who is on the job can ask you what I asked you and you can tell them your story.”

“I’m just going to go home.”

“No, listen. If you’re positive that Jimmy punched and assaulted you, then we should call the cops. Don’t just let this go.”

“Fuck you.”

“What?”

“Nothing.” She shivered and Ronald realized he’d taken an aggressive step forward.

“Look if you don’t call the cops you may as well advertise the fact that you’re lying.”

“They aren’t going to help me. They’re just going to be just like you.”

Ronald was unaffected by the words. Again, he’d heard them many times before. She was just trying to hide the fact and when he’d scared her, it just scared the truth out

of her. People who really felt affected just decided to do the right thing. That's how it worked. He knew. He'd seen it before. He knew.

He led her to the door. He opened it and she walked out into the dark of the night. He watched through the window as she walked by the streetlight. She headed down the direction Jimmy had pointed the other night with the cops. Ronald let the blinds flap down, and he sat and leaned on his hands.

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He found himself knocking on Suzy's door a few days later. If she was around he could ask her if she knew anything. It wasn't exactly protocol, but Ronald had already foregone protocol to stick up for Jimmy once. She answered the door. "Ronald, why are you here?"

He looked around her. "Is Jimmy home?"

"Yes, but, Ronald, I don't think he wants to see you."

"Can you step outside for a moment?"

"I think it's better if I say inside."

Ronald was still wearing his police uniform. "Linda came over to my house the other night and accused Jimmy of giving her a huge black eye. I just want to ask him a few questions."

Suzy rubbed her lips together and stepped outside on the porch, closing the door behind her. "I don't know what's going between them, I don't know what's happened. I can tell you right now, going in there dressed like that and claiming you just want to ask a few questions is a really bad idea."

“I just want to see if the stories align. I’m not here to arrest, to intimidate, or anything like that. But I want some serious answers and I want to know I’m getting the truth.”

“And just why wouldn’t you get the truth?” Ronald could practically hear bear roars in his head. “Jimmy is a great boy and he doesn’t need any more harassment, not from you or from anyone else.” She shook her head. “Look, I thought you were different. You helped my boy. But you showing up like this with that sort of flimsy accusation proves you’re no different.”

“Suzy, you should be glad it’s me and not the officers from the other night.”

She looked like he’d slapped her across the face. “I’m sorry, officer, what did you just say to me?”

Ronald rolled his eyes. “Can I talk to Jimmy?”

“I think you better go home.”

“If he hit her, wouldn’t you like to know?”

“I know my son. You don’t. I don’t even know where you get off.”

“I get off on years of experience, Suzy. I’ve seen every situation, including this one. And I’m asking myself what to believe just based on the evidence in front of me. I’m not saying Jimmy did it, I’m saying it’s possible, and I just want to ask questions.”

“I don’t think you need to.”

“It’s frankly not up to you.”

“I’ll have no more of this. Unless you got a warrant, officer, you’ll not talk to my boy.” Suzy started opening the door.



Ronald watched how her face changed, hated himself for coming over in the first place. He watched her close the door behind her and with it, his opportunity to learn any sort of truth.

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A few weeks later the answer came. As Robert was on his way home, the operator came over the radio, "Unit 342 we've received a call of a domestic disturbance involving a black male and white female in your neighborhood of residence. Are you close enough to respond?" Robert had no reason to immediately think it was Jimmy.

"Confirmed, I'll head there immediately."

"Back-up will be there shortly."

Robert wanted to press the button and refuse it like it was some sort of action movie. He didn't need back-up, and god forbid if they sent Carter. But Robert didn't know he wouldn't need back-up.

The address was Suzy's. He pulled up with his lights off and parked. Suzy's car was gone and lights were on throughout the house. He got out and walked up to the door. He knocked. For once, he wasn't sure if he wanted to announce himself as police or just as who he was. No one answered the first knock. He unlatched his gun holster. He knocked again. Then from behind the door he heard a girl screaming.

He kicked the door. The screaming was louder now. Then the door was open. He held his gun out and scanned the room. Suzy wasn't anywhere to be found. "Jimmy!"

He walked back to the hallway where he saw the light of the bedroom on. "Is anyone in there?" he asked the dark door.

“Ronald?” Jimmy opened the door, then he saw the situation and raised his arms. “It’s not...” then there was a choking noise in his throat. Ronald saw a wild animal look pass over Jimmy’s face, the watering up of the eyes, the way they darted from his face to his gun, the clenching of the hands. He imagined Jimmy slamming the door and darting back in. Ronald imagined shooting at Jimmy.

“Jimmy, just stay right there.” Ronald lowered his gun. “Talk to me. What’s going on?”

From the bedroom he heard whimpers. He walked up to Jimmy and saw Linda curled up in a corner. Ronald turned to Jimmy. “I have to cuff you, okay?”

Jimmy kept his lips pressed together. Then he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Ronald could see scratch marks on his cheeks. He took Jimmy’s left hand and clasped a cuff on it. Jimmy ripped his hand from Ronald’s took a few steps into the hallway then paused and turned around. Ronald had his hand on his gun again. His training was shouting at him to be wary, to worry, to lift that gun, to tackle, to pin Jimmy’s neck against the ground with a knee, to taser him, to do whatever he could to protect himself. He knew the mantras, he repeated in his head. Anyone can be capable of violence, anyone can do something morally wrong, anyone at any time in the right circumstances.

Jimmy said, like a siren on a dark highway. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I want to believe that.” Ronald said.

Jimmy sighed. His lip trembled. “What do I do?”

“Lay down on the ground, let me cuff you, and we’ll sort this whole mess out.”

Jimmy looked to his left, no doubt contemplating the open front door. Then he lowered himself slowly. Ronald walked over to him lying on the ground. He took his hands gently and restrained them behind his back, feeling the thin layer of sweat over his skin. He guided him up and sat him down on his own couch.

He went back to the bedroom where Linda was sitting in the corner, crying lightly. Ronald touched her shoulder. "What happened here?"

She pushed at his arm, "No," she shouted half to him half to herself. "Don't touch me. Don't anyone fucking touch me."

"If you can't tell me, I can't help you."

She turned around and faced him. He saw her face. It was the same as it had been the other night. Her eye still bruised. "Did Jimmy do this to you?"

She breathed deep, "No." She shook her head. "No."

Ronald wanted to believe her. He wanted that one word to console him and remove the pressure of the situation.

From the living room he heard the scuffling of feet and the screen door bouncing off the porch. Ronald jumped up and ran to the living room. He ran outside and saw Jimmy lying in the grass, having tripped.

Ronald landed on him and grabbed his handcuffs. He wanted to slam Jimmy's head into the ground. "Did you hit her?"

"No." He sighed and just breathed. "Don't hurt me."

Ronald imagined he had three minutes or so before back-up arrived. "Jimmy, I don't have time to fuck around." He would get answers one way or another. "I haven't told anyone this, but Jimmy, I'm a violent man. You know why I moved here? I watched

a drunk driver kill his daughter in a car wreck. When I got to the car the man wasn't even lucid enough to realize what had happened, he kept pumping his foot into the gas. Know what I did?" Ronald reached out to Jimmy's head. He rubbed the back of it and gripped it tight. "I grabbed his head," he pushed lightly. "Then I bashed him against his steering wheel until he wasn't conscious anymore. Do you know why?"

His breathing had slowed and Ronald saw the animal fear come back. Only this time, he was glad. He was happy to see his fear. Ronald didn't need to know what had happened here tonight. Fear was the signature of guilt written on the check of a criminal face. People were just violent creatures.

"Because I've seen too much violence Jimmy, and I've seen too many violent people go without punishment. I'm here to correct that in the world. It's my job, Jimmy."

"You're a fucking whacko." Jimmy said. He shook his head. "This ain't got nothing to do with what I did, it's about what I am." He spit at Ronald's feet. "Do your worst. Ain't no one going to cry over one dead black kid in the suburb. Will they?"

"You're not half as smart as you think you are." Ronald was happy with the degree of shock on Jimmy's face. There were more red and blue lights headed down the street. He had fifteen seconds to do whatever he wanted to Jimmy. He could imagine the shattering of glass, the spray of blood, and the satisfaction of knowing he'd found his justice.