GRAVE BLANKETS, NOW AVAILABLE!

STORIES

By

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Abstract:

Grave Blankets, Now Available! is a literary fiction short story collection consisting of eight connected stories. The collection begins during the Civil War, when two deserters from Sherman's army discover the aftermath of a massacre deep in the Georgian forest. This incident serves as the catalyst for the other stories in the collection, which follow the families connected to the bizarre tragedy for the next 200 years. *Grave Blankets, Now Available!* blends literary fiction with elements of fabulism, slipstream, and historical fiction. The stories feature topics as diverse as county workers feeding roadkill to circus lions, a young woman in thrall of her fortune-teller mother, and a professional football player with an augmented arm.

I am fortunate enough to have had some success with the stories in this collection. "Steaks From the Trainer's Hand" won a Tethered by Letters fiction contest and was featured in the journal *F(r)iction*. "Silver Teeth Fill Empty Mouths" won the 2016 Marye Lynn Cummings Endowed Scholarship in Fiction, and "Familiar Depictions" received third place in that same award in 2017. Finally, stories from this collection helped to secure me a spot at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's PhD program in English/Creative Writing. I am pleased to be fully funded there as a graduate teaching assistant.

Thank you for reading this thesis, as well as for your assistance in helping me to become a better writer. I hope you enjoy the collection.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

SILVER TEETH FILL EMPTY MOUTHS

When Alanson Barber was caught deserting, he was strung up on the wagon wheel while around him the rest of Sherman's Army marched to breakfast. Unable to turn, he only felt a clambering up the opposite side of the wheel before someone began to shave his head. Falling hair circled the spokes below like a devil's halo. The shaver did not use cream, only water, and the bayonet skipped over Alan's furrows like a plow. Tiny snakes of blood wriggled down his face. The shaver did not speak, and Alan did not cry out. He was being marked, he knew, and he was almost relieved; better a shaved head than the desertion brand.

Even through the pain, he was amused, for Alanson was himself a barber, down through the family line. Alan's grandfather died before he was born, but Alan Sr. always told his son that Zeke Barber was a barber of the old days: a wooden pole wrapped in bloody bandages and stringed-teeth, a tank on top housing leeches for bloodletting.

The shaver's hands felt like tarantulas and his beard rasped and flopped across Alan's bare neck as if the man had the monstrous head of a tarantula, with two great gray beard-fangs and octuplet eyes and a mind set to crawling.

Alan thought of his friend Silvius hanging from a balcony in Atlanta. He thought about the knife in his pocket that Silvius had given him for his birthday last year, the knife he'd cut Silvius down with. He thought that maybe Silvius wasn't a friend anymore, but an old friend, now that he was dead.

When Alan's skull was patchy and half skinned his torturers gave the wagon wheel a quarter turn. His full weight hung from his ankles and wrists where they were tied to the wheel rim. In no time, his exertion became total and he lost notice of those around him, that endless procession of soldiers, until something red and wet shoved beneath his nose.

Through squinched eyes, he saw the medicine man, a discharged sharpshooter who looked like a gaunt St. Nick, holding aloft his frying doe heart. The medicine man swore the heart incited men to fierceness in battle and each morning during breakfast he walked the tent rows like an altar boy swinging his thurible at Mass.

The doe heart floated before Alan as if unconnected from the grimy hands holding it. A smoldering, bloody smell took over Alan's senses, drowsed him, put him down surely as barber's morphine.

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George came to cut him down when the time was up. He supported Alan to the tent and laid him down on his bedroll, then he mopped the blood from Alan's head.

"The trick," said George. "Is not getting caught." And he told Alan something that Alan knew he'd never told anyone before: he was a bounty jumper.

"How much have you made?"

"Just about enough," said George.

Two days later, Alan and George abandoned camp before dawn and started back towards Atlanta to find and bury their friend, Marcus Silvius.

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They stopped frequently during the first few miles. At least until Alan's muscles stretched back into place. His head itched from the scabs. Without hair, he was cold and his body ached in ways that he did not know it could.

Alan suspected George had been struck tender by the wagon wheel tribulation. In an offhand way, he kept handing Alan his canteen and complaining vaguely of fatigue and fitful sleep, as if he was the one responsible for their breaks.

Alan's original plan had been to find Silvius, bury him, and appear back at camp with no one the wiser. By now he understood he would never go back. George, as usual, seemed to be a few steps ahead of him and had insisted they pack heavy before departing. The three of them had been together since transferring from Wisconsin in pursuit of, at least in Alan's case, the glory that would come fighting under Sherman. Once Alan had thought himself harder than petrified oak, a killer's seed inside him that would be borne out in battle. If that had ever been true, the ordeal with Silvius had ripped out the seed and made barren the soil.

But he still kept sharp, if only for George and Silvius's sake. There was small chance they were being followed this far out of camp but he didn't want to run into anyone, Union or Reb. His hand darted to his chest and touched Silvius's pendant beneath his jacket. For luck maybe, or for superstition. Or for something else. He just touched it when it felt right to.

George, in front, had his Henry rifle slung over his shoulder. He was winter pale and beginning to go bald, the center-swirl of his cowlick a dime of skin in the sun. Crossing his back was a Whitworth he'd had taken from a Reb sharpshooter, on his belt a pouch filled with teeth. Some nights around the fire he would shake them like a handful of corn seed. At first Alan figured George saved them for metals in the fillings. But he'd never seen the teeth glint in firelight. A few battles gone by and it had made more sense. George was a superstitious man: the teeth were the bones of the dead, a memory of a life. Not an ornament but a funeral. Like Alan's own pendant—Silvius's pocket watch repurposed.

Sometimes Alan felt like Silvius was actually hanging around his neck, just the way he'd found him. Whispering the way, but so quietly that Alan couldn't quite hear. Several times now, a sensation had washed over him that seemed to convey *Silvius*. Last week, he'd found a red fox in one of the traps flanking the column line. Silvius screamed in his head, and he released the fox, though he suspected the critter would die anyway.

Did George feel the same, with his dead chained to him by their teeth? The most intimate to the dead is the one that killed him, after all. Alan's mother told him that Love and Hate were brothers who had so much in common they couldn't stand each other.

The question was, did each tooth come from a man George had slain, or did he take a tooth for each man slain? Could Alan count the teeth and know how many men George had killed? Or was there a separate distinction to determine who got dental work? Because he didn't think George needed them to remember. You couldn't forget that. At least he couldn't.

Two weeks ago they'd torched Atlanta. Two days before Atlanta, in battle outside the city, he'd amputated Silvius's fingers to stop the fountain from a peppergun shot. He murdered the owner and used the hot muzzle to cauterize Silvius's stumps. After the battle Alan got him to the hospital tents for a stitch before infection set it, and by God the man had survived.

Though Alan had begged him to rest, Silvius refused to miss the spoils of Atlanta. And in Atlanta the war had come for Silvius. Alan found his corpse strung up like a whitetail over a mansion's second story balcony. The mansion had been abandoned. He'd known it the moment he'd heard Silvius's head clang against a terracotta pot swaying in the wind. No sane person could set while that wind chime sang.

In the second story bedroom, after cutting down Silvius's body, Alan had finally given up the war. The burning of Atlanta had only just begun and yet it seemed like everything burned. Though it was night, savage red light flickered into the bedroom. The air smelled charred then extinguished. The only sound was a hoarse roar—combination sounds of a razed city. After dragging Silvius inside, Alan had closed the French doors to the balcony. Instead of separating him, as he'd intended, the doors framed a tableau of devastation. And it had suddenly occurred to him that he might already be dead. There'd been enough close calls. Odds were one of them came even closer and he'd just gone on spectral and oblivious.

He'd found a note stuffed in Silvius's mouth. It was so short he knew it by heart: "Some still live in Atlanta." A short sentence for the length of a human life.

Already separated from his unit and not eager to get lost in the burning city, Alan had covered Silvius with a sheet and taken his extra ammunition and hard tack and a

pocket watch. The pocket watch had a spot for a picture in its door but no picture. The watch had stopped. The hardtack and ammunition were still untouched and wrapped in a blue kerchief at the bottom of his pack. He'd tossed the watch but speared a hole through the tin watch door, then threaded a leather thong through the hole and hung it around his neck. The other side of a watch. A blank face.

As he and George continued their trek Alan kept an eye out for familiar territory. To the south the forest thinned and opened up to a wild field divided with tree-line and a dried-up creek. They lunched on a hillock and pressed down a square of field grass in the center to sit invisibly. Wind whipped the grass into grasshopper songs.

"I need a haircut," said George. He was stretching his legs out in front of him and kneading his thighs. His boots were unlaced and sitting next to him, rundown as tenement houses. "You know anyone can help me with that?"

"I ain't carrying the hair out of here," said Alan. It was hard to hear his own voice over the wind and singing grass. Silvius seemed to be whispering from his pendant and Alan felt a buzzing that connected his brain stem to his gut. A sense he'd developed over the last few years. Or maybe the sense was there before, it just hadn't had cause until the war.

Fifty yards away a shrub detached from the undergrowth and crept towards them into the field. Branches and leaves and fronds attached to a figure until the shape was all but erased. But the wind ruffled and exposed. The man hadn't seen them, Alan knew that for certain. But he was focused. You could see it in every one of his movements. Hanging from his shoulder was some sort of rifle. Black, spiny, and metallic. From the

muzzle sprouted ferns and sunflowers and wasted purple wildflowers. He was holding a black flute like you'd hold a revolver.

For a minute they watched him. Then he took another few steps forward. George aimed his Whitworth.

"He don't see us," said Alan. The man was looking up into the treetops, spinning so he could take the circumference. Then, privately satisfied, abandoned his focus and strolled casually through the field along the dry creek as if walking to the market. George tracked him with the Whitworth.

"He's gonna walk past," said Alan. "Let him be."

George shot and the man jumped like a deer, ran a few steps, and lurched to the ground. A ghost of smoke hung in the air.

"He's a Reb," said George.

The man took on the stillness of death while they watched. Alan kept an eye out on the tree line in case he hadn't been travelling alone. George laced his boots. When they jogged over Alan heard the teeth in George's pouch clicking like tiny mouths.

"I won't shy about it, George," said Alan. "You murdered him." He sounded flat, made himself feel incredulity, attempted rage. The truth was that he was only going through the motions. The man had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He'd died. It could happen to anyone. Might have already happened to both of them.

"Don't put that on me," said George. "He would have killed us in the reverse."

Steam whispered from the corpse, up the bristling plants and away in the breeze. The man was facedown and his arm was sticking out like he'd been reaching for something as he fell. The beflowered rifle lay a few feet away in the crook of a root.

George flipped over the corpse and they ripped away the camouflage. Alan used his Bowie on snarled patches. Clearing the brush left half-a-man, emaciated, with the massive extremities and cranium of a wooden puppet. Face so carved he didn't look human but tighter and hungrier. A great scraggly beard turned white in a distinct line an inch from his jaw. His helmet was muddied and piebald deep green and labelled "Hush Puppy" in thick fingertip white.

"Reckon he's a soldier," said George.

"Union or Reb?"

"Don't look like either."

"Could be a foreigner." He was familiar, though. "Reminds me of the medicine man."

"Sure," said George. "Gives you a look. Or maybe takes a certain type." He took up the black flute, so lovingly cradled. It was a pistol: flat-black with a wooden grip and metal cylinder stretching from the muzzle. "Weird looking thing. You ever seen one?"

"Ain't a Colt," said Alan.

"Where do you put the bullets?" George asked. He stuffed the pistol in his belt. "It doesn't revolve."

Alan closed the man's eyes. "I reckon he was heading home."

"Sure," said George. "Sorry Hush Puppy." He was patting the man down and pulling his pockets out, revealing a wad of green bills with a single match banded on.

"Look at that," said Alan. It was more money that he'd ever seen at once. "How much, you reckon?"

George, regularly nonplussed, and in battle cool to the point of spookiness, was shaking and sniffing like he could smell gold on the air. "Think there's more of this?"

"What about Silvius?"

"Shit," said George. "We're on the way. You want to pass up? You said yourself he's headed home." He began pushing the brush back over Hush Puppy, the same way Alan hid his deer shelter after a hunt. Hush Puppy sunk into the field in stages, slow drowning into litterfall until only his toes broke the surface. Nobody would ever find him, Alan realized, or even know he'd died.

"Christ, George," he said. "We can't just leave him here." He stepped into George's way and cast off the leaves and moss and wildflowers of the death nest.

George stuffed the bills into his pack. "He was following the creek."

"We ain't giving up on Silvius," Alan told him.

George helped him hoist Hush Puppy onto his shoulders. "If we don't find anything in an hour we go right back on track. My word."

"As a deserter," Alan said. But he gestured with his chin to go on. Silvius couldn't begrudge them chance at fortune.

Even injured, he had little trouble carrying cadaverous Hush Puppy. George had his rifle out and was walking a straight line down the creek. They followed it to the other side of the meadow, downward, into the forest proper where the creek muddied. The forest was old but the undergrowth thick. There'd been a fire sometime in the last few decades—ghostly white tidal scars scoured the bases of grander trees.

On odd steps there came a tinkling from the corpse over his shoulders. Alan imagined a tiny bell pressed beneath the skin of Hush Puppy's throat, sounds caught in

soft wet skin. They'd lost the light and sun came only through the river-deltas between the leaves. Rocks were slick and he made sure of his footing. A game trail ran parallel to the creek.

Alan was eleven when he killed his first deer. He remembered thinking that it was too like a man to kill. But he'd been with his father and uncles and cousins; he had no avenue but to pull the trigger. When he began to dress the doe it shat. The scat curled onto a leaf beneath its anus. Piled guts told a future in a language he couldn't read.

The doe was sizable but his father was a huge man. He carried the doe over his shoulders with straight arms, gripping fore and back legs. Alan followed him out of the woods, craned his neck up and studied the creature he'd killed. The remorse started him crying but he hid the tears. But even so, one day he wished to be as strong as his father and carry a doe out of the woods on his back.

Following the creek around the cusp of a hill opened them up to another clearing where the creek collected into a pond. A riverboat, twice the pond's size, lolled like a magnificent tongue from the pond onto the forest floor. Out here, away from rivers or cities, this riverboat was grand as a cathedral. Alan craned his neck to look at its entirety and was awed. Was this Hush Puppy's home, where he'd been traveling when they slew him? He laid Hush Puppy gently onto a patch of glittering earth. A number of rusted metal boxes lay half-submerged in the pond or at the furthest reaches of the clearing, as if thrown from the riverboat.

"That's the biggest damn riverboat I ever saw," said George.

Vines snaked up the sides of the boat. The paddlewheel was half again Alan's height. The paddles were pitted and cracked as if the wheel had kept turning after it was

grounded. Weather had eaten the boards on the starboard side off the water, leaving a man-sized hole edged rotten and dark as the inside of a closed body.

"It didn't come up that creek," Alan said.

George laughed and the sparrows squatting on the paddlewheel twittered. They sounded insane, too happy by half. "Someone must've dropped it here," George said.

"Who? Jeff Davis?"

Alan dipped his finger into the pond and rippled the soup of dead leaves. Next to him was one of those metal boxes. It was all of four feet tall, with a ball-end stick coming off one side. He depressed the stick and metallic trilling came from the box. Some sort of machine, then. He swept water down the front until it shone. Behind a pane of glass were drawings of fruit. Two lemons and twined cherries. He yanked on the stick again and the pictures spun to a watermelon, a bunch of grapes, and the number 7.

Light dappled from the forest floor like the sun was shining through holes in the earth. Alan knelt down by a machine on the bank and sifted through the grass and leaves and dead-moss. He came up with a shiny silver coin and felt decisively like a crow. Where one coin was another, and another, until he stuffed a handful into his pocket. An entire handful of silver. Desertion be damned, he was now rich enough to buy himself a whole new name. Alan wished then, more than ever before, that Silvius was with them. He used to send three quarters of his monthly back to his sister and mother.

"Why don't you empty one of them sacks," he said to George. "We're gonna need it."

George was standing at the cracked hole in the hull. Alan thought his eyes looked about ten leagues away from his body. He stepped inside. Alan followed with full pockets.

The air musted into Alan's lungs and he sneezed twice, then again for luck. The wreck had pulverized the interior of the riverboat. Chandeliers and wainscoting askew, floorboards chopsticked, barstools upturned. Octagonal tables grew fine carpets of fungus. There was just enough sunlight shining to throw misshapen shadows in every direction. The floor lay at odd planes and George, though standing straight, appeared cocked off to one side.

"Might find the rovin' gambler around here," said George.

"You remember Silvius's sister's name?" Alan asked. "We can split this three ways."

They came to a hall filled row upon row with the same picture machines as outside. Dust had long settled along the tops but their flanks glittered. Alan pulled levers in succession, watching the shapes and numbers spin. George busted out the picture windows with the butt of his rifle. A bright fungal smell pervaded, getting stronger as they went.

Stacked in the corner of the hall were cords of bundled dollar bills. A succession of fire pits, the first smoldering but the rest ashen, snaked back into dark corners. Smoldering bills flaked in a sourceless breeze. A piece stuck to the sweat on Alan's brow. He peeled it off and looked into a glowing eye floating over a pyramid.

"That Hush Puppy was a mad bastard," said George. He was shaking his head in disbelief. "He's burned our loot."

Alan knelt down and sifted through a pit until he came up with a lightly scorched bill. "These bills are awful tiny," he said. A bobber dropped from his throat to his balls. "And look how green. This shit ain't real, George. Counterfeit."

George snatched the bill from his hand. He stared at it. Then he kicked the fire pit in a flurry of burned paper and ash. He started to cough and it made him angrier, each cough barking out like a slug from the Whitworth. It might be funny if Alan had ever seen him act this way. After a minute George stopped kicking. He spit into the pit, then walked off.

Alan spilled the silver from his pocket and looked closely at it for the first time. Its date was 1957. Worst counterfeit he'd ever seen.

He followed the fire pits to the end of the hall and found George at the entrance to Hush Puppy's lair. He figured this for two reasons: first, a dog leash and several collars were arranged around the fire. Second, dried wildflowers lay in the ashes, a once-living hallucination against the gray.

Behind the fire pit was a doorway. A curtain hid the doorway and when he brushed it aside the stench was so strong he could hear it.

A chandelier and banquet tables clustered against one wall of the ballroom. The checkerboard floor was marble and mud-swept. In the center was a pile of tangled corpses dressed in bellhop uniforms, thin red stripes on navy slacks, their eyes pinched to slits, melded together in summer heat and now quasi-mummified in autumn. Sprinkled throughout were shriveled women in sparkling party dresses and shriveled men in tuxedos. The bodies had clearly been gathered together for a purpose. More than just the

practical, perhaps. A nauseous beauty was conveyed in the positioning of the limbs, the varying states of decay, the sloughed hair on the hardwood.

Ribboned along the ceiling were stringed fingers pointing in all directions, one pointed straight at Alan, and he had the urge to walk up and point it elsewhere. Playing cards and cocktail napkins crusted with rouge and lipstick were clothespinned between each finger.

Along the far wall was a row of bar stools. Upon each stool was a human head. Those on the farthest right were remarkably well preserved, on the left barely human. Each mouth was propped open with a twig or a chicken bone. The gaping mouths revealed Hush Puppy's compulsion: placed on each tongue was a gleaming counterfeit coin.

Short cylinders of burnished metal stuck from jagged craters in the skulls. A casing for each man, in the back of the head. This explained Hush Puppy's forest-suit—sneaking up and jamming his black flute behind the ear of his victims.

"He's a devil," said George, awed. "He went savage."

"Are they Rebs or us, you think?" Alan asked. But he knew it didn't really matter.

George was squatting down and looking into the dead eyes.

Alan staggered to the corner of the room. He leaned against a table and gagged. When he turned back George was pacing around the corpse pile. George moved like a rusty spring. He had a handful of spent hair and was letting it drift to the ground through his fingers. Something skittered into the pile and Alan nudged a foot with his rifle. A ball of roaches exploded and fled deeper into their nest.

And then the song came fluttering in through the window. George perked up like a hunting dog on point.

"You hear that?" he asked.

Alan couldn't make out the lyrics. But there were countless voices singing—the sound was full and layered and had physical weight in his eardrums.

"That's a regiment at least," he said. The thud of boots shook the boat and dust drifted from railings and ledges and light fixtures. George had his pack off and was stuffing bill-cords into it.

Alan felt back in the fold, back in the action. His muscles were vibrating and his hands stroked his rifle. "We should leave," he said.

George was filling his second bag.

"George," Alan said.

"I'm coming," said George. "Blast it, Barber. I got that old feeling again." He was smiling big, smiling happy, but his eyes were squinting red and slow.

They jogged out. Coins clinking, bills rustling, the rotten smell chasing them. Coming through the hole in the hull blinded Alan and he pulled his hat down low.

"Just a moment, Barber," said George. He was kneeling next to Hush Puppy. Alan felt a burst of guilt that he wouldn't be able to bury him, after all.

"Ain't time," said Alan. The singing and marching was closer now, louder. He half expected the leaves to dance up from the forest floor. George had his hands on either side of Hush Puppy's face like he was going to kiss him. Alan went to grab his elbow, pull him bodily from the clearing. Leave the riverboat behind, leave the incoming regiment behind. Reb or Union, it didn't matter. They were marked men in either case.

But Hush Puppy's mouth was cracked open in rigor and something glinted inside. George stuck his fingers in and came out with one of the counterfeit coins. He stared at it and Alan stared at him. Then George took the bag of teeth from his belt and poured them onto the ground next to Hush Puppy's head. He took the coin and tentatively placed it atop his own tongue. Then he spit it out. He turned to look at Alan.

"All's I need now," he said. He opened one of Hush Puppy's eyes. "See? He wants me to have it. He's winkin'."

Alan was struck dumb. George was looking at him as if to say that it was all a joke, really, if you looked at it the right way. The singers were marching closer. Alan could even make out lyrics: John Brown's body lies a-moulderin' in the grave.

George put the coin back in his mouth. "Sure don't taste like silver," he said.

And all at once Alan was walking into the Atlanta mansion while the city burned to ash. He was pulling hand over hand on Silvius's rope, hauling the body over the railing and hoisting it inside. Closing the French doors and staring at a city cast in crimson, light from hell infusing the room. Steaming wind rustling Silvius's hair. The note crumpled in Silvius's mouth.

Alan gripped his pendant. Cool metal in his palm. To his own surprise he began to howl. Like one of Hush Puppy's trophies he couldn't seem to get his mouth closed. George, gawking at him, finally shed the glass panes in his eyes.

"Barber?" he asked.

Alan's howl found form. "Over here," he screamed. "Over here!"

The singing stopped. The sparrows chirped on their riverboat perch. George began to back out of the clearing. "You dumb bastard," he said.

Alan turned away and sat next to Hush Puppy.

"Alan?" said George. "Let's get out of here. They're coming for us."

All was quiet: the singing hadn't resumed. Alan heard the coin tinkling in George's mouth.

Then George turned away. He splashed through the pond and ran off into the wood. Alan thought he could still hear that coin tinkle in the distance.

He closed Hush Puppy's winking eye and tried to remember if Silvius's eyes had been open or closed when he found him. He hoped that somebody would come along and give Silvius the burial he deserved, now that he wouldn't be able to.

Incisors and molars and canines sprinkled the forest floor among the leaves and coins. One by one Alan tossed the teeth into the pond. They pinged off the riverboat and plopped into the water. His arm and his wrists were suddenly sore again, his scalp raw beneath his hat.

Leaves shook around him as the marching resumed. He kept hold of the pendant, the metal lid to Silvius's watch. He waited. He and Silvius and Hush Puppy together, all waiting.

CHAPTER II

ENOCH'S MULE

In the days leading up to my birthday I took it upon myself to exterminate the diseased farm cats. Mr. Smith's farmhands generally drowned them in sacks and we'd find the cats down in the ponds and caught up among river stones. Rock River ran the western length of Smith Hollow's fields and forests, and to prevent the river from spoiling Ma agreed I should put out the cats on my own terms.

"And happy birthday, Alice," she said, and hugged me tight so I could feel her belly pressing me.

"Thanks Ma."

"Aren't you gonna wish your brother a happy birthday?"

I pressed my hand to Ma's pregnant belly. I've got long, thin fingers—piano fingers Ma calls them—and they looked stubby on her wide stomach. She was ripe enough I could almost believe she was due today.

"Happy birthday, Jonathan," I said.

This particular year Ma held our birthday in extreme regard: it was the final Silvius family birthday before the 20th century swept in and also the summer solstice.

Ma reckoned this doubling a magic boon—not coincidence but fate—and proclaimed our seventeenth birthday to be the most important yet.

She made us a breakfast of pancakes, bacon, and eggs. We finished it all, even though I barely ate a quarter of the meal.

"Jonathan must be hungry today," said Ma as we cleaned up.

Afterwards I went to the barn and found the black cat with blue spangled eyes and the lurching step—both signs of brain rot. I enticed it with an anchovy and as the cat ate I wrang its neck. I carried it to the pit in which I'd taken to burying the cats. I could feel kittens in its stomach, and, checking over my shoulder to make sure Ma didn't see, let myself cry a little bit.

Crying felt fine. I hadn't been able to in a few months, what with Ma working me to the bone since she caught me with Elsa Thayer. If I'd been caught with Elsa's eldest brother Eli, Ma would've pinned a ribbon to my dress.

Even so, feeling those kittens like spongy little stones in that mama cat's body was quite a thing. I'd never really thought before how every animal litter was a whole nest of twins. They shared the womb, didn't they? Just like Jonathan and I had.

When my melancholy passed I covered the cat pit with a log rounds and pine branches to keep the stench down. Today was a day to look forward to, what with the birthday tribute this afternoon. And breakfast had been a good start, especially considering Ma hadn't cooked with such grandeur since Elsa Thayer. Though my birthday was no huge cause for celebration, Jonathan's was. Ma was convinced that Jonathan eventually would be born and that it stood to reason he would be born on his birthday.

But walking back to the house I had the horrible thought of those womb kittens still alive and birthing right there in the pit. Mewling for their mother amid the corpses of their kin.

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Due to the occasion my day was hectic. On top of the normal chores and the cats, I prepared the barn and lawn for the tribute. I strung streamers among the barn rafters and opened the smoke hatch while I was up there. Then I collected stones for the fire pit, swept the hay, and arranged three bales as a bench.

In the lawn I ran rope from the barn doors to stakes a hundred yards out. This, said Ma, was so the people didn't mill about like cattle and trample the grass. "More like a bull run this way, girl," she'd said. "Keep 'em orderly and in line."

Which was funny since Ma's people usually acted meek as mice while they waited for an audience.

Ma was well known around Hamilton County. Most days, wondering souls waited on the porch for an audience. People said she could tell you the future, or the past, or what was happening this moment half a world away. They whispered that she received her Second Sight from the baby living in her belly. I knew this because whenever I went into town the old men and ladies stopped me either to ask about Ma or warn me about her devilry. "Save yourself, girl," they would say. Or, "Can she help me?"

And sometimes the young men would say "If you need to be in a way to be a witch, I'll help put you there."

I did not much like going to town. But I couldn't help wonder what Ma was *really* doing for these people when they came by. Half the time they came running out of the house. I'd never sat in before. Having another Presence in the room mucked with the flow of things— according to Ma. Truth be told I suspect she does not like having me.

Which, of course, will change when she sees what I've done with the cats.

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The line from the barn began to form around ten even though everyone knew Ma didn't take callers before noon. Families came first. Children held chickens by the ankle—some dripping and others fluttering about. The Braggs led a piglet collared in woven grass. I imagine they came with a gift so extravagant due to Ma allowing that youngest Bragg odd jobs around our edge of Smith's property.

After the families came those people whose families were left home, lied to, or did not exist. Their gifts were more varied: a bushel of strawberries, broken whitetail antlers, a puppy half torn by the coyotes, even some firearms I knew were from the Great Rebellion.

I didn't recognize the man with the rifles. He was short and one of the rifles was tall as him, though he held it very easily under his arm as I might hold a rake or hoe. I wondered what this rifle was named. Was this the model of gun that killed Uncle Marcus? Ma said it was okay for me to call Uncle Marcus "father" but I couldn't get used to it, never having known the man.

Uncle Marcus died thirteen years before I was born. To hear Ma tell it, Uncle Marcus came back from the dead and travelled north. The journey took him some time but he finally showed up in Ma's bedroom one night. And then Ma would laugh and say

she couldn't go into this part too much— or at least she used to laugh, before Elsa, and now I imagine she would strike me— only that afterwards Uncle Marcus disappeared into a ray of moonlight, and as she tried to fall asleep she could feel two tiny people growing inside her.

I was born a year later. Three months over, meaning I came out stronger and with more spirit. Ma often wondered what sort of spirit Jonathan might be born with. In these grand imaginings I would see a distinct love in Ma's face. I knew she loved Jonathan most.

By noon Ma's flock stretched all the way back to the farmhouse, well past my rope-run. People eyed one another. As Ma had instructed, I walked to the front of the line and hauled the door open. The line surged forward but I slipped into the barn and closed the door behind me. Ma sat on the hay bale bench as a queen would sit on her throne. Her belly sprouted massively. I fancied that if Jonathan kicked I'd see a tiny foot right through the nightgown she wore, taught only around her stomach.

The fire pit waited fire-less before her. When dusk fell and her parishioners dwindled to none, I would light the fire and present her my cats. A gift that would outshine any of the paltry offerings outside.

"Shall I let them in, Ma?" I asked.

Ma nodded. "And you come sit down here next to me," she said, and motioned to the hay-strewn dirt at her feet.

I unlocked the door and told myself that I was debased sitting so lowly next to her. But I have to admit a certain pride in the proceedings. Even lower than Ma, this devotion was now partly my own.

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She reacted identically to each gift: with a solemn nod and the briefest touch of the parishioner's forehead with the back of her fingers. It was a kind gesture. Loving, even. Watching her repeat it began to turn my lip. This was the same hand, after all, that once broke the Bragg boy's arm so badly Mr. Smith had to use stucco to set it immobile.

Ma organized the gifts into piles. In fact, I was one of these piles. By the end I was walled in by hemp stalks, corn stalks, and stacked gourds. On Ma's other side was a greasy pile of varmint corpses, deer antlers and snakeskins.

Finally the line dwindled. No light shined through the slats in the barn. Nobody else came through the barn door. I sorted the gifts in order to make my way free of them.

Ma had the Bragg boy tipping well water into her mouth from a ladle. "Get rid of this hay, boy," she said. Then to me: "And don't you have a gift for your brother, Alice?" By which, of course, she meant 'where's my devotion, girl? You're past due after Elsa Thayer.'

I left the barn with a spade shovel and a wheelbarrow.

For a few minutes I worked to uncover the cats from the lye and the dirt. I had them buried in a copse of trees down the lane, in the same place where I'd buried our old farm dog, Wing, after he'd been run down by a carriage. I'd found him huffing in the grass and Ma had me throttle him out.

I took care to put the mother cat on top. God must've read my thoughts this morning because not one of those kittens had been born.

I threw a white sheet over the wheelbarrow.

When I re-entered the barn Ma waited on her hay throne. I wheeled the barrow near the bonfire and set to lighting the fire. I did not disturb the white linen.

The Bragg boy came back into the barn leading a mule. The mule began to eat scattered hay. As the mule munched the Bragg boy bent over and for a moment I thought he meant to eat too. Instead he took a pick to the mule's hooves. Without preamble the mule kicked back and caught the Bragg boy in the head. The hoof pick spun end over end into the hay and the Bragg boy flew almost as far.

I ran to him. His nose bled and so did the soft spot on his temple where the hoof had connected.

"*Mor*?" he said. Froth spilled from his mouth. "*Mor*?"

The mule munched hay. I didn't even know the boy's name. Or at least I couldn't remember. I must've known at some point. I stroked his brow and blood stuck to my hand.

Ma was sitting forward on her throne, peering around that belly. "You'd better fetch Mr. Smith," she said. "He could perhaps do some doctoring." I could not make out her expression as she said this and I didn't want to. She tended to have a bloodthirsty bent. I was not enthused to leave the boy alone, but when Ma spoke I jumped. It's funny, I think, how pleasing someone can become so cowardly.

Mr. Smith lived two miles up the road but I am a strong runner. I took off from the barn door, loosed my jaw, shook my legs on the hoof. Let the burn creep into my lungs. Next thing I knew I was coming up on Smith's farmhouse. Like most of my good runs it felt like I'd gone to sleep and woken up *there*.

Mr. Smith himself was chopping wood beside his woodshop. I gasped to him as I ran up, out of breath, but the tenor of my voice must have alerted him to the gravity. He threw down his axe and hobbled over to his grand carriage.

The carriage was all cherry wood and black leather with a shining gold-handled whip stuck like a fishing pole between the seat cushions. The seat was plush and I'd bet my life it was filled with something softer than hay. Maybe ewe down or cotton.

The rumor was that Mr. Smith made a fortune during the Great Rebellion. This accounted for the many acres of Smith Hollow. Enough that Mr. Smith employed our family as well as the Braggs and Thayers to work the land.

Mr. Smith already had one horse hitched by the time I ran up. He was a huge man. Though elderly his shoulders were broad and he stood almost as tall as the Percherons.

We did not speak while he hitched up the other beast. Despite the predicament I was excited for the ride. Many times I'd seen those Percherons trotting about and pulling this sled like it was nothing.

But the ride back took much longer than the run there. At least that was how it felt waiting on that carriage seat. For an eternity I watched the Percheron's haunches plunge. Mr. Smith and I continued not to speak. He was known to be a quiet man, one who preferred not to have words spoken to him. Ma said this was also due to the Great Rebellion, on account of Uncle Marcus and Mr. Smith being brotherly during the war.

When we finally returned the Bragg boy was sprawled in the dirt outside the barn. Ma was on her knees next to him with her head on his chest—listening to his heartbeat, I suppose. She'd drug him outside. The barn door was closed tight. It struck me that my

head had rested on Elsa's chest much the same way when Ma had found us. This recollection felt dirty—to remember Else in that way with the boy scarecrow crumpled in the dirt.

Ma stepped back from the boy. She looked like she'd just been caught peeping Tom. Suddenly I dreaded the boy's death. But I was immediately guilty for thinking Ma would do anything like that. She would never kill a boy.

Or rather, I amended, she'd never killed a boy such that I knew of. I couldn't help but think of the way she'd watched me as I'd killed Wing. She'd had that same peeping Tom look.

In any case the boy yet breathed, though a purple crown set on his brown and his left eye was knocked halfway around the other way.

Mr. Smith knelt by the boy. The barn loomed above them like a dark cave. Mr. Smith began to press the boy's chest like a bellows. The boy bobbed about. His hands and feet flailed in time. When Mr. Smith stopped pumping so did all motion. Mr. Smith put a two fingers on the boy's neck and with his other hand he prodded the soft spot on the boy's temple. Blood formed a halo behind the boy's head.

"What's his name," I asked.

"Enoch," said Ma.

"He'll pass on in a few hours," said Mr. Smith

"We need to tell his mother," I said, before I knew I was speaking. Enoch was dying with his mother none the wiser. We three knew a foul secret that was not our business to know. His mother should be the one kneeling over him, not Ma or Mr. Smith or me who hadn't even remembered his name.

Mr. Smith floated to his feet. He wasn't looking at Enoch but at the barn. At the closed door, I thought. Finally he said: "I'll tell Mrs. Bragg."

"We can prepare the body for her," said Ma. "Bring her over in the morning. She won't know he's been kicked."

"*Mor?*" asked Enoch Bragg.

"Yes," said Mr. Smith. He shuffled back to his carriage and took his time mounting the steps. He circled the barn to get going the right direction. The Percherons thundered by, kicked up dirt that swirled away in the wind a moment before reaching them.

"Well," Ma said. "Bring him in."

I took Enoch by the ankles and drug him over the threshold of the barn. Ma followed me inside.

Enoch's mule was deep into a hay bale. My gift was linen covered and forgotten next to the fire pit. Well, forgotten by Ma. She dogged me to haul faster. Though the boy wasn't big he sure was heavy. Ma had a hand on her belly and I could tell the excitement was making her weak.

"Why don't you go sit down, Ma?"

She sat on her throne. I lay Enoch by the fire next to all my cats—just to see if she would notice.

"I think I felt Jonathan kick," Ma said. "What do you think, Alice? What would you do with him?"

I wasn't sure if she was talking about Jonathan or Enoch. "Take him to the mortician rather than do it myself," I said.

"Oh Alice," said Ma. She looked sad and in the dark her belly seemed darker still than the rest of her. "I never wanted a girl. Hang him upside down from the rafters. We'll bleed him."

But I couldn't keep my attention from the covered wheelbarrow. My gift. Beneath the sheet I envisioned the dead mother cat birthing a litter after all—stillborn but for a single kitten. And the kitten wouldn't die but live on her dead mother's leftover milk until, strong enough, she would crawl from beneath the sheet and escape.

"We'll collect the blood and freeze half for winter," said Ma. "After you string him up, grab a milk pail and a few yards of wax paper."

What was it like to be born under that sheet? I wondered. Right into the white void. Did it feel like a blindfold or like blindness? And I realized I knew the answer: at first a rag over your face was like a blindfold, but if you kept it there long enough you'd eventually go blind.

My memories flashed awake like lightning behind haze. I remembered suckling on my mother's breast—the musk of her nipple and armpit, the sweet taste of her milk. I remembered looking into a white void. Too young, then, to know that after the feeding Mr. Smith would draw the rag from my face and the world would jump back to life. But I remembered all of this, now, the lightning overtaking the haze.

Ma would pass me off to him, averting her eyes, shaking and clenching in anger. And Mr. Smith, much younger then, with arms covered in dark fur and hands big enough to cradle me whole, would walk me to my crib.

"Are you ill, dear?" Ma asked. I about jumped out of my skin at the sound. She was squatting, hand on the small of her back, to tie Enoch's wrists with rope.

"I had a memory," I said. I felt like I'd just woken up from a too-long nap.

"Oh Alice," said Ma, "I those sorts of memories too." She smiled and I could see her smile floating. "Now come over here and tie his other wrist. It isn't all memories, you know."

It isn't all memories, you know, I thought.

Before I could consider the decision for too long I strode from the barn. I did not turn to see Ma standing before her throne of hay. I did not turn and see Enoch's mule, or Enoch. I did not turn as Ma yelled to me—though I did begin to run.

I ran until I grew tired.

When I finally looked around, I did not recognize anything. I reckoned I was still on the farm but nowhere I'd ever been before. The world was varying shades of gray and black, with dashes of color in the wildflowers and the yellow stars reflecting them. I couldn't see a single shade of white but the moon and stars, as if white linen floated behind the black shield of the night sky.

Out here I could imagine I'd come from anywhere.

I could see my way anywhere. I ran on.

CHAPTER III

IN EFFIGY

Jeremiah Bragg found the wooden leg in the forest. The leg dangled by its wooden toes from a squirrel dray in the canopy. Jeremiah threw rocks and sticks until the leg spun free and stuck a landing on the leaves.

Not a single squirrel joined him in witnessing this improbability.

After a moment he took the leg by its end—the calf, only a half-leg, really—and continued his walk. Honest to God unlikely, finding a wooden leg. Who lost a leg? How had it gotten into the tree? Had some giant squirrel drug it all the way up there?

Jeremiah was relieved for the distraction.

Jeremiah walked because he was going mad and walking was the only thing for it. He worried he would commit more violence if he didn't keep moving. He figured he was the most confused man in Hamilton County. Jeremiah felt a contradiction in his spirit—he always had an enemy's name pounding the blood beneath his knuckles, and was always depressed at this apeish desire to cause pain.

Doubtless his brothers and the other farmhands toiled at the farm without him. He would join them after noon. He couldn't remember who he'd beaten last night but he

could still taste the blood on his teeth. In any case, Mr. Smith was down two laborers.

Walking wasn't acting as the balm he might have hoped for. His body shook. His hands ached like full stomachs. He stared at a maple tree then walked forward and bashed his head against the tree. He didn't know exactly why he did this but immediately the shake left his hands and his heart beat in tune with his aching head. For the time he was relaxed.

At the edge of the marsh he sat and inspected the wooden leg more closely. Oak. Smelled of tar and the woodshop—just like his own. The wood was rotted and tapped hollow against his knee. But the cut was new and sawdust hung sparkling in the noonlight; this was a young carving from old wood. A hole had been bored through the top of the calf. He stuck his finger inside and the finger came out splintered and rust red—formerly home to a bolt or nail. Maybe where the harness was once attached. He wondered at the lack of one. How had the one-legged man affixed his missing leg?

Jeremiah decided to head home immediately. Perhaps some work would do him good. An airy but welcome melancholy had stolen over him since finding the leg. He picked up his pace to see if he could tire himself out, settle into something like civilized by the time he rejoined his kin at the farm.

Mr. Smith's farm was wedged between a great thicket of forest to the south and the swamp to the north. From his vantage on the rise of a drumlin he could see the doll-shapes of his brothers working in the fields. A pressed dirt road led from the farm two miles east to the county road. Along the way was his family's house and also the Silvius place where his younger brother Enoch had worked until he was kicked to death by a mule.

Jeremiah's woodshop squatted swampside. He set off with his bindle of wooden leg. A figure waited outside the woodshop. Time and distance revealed it to be Saul Dutson. Saul had raccoon eyes and a bandage around his neck. Red crescent moons soaked the cloth below his ear. Jeremiah remembered, then, whom he'd beaten the night before.

"Just the fellow," said Saul Dutson. "I wanted to apologize for my boorish behavior last night."

Saul Dutson was a handsome man. He worked the fields with the Bragg brothers. Jeremiah thought he looked like the God Apollo in a picture his Mother used to show him from her fable book—all glowing in the sun and playing the harp.

Jeremiah was aroused to anger just looking at him.

"My words were uncalled for." Saul Dutson looked over both shoulders. He whispered. "I shouldn't have called you queer but I meant no disrespect." He stepped forward and Jeremiah felt that they were very close. Jeremiah was taller than Saul but Saul looked right in his eye.

"Don't have nothing to apologize for," said Jeremiah. "I'm the one who should be." Before Saul could move further Jeremiah slid into his workshop and closed the door behind him. He listened to Saul sigh, listened to him leave.

All at once Jeremiah wanted to go out into the forest again and walk until he fell down tired. He felt he could crack from within. But if he missed more work Mr. Smith would have his ass and his brothers would needle him mercilessly.

Fence posts for the grazing field needed replacing. He was only a passable woodcarver but he prided himself on a tight post. To scare away whatever was roosting

inside him he put his entire being into the job. He took his axe from where it hung next to the woodstove. He left the woodshop and walked a few yards into the tree line at the edge of the grazing pasture.

Jeremiah hacked down tree after tree. The axe handle slid in short bursts within his clasped hands. He worked until he was too exhausted to feel and that night slept on the cot in his shop.

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Early the next morning Mr. Smith knocked on his door and requested a rocking chair. Jeremiah cried once Mr. Smith left. He couldn't account for why he wept and chalked it up to lack of sleep.

A copse of ancient birch grew west of the farm. Jeremiah arrived at lunch and he ate beneath the canopy. On a whim he'd brought the wooden leg so he could gaze on it while he worked.

After lunch he picked the fourth largest tree—first, second, and third seemed bad luck—and began to hack away. His mind wandered but kept coming back to the wooden leg. The more he looked the more he marveled at the craftsmanship. Calf muscles pressing beneath wood skin, a vein running over the ankle bone—remarkable distinctions even in the rot.

At times his mind slipped to Saul Dutson standing close to him outside the woodshop. He'd wanted to thrash Saul right then, he told himself. That was what he was feeling. He wanted to put hands on Saul. Catch Saul another beating.

So circled Jeremiah's thoughts.

And then at the apogee of his swing he felt he was being watched. He let his momentum carry the axe deep and his arms thrummed on the handle.

Between two birch trees, no more than ten feet away, was a wooden man.

For a split second there he thought it'd had been alive.

The figure looked like a drawing doll he'd once seen in the home of an artist—each limb split into tubular segments for posing. The form was more the suggestion of a man than a man himself. Its eye sockets were shallow and empty as its mouth.

He went for a closer look. Moss grew in inky lines across the wooden body, giving the appearance of chest hair. Standing this close made him imagine, again, Saul Dutson. When he looked down at his feet, embarrassed even alone in the woods, he saw that the figure lacked a left leg from the knee down.

He reckoned he should tell Mr. Smith that a crazy woodcutter was squatting on the property. Nobody living on Smith Hollow could carve wood like this, as far as he knew. Certainly none of his brothers. Perhaps it was Mr. Smith himself. But he couldn't see Mr. Smith sneaking up on him in the woods, standing up a mannequin, and sneaking away. Not a man of that size, and not at his age.

And for the first time it occurred to him that he hadn't found a disembodied leg and a one-legged body. They'd been left for him to find. Someone was talking to him. But what were they saying?

With renewed vigor he set back to work. He became a player piano and tree after tree fell to his automation. Whatever the message, he was unskilled compared to the creator of this effigy. And very envious, he realized. Who was he but the Bragg brother that could work with wood, the one sent into the forest by Mr. Smith on special

directives? Yet his ability with wood was rough and untrained, guided only by the slightest knack. Though he'd never admitted this to anyone else he knew it was true.

And if he was being honest, an odd part of him was jealous of the wooden figure. It never wanted to hurt anyone, or ruin anything. It did not want at all. It was a void of feeling. God, to be void of feeling, to put a tapper on his passion and let it ooze away instead of exploding through his fists.

For fun he imagined he was the wooden figure, propped up in the birch copse and watching an angry brute kill a tree.

Jeremiah only stopped swinging when the axe slipped out of his hands. Looking at the burst blisters brought the sting. He felt an idiot for not wearing gloves.

But after accounting it turned out he'd felled enough birch to build a dozen chairs.

Jeremiah tied three long branches into a triangle. He netted rope halfway down the triangle. He stacked the branches along the frame and rolled cords into the net. With the remainder of his rope and a small branch he knotted up a yoke and, feeling like a dog or one of Mr. Smith's Percherons, harnessed himself and commenced hauling.

His travois tugged undergrowth but came on easily enough for all that. The effigy was strapped to the cords like an exhausted monarch. On a throne of its kin's flesh, Jeremiah realized. The equivalent to him sitting on a pile of dismembered corpses.

It took him most of the walk home to put his finger on what was nagging at him. The wooden leg didn't fit the effigy. Too realistic by far. Almost true to life.

Which meant that the leg was from a different wooden man entirely.

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The birch made for a supple rocking chair. By evening of the next day Jeremiah was sweeping sawdust and congratulating himself on a job well done. He'd taken extra care to sand the runners smooth and even layered a coat of stain. The wooden effigy stood by his cot— he was moved to his best work in the presence of the figure.

Despite this a sour part of him wanted to hack the chair to pieces. He couldn't say why. He wanted to howl or scream the feeling away. Instead he carried the chair to Mr. Smith's porch and pushed it rocking. Then he set off to the Kroghville Inn for a drink or three.

He came-to hours later, in his woodshop, sitting on the floor next to a pile of vomit. His own, he supposed. Evidently he'd just walked in because the door hung open and cooled his backside. His feet ached and in the swim of his vision he saw that he wasn't wearing any boots. And now that he had a moment to consider his state, it appeared that his pants were on backwards. No accounting for that. He laughed but it sounded sad in the air.

There was water in the sink and he dipped his face in to sober up. Then he sat on the edge of his cot and peeled off his socks like rabbit's skin. For the briefest moment he had the sensation that someone else's feet had replaced his own. But then he pinpointed this discomfort. He walked across the room and took the wooden leg from where he'd hung it over the wood stove. An etched saddle hairline ran around the ball of the foot. The second toe was longer than the big toe.

No doubt about it: the wooden leg was identical to his flesh-and-blood leg.

The realization crawled up him like a snake. No accounting for this either— witchery was afoot. Maybe a hex put upon him. He'd walked to places in Smith Hollow

he reckoned people had never rightly walked before, or at least hadn't walked in a few centuries. Could he not have disturbed a witch, or something worse, in his passing?

And even as Jeremiah considered the possibility his blood rose up high enough that he felt it sloshing behind his eyeballs. The kind of attention he'd attracted could be the fatal type. Jeremiah had heard the stories from the old timers—the Hodag prowling the woods that could take shape of any man or woman. The swamp witches who snared fat children and lonely bachelors only to dry their pelts on the clothesline. Even about the widow Silvius, who could change your luck any which way she wanted.

Jeremiah felt, for the hundredth time in his life, the crushing weight of forces beyond his control.

So he pulled his knife from his belt and stabbed the wooden foot through. Then he went outside and pried his axe from the chopping block. He pulled the wooden figure from the wall and found his grip on the axe. In a few moments this mannequin would be kindling. Hopefully that would break the hex.

But before Jeremiah could swing he felt something wet on the floor. Blood pulsed merrily from a cut in the arch of his foot. Hell, what foot? There was a red splotch where his foot should've been. The knife still stuck vertical from the arch of the wooden foot. The exact spot where *his* foot was bleeding. The exact spot where he was bleeding and feeling no pain at all.

A calm stole over him such that he'd never felt. He set the axe against the wall and wrapped his foot in the bed sheet. His body felt as blank as the wooden mannequin's expression. Jeremiah thought he would cry from relief if he'd the capacity to feel that pitch of emotion.

And he regarded the wooden mannequin and the twin wooden leg, he understood what was being asked of him. He didn't know who was asking, but he knew the directive:

He was to create himself in wood.

***

The very next day Jeremiah commenced to cutting. He selected the thickest and tallest trunk for the process: three feet wide and almost as tall as he was. After he debarked it he took the pen knife and drew a rough bell shape in the mass. A head and body. The arms he figured he would have to attach separately. The legs could perhaps be carved out.

He attacked the birch with his hatchet. It was awkward going and more than once he cut far deeper than he meant. But little by little the wood began to take shape beneath his hand, as if jumping off for him.

The result of a day's work was a spindly wooden man. Not true to life. Maybe a very gaunt man. And no detail yet. Despite this Jeremiah was proud—for a first time carving he counted it a success.

But the figure was not him. Even rough-cut it was easy enough to tell that he'd departed from self-sculpture. There was no way to uncut the wood, and so he decided that he would create a stranger as practice for creating himself.

After that he didn't think so much as let his hands do the thinking for him. They were suddenly so very clever, bouncing about with awls and picks and saws in a way he'd never expected they were capable of. Almost like he was being puppeteered so deftly he didn't know he was the puppet.

When dawn broke he stood before a finished wooden man, or at least as finished as this one was going to get. He'd carved a young man with old eyes and a long beard. The man carried a wooden revolver and wore a round helmet with dark and light patterns like leaves. Branches stuck from him in pincushion and a rifle hung on a strap over his shoulder. On a whim Jeremiah had stuffed the rifle bore with wildflowers.

Jeremiah carried the wooden soldier outside and set him in the field grass outside the woodshop.

Then he looked around for his brothers. Nowhere to be seen. Eating breakfast at the house, he figured. They were beginning to feel like figures from another life. Not to mention Saul Dutson, who kept intruding in his mind and who he was relieved, in a way, not to have seen. He might as well be the only man on the earth.

A voice deeper in his mind—sounded like his own except meaner and lower—reminded him that he'd seen Saul just the other night. Why do you think your pants were on backwards? Where are your boots if not beneath Saul's—

Jeremiah refused to let his thoughts go in that direction. He refused to dwell on what very well could be his own brain playing tricks on him. He gazed at his carved man, the wooden soldier, lonely in the grass. In a fit of inspiration Jeremiah took the expressionless wooden doll from inside and set him up next to the soldier. They were brothers, in a way. Half-brothers at least. They should be together,

Jeremiah returned to his woodshop. He locked the door and started from scratch.

***

It was Saul Dutson who finally called upon Jeremiah. Jeremiah had lost the last few days in his frenzy of work. The truth was that passions had not abated so much as

transferred from imbibing and fighting to woodcarving. But he counted his blessings—all in all an improvement in temperament. He hadn't even thought about brutalizing someone since the incident with the bleeding foot. Despite his limp, Jeremiah was almost happy.

But when he answered the door and found Saul Dutson knocking, he saw in Saul's eyes that Saul did not think him well. In fact, Saul looked downright concerned.

"Oh. Hello," said Saul, as if surprised to see Jeremiah in the woodshop he hadn't left in almost a week.

"Hello Saul," said Jeremiah. All at once he was nervous and fumbled tongued. What could he possibly say? Did he want to talk or shoo Saul away? Jeremiah internally bemoaned his inability to say anything clever. He was suddenly worried that Saul would see his unfinished work and he closed the door until only his head stuck through.

"We've all been wondering what you've been up to in here," Saul said. His raccoon eyes had faded down to gold and by God if they didn't match his hair. "Your brothers and me I mean. They didn't want to come bother you but they talk about you a lot. Nothing bad, you understand. Well that isn't entirely true. Brothers have their ways, after all."

"Look, Saul," Jeremiah began, not entirely sure what he was going to come out of his mouth.

"But I don't care what you're doing. I came to drop off your boots." Saul produced the boots from behind his back. They were muddy. Jeremiah plucked the boots from the air and tossed them backwards into his apartment.

"Well," said Saul. "Maybe see you down at the Kroghville tonight. Or tomorrow night." And he walked away. He was headed on path that would take him past Smith's farmhouse, then the cattle feed, and finally spill him out onto the fields where he would pick corn until dusk fell.

Jeremiah, head sticking from the doorway, watched him walk.

***

Jeremiah's great creation, himself, was nearing completion. It lay severed around the woodshop.

So, *this* close, Jeremiah stood outside in the field grass at dawn and studied his soldier and wooden mannequin. He wanted to emblazon the figures in his memory, then in one go—no matter the duration!—he would carve his face. For his own reference he'd arranged a buffed-tin mirror and a black bowl of clear water near the birch head.

Jeremiah ran his hands over the planed wood of the soldier's head and looked vaguely into the distance. Saul Dutson stood beneath the shroud of a pine tree, half hidden in the pine needles. Far away, sure, but definitely Saul. He was staring at Jeremiah. The stare lasted for an eternity and finally Jeremiah looked down and when he looked up a second later Saul was gone, pine needles rustling. Deeper into the forest.

Without so much as a consideration Jeremiah went after him.

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Following Saul turned out to be more difficult than he imagined. Jeremiah could never make eyes on him for more than a second, but he also never seemed to see Saul actually move. It was more like he would watch Saul standing somewhere off in the distance, lose focus for a second, and poof! Saul was gone. Except for a while later, just

when Jeremiah thought he was lost or was getting ready to turn around, Saul would appear again, still as the forest itself. Repeat. Repeat.

Soon enough they were well shy of the farm and deep into Smith Hollow's wilderness. He began to see Saul less and less, until a length of time passed such that Jeremiah realized he was alone.

A drumlin squatted in the distance. Short and bone bare trees spiked the hill. New plan: he would make for the drumlin, climb to the summit, and survey the landscape. Maybe even catch sight of Saul. He couldn't understand why Saul would lead him out here only to abandon him.

Smith Hollow was large enough that even after all these years—since he was old enough to bend and pick—he hadn't been everywhere. This wood was totally unfamiliar. He did notice an inordinate amount of birch, though, and if he could spot the birch grove from the drumlin he could plot a way back to the farm.

Jeremiah came closer to the drumlin. And to his surprise the trees weren't trees at all, but wooden statues.

At the foot of the drumlin an oak mother and baby towered, double his size, and past them sat a man and his dog carved from maple. The man's face was cut in detail down to the irises and eyebrows.

Jeremiah felt like he'd walked into church in the middle of service, as if this place was holy and ongoing.

He walked among the pews, aimed for the top of the hill, still intent on getting his view and finding Saul. On his way he passed nannies shepherding children, a man playing a cornet, a painter and model posing. Jeremiah had never seen this many people

at once, never mind that they were wooden. He'd been to Hamilton but forget Milwaukee or Chicago.

Topping the drumlin was a soldier that might have been the brother of his own carving. Their gaunt faces were identical, their cadaverous forms both bristling with branches and leaves. Hell, this soldier's rifle was even stuffed with wildflowers. This was no coincidence, this was magic—he'd somehow carved the same man. Whoever had directed him to create himself in wood was the same person who carved these pieces.

Yet this soldier made his look like a child's drawing. The detail was staggering. The soldier wasn't true to life so much as a specific life rendered in subtle exaggeration. His hands were spidery and muscular, the trigger finger long as an antenna. His feet were broad as platters and his legs were just-too-long, as if he were designed to march.

Over the ridge knelt two more soldiers. One was drawing sights on the wildflower soldier through a telescope rifle. The second was standing with his mouth open, gun down. He was large as a bear. He was Mr. Smith. Decades younger, sure, but Mr. Smith all the same. It would be an insult to the artist to pretend differently. Looking at the wooden man was seeing the truest version of Mr. Smith. And since that was Smith, this scene was depicting the Great Rebellion. Mr. Smith's pard was about to shoot the wildflower soldier.

Jeremiah became unsettled. The very wind drawing across the drumlin seemed infused with witchery. From his vantage he could see far and wide. But he did not see Saul. Because, he realized, Saul had never been out here.

***

The moon was risen by the time Jeremiah made it back to the shop. His energy was not spent; walking had worn away its usefulness. He split his knuckles against his door and also his forehead. Moonlight cast the workshop in a glow and he lit candles until the white and yellow light fought in a blaze bright as day.

Jeremiah built his wooden body in a frenzy. Each limb fit into its socket with a hollow *pop* until standing before him was himself, headless. The head was still a squarish lump of wood. He'd mounted it on a broom handle and stuck the handle into a cheese press to approximate eye level.

Jeremiah took his fine tools and began to cut the wooden head. He found that he didn't even need to use the mirror. His fingers knew his face, it seemed, better than his own eyes.

The birds were chirping in the dawn when Jeremiah finished. Puddles of light swam into the woodshop. He'd sweated canals into the sawdust on the backs of his hands.

Jeremiah clasped his head between his palms and held it above the empty wood neck.

He wished away his lust for violence for Saul. He wished he would no longer be ruled by his violent whims. He wished he were made of wood.

Jeremiah fitted the head onto the body and expected something magical to happen, such as his soul flowing into the wooden form and occupying that one instead of this one.

But Jeremiah's soul did not jump ship. Instead he regarded the wooden version of himself. It was well made. Anybody could recognize him. Hell, this statue was almost

as good as those on the drumlin. He might create work of such beauty and accuracy at some point. If he kept on carving, that was.

Jeremiah lifted his wooden self. He carried himself outside and took in the air. His brothers were already in the fields. They bobbed up and down like birds pecking corn. What would they say if he walked up right now and joined them?

The wooden brothers were also outside. The drawing dummy and wildflower soldier leaned toward each other in commiseration. Jeremiah arranged his wood self so he appeared to join the conversation. His wood self appeared even more skillful in comparison to the earlier work. The overall effect was a tintype speaking with a cartoon and an exclamation point.

Behind them was all the extra birch. He'd stacked it against the back of the shop.

He hadn't used a quarter of it yet.

CHAPTER IV

THE ROVING GAMBLER

Hush Puppy believed himself to be descended from a long line of warriors. At last as far back as the Civil War, and he liked to imagine much further than that— all the way back to the Germanic barbarian tribes of his lineage.

Hush Puppy was so named because he killed guard dogs. The platoon called killing dogs "dog duty," and Hush Puppy pulled it because he was the silent man among them.

But Hush Puppy pledged he'd never kill another dog.

The jungle was nearly black at night. He relied on senses of smell and touch. The air was wet and heavy and carnal. Massive trees throbbed in the humidity, too dark to see but with presence enough to be felt. He floated in deep ocean with no land in sight.

He wondered if he was still being followed.

Two days ago he'd spotted paw prints at the edge of camp. Only an hour ago he'd gone out to piss and found prints circling his tent. So many that they muddled together. So many that an entire pack must be on his tail.

So he'd gathered his belongings and into the jungle he went.

Hush Puppy was sure he'd lost his edge. He tried to make up for it by looking everywhere at once. Just as he fiddled with his lucky coin when he was nervous— rolling it between fingers, rubbing the smoothed face, placing it on his tongue— Hush Puppy fiddled with his regrets. He imagined, over and over, those last dogs lurching in the bamboo. He could still hear the crackling reeds and the whimpering pups and his pistol's sliding action. Still smell the gun's oily glaze and gunpowder and dog shit.

So while his body practiced woodcraft his mind traced the death memories suffused into the pistol. That little black flute he'd named Jeffery after the Jethro Tull song. The Hush Puppy, a weapon designed with canine slaughter in mind.

But try as he might, he couldn't remember how many doggy lives Jeffrey had ended. Jeffrey, even deadlier than the kill-shelter's needle! At about sixteen or seventeen Hush Puppy lost count. There were a few more after that— he could picture a set of perked ears, a brindled coat, and a jangling set of metal jaws— but the spate along the North Mekong was much too recent and entirely too mad to keep track of in specifics. So he told himself twenty. Twenty dogs. A round number might be easier to wear down in memory.

He caught a whiff of rot on the air. No doubt some dead critter. The smell was blue and deepened to black until he held his breath. Whatever was attached to the smell was certainly dead, and couldn't be more than fifty feet away.

He heard a rustle and a crack, a few yards apart from each other: at least two men stalking him. But what Charlie patrol ever stank like that? The stench was animal: a doe splattered on the highway or the wolf rolling in her. And was it his imagination or did he hear dogs panting?

He wanted to gag but couldn't afford to make the noise. Just when he was sure that he was going to puke anyway and suffer the consequences the smell receded into the jungle, and with it the rustle of footsteps.

Only when the smell had been absent for fifteen minutes did he allow himself to move. He tried to jog as fast as he could without compromising his safety in the dark. Very faintly, in the distance, he heard dogs yipping.

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Hush Puppy let himself take a break three hours out and with dawn beginning to crest. He set his pack against a tree and set himself against his pack. He loosened his boots and rolled his pant legs.

Secure, he stroked the face side of his lucky coin. The coin hung around his neck by a leather thong. Attached to the coin was a family legend that Hush Puppy was too skeptical to believe. But he was proud to wear to wear the heirloom— it'd been worn by the first George Everson. The Namesake.

The story of the coin was well-known in his family as Santa Claus. During the Civil War, Great Grandpa George had unearthed buried treasure in the deep Georgian wilderness. But, alas for the family Everson, the horde was counterfeit! As a souvenir of his surreal discovery, George the Namesake took with him a single coin.

As the coin was passed from son to father, and time marched closer and closer to the date on the coin—1957—the family began to marvel: the coin no longer looked too small, or featured the wrong face on its head. Instead it appeared authentic. In fact, Hush Puppy had shared his birthday with the coin in '57. But if he'd ever inspected the coin

before then he no longer remembered, which made him suspect the whole thing was an elaborate family joke. More likely it was just a lucky counterfeit.

He kissed the coin and dropped it and the coin clanged against Jeffrey's muzzle, shattering the round sounds of the jungle. He plunged the coin back inside his shirt and waited for his heart to calm down. His hairs were prickling and he had the strangest feeling like he'd done this before.

Except, he now noticed, for the tinkling of a song. A song that he recognized but could barely hear was whispering from the jungle. He took deep breaths until the jungle's familiarity seeped back. But he could still hear the song. This was worrisome. Either someone was close by or he was going madhouse.

As he hiked on the song grew louder and louder until he was sure it wasn't a hallucination. He could even make out a lyric: *Oh well I'm the type of guy who'll never settle down*. And that rhyming, déjà vu feeling came back on again, strong enough to make him nauseous.

He knew that he should try for cover but instead he kept walking. He sniffed the air but nothing was amiss, no horrible rotting odors, no rice cooking or motor oil burning. He forged ahead and as thick as the jungle was he couldn't see more than five feet out.

Because of this the river seemed to pop wholesale from the green—one moment invisible and the next blue and gold in the heat, flowing merrily five yards before him.

This was the Mekong, broad and flat as a quilt. Lush ferns reached for the sky at river's edge. A bullfrog jumped into the river. Lagoons pooled like a beaded necklace around the river's neck.

Trundling up the center of the river was a paddlewheel riverboat and from it came the song of Dion, magnified on the water. The river dwarfed the boat but as the boat came closer its size was also revealed.

The riverboat was the elder brother of those he and his schoolmates had chased from the shore of the Mississippi— those ramshackle riverboat casinos that ventured up river from Prairie du Chien or even Sioux City for petty cash in rural Alma and its sister towns. This Mekong riverboat would never have deigned to travel so far north, grand as it was. The boat seemed a town unto itself.

People stood on the prow of the riverboat between two tree-trunk smokestacks. He waved at the people and a few waved back. This act seemed terminally stupid a moment later so he ducked into the weeds and belly-crawled fifteen yards into the jungle. Perhaps no one of consequence had seen him and the boat would paddle on by. Through split ferns he saw that the boat came on.

He thought about running deeper into the jungle but before he could move a familiar scent assailed him. That dead stench from the night before—his stalkers. He listened for sounds of movement or dogs yipping but all he could hear was Dion, playing louder as the riverboat came near the bank.

A shape stole from tree to tree, low and dark, yards in front of him. Whatever it was moved spooky fast and—maybe this was his imagination—more like a centipede rolling than a dog coursing.

He was reminded of the myriad paw prints circling his tent. All rushing together. A little voice in the back of his mind whispered that maybe this wasn't Charlie, after all.

In sudden panic he crawled for a lagoon on hands and knees, expecting at any moment to be bit at the ankle and ripped into the jungle. He slid into the lagoon and hid among the lily pads with only his head above the surface. The riverboat was at that moment pulling to the river bank and he was dwarfed by it, as if a building had grown spontaneously out of the jungle.

By now the dead smell was so strong that his other senses dimmed to make room. And that rhyming was back: he felt as if the world had divorced itself from sense. The shadows and undergrowth became abstract and hallucinogenic shapes. Dion played over the wind like a spiritual chant.

Barely thirty feet away a second dark shape scuttled through the murk. At first he thought it a greyhound, that he'd been seeing things after all. But then he saw its legs. There were many. They moved symphonically but powerfully, like pistons encased in flesh. A plague mask snout pointed at the dirt. The creature snuffled and disappeared from sight.

Hush Puppy turned and ran for the river.

The sun was too bright for him to see much except for dim people shapes waving to him from a deck that wasn't quite as close to shore as he'd figured. He plunged into the water and swam hard but it felt as if he were swimming in a dream. The river yawned miles beneath his feet and the sun shone kaleidoscope upon the water. His bladder let go.

He could hear the dogs splashing into the river, and to prevent himself from looking back he closed his eyes. Black water splashed over his face, and when he couldn't stand it anymore he opened his eyes and the riverboat reared before him, blocking out the sun, throwing him into deep shade. The boat was all curved colonnades

and French windowpanes. People in fancy clothes drank cocktails on deck. He had the strangest sensation like he was buried up to his neck in a mansion lawn while a posh party played out on the porch.

Party guests reached down and lifted him from the Mekong. So many hands that he all but levitated. He dimly noticed that he was splashing water all over his rescuers but he ignored them to look at the riverbank.

There were no dogs on shore. The riverboat paddled downriver, but as it followed a bend in the Mekong he saw one, two, three, even more, creatures wrest themselves from the trees and trot down to the water.

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Hush Puppy was dried off by many gloved hands. Men in tuxedos and women in shining gowns pointed at him and laughed boozily. Sharp fingers poked his chest and pinched his ass. As Hush Puppy gasped a sunburned man shoved a cigarette into his mouth.

As if this was a cue that signaled their boredom with the hitchhiking Frogman of the Mekong, his saviors drifted away. Hush Puppy gazed upon a vast casino.

He walked along the deck, past blackjack and craps and tile games he did not recognize. Vietnamese, Europeans, and Americans shook dice and pulled levers and shuffled cards. He heard cheerful Christmas chimes at intervals. He could smell the cool in the river.

Silent waiters in blue suits hovered around him, waiting to be signaled. They reminded him of bellhops. He kept his head down so as not to belie his lack of money—apart from the coin around his neck, of course, and he didn't imagine he'd be gambling

with that. But he did find himself checking the shore and the jungle's edge every few minutes. Unnerved, he walked through an ornate glass door to the interior of the riverboat. He found himself on a balcony overlooking a ballroom. Couples danced in lascivious embrace on the checkered ballroom floor. The balcony was packed with slot machines, glinting and trilling in damp air. The air was hotter inside than out and his eyes stung with sweat.

In the shining surface of a slot machine he saw that his face was still painted green. The river had washed the lower half and spotted the upper, leaving him with Viking war paint. He was disturbed by his image. There was no empathy, only dead eyes and some vague shadow of anger radiating out of the slackness. He ran his hands through his hair to gather sweat and wiped his face as clean as he could.

A dog barked from somewhere lower in the boat. He flinched.

For a long time Hush Puppy stood next to the slot machine. He had absolutely no idea what to do with himself. At any moment he expected Charlie to march up and put a bullet in him. He stuck out like a green thumb so he took off his helmet and stowed it in his pack. Then he knelt out of sight and divested himself of all arms and ammunition. This armory joined the helmet in his pack. He ruffled his hair and pulled his boot laces and hid Jeffrey and an extra clip in his waistband. Finally, he loosened his shirt buttons down to the collarbone to show off his chest hair and the coin necklace. He hoped this would be enough to pass him off as a hippy and longtime deserter.

He raised the coin to his mouth and kissed it. Then he found himself a slot machine far away from anyone else and sat in front of it and tried to act like he was playing. But after a few minutes he just sat there, scanning the room, finally allowing

himself to exult in his freedom. A few minutes after that he collected a few spent cocktails from the tables around him and began to drink.

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He was high in no time. Turns out it didn't take much to get a rumble going these days. The bellhops materialized eerily—drinks had begun appearing at his table and when he tried to convey in broken Vietnamese that he didn't have money his waiter didn't even look up.

And there was more barking from the invisible dog. This time the owner yelled sharply in Vietnamese—a long string of venom. Hush Puppy still couldn't figure out where the sounds were coming from. But he would never speak to his dog that way, and not just because it was cruel. Words were crucial to a dog. Word economy was powerful. To make your dog silent you said *quiet*, and only once.

And right there, despite his studied avoidance, the memories leaked in. The memories he hadn't handled in specifics since he'd come to the jungle. His own dog, Buck, dead for a year now. Only a few weeks before deployment his parents called to tell him they were putting Buck down. Hush Puppy, still called George—or Quinn, by his mother and grandmother—met them at the vet. Buck needed help mounting the three steps indoors and in the examination room he just lay on his side. While Doc Smith prepared the needle George sat on the floor and embraced his dog. After it happened George remained a few minutes. Buck's heart had sort of quieted down and then shut off, like at any moment it would turn back on again and Buck would stand back up and they'd leave the vet together. George sat there and remembered how he'd taught Buck hand signals when Buck was a pup. How they would sit on the kitchen floor since Mom

hadn't allowed Buck on the carpet. How he'd waggle his fingers or close his fist and Buck would stand, sit, lay down.

The barking grew louder and pulled him from memory. In the half-panic of sudden wakefulness he left his table and took a confusing route through the halls. His path took him deeper and deeper, almost against his will, as if at every juncture he instinctively took the way towards the center of the ship and the source of the clamor.

Hush Puppy arrived at a lounge below decks. The dogs were somewhere in the room; he could hear them groaning. The lounge featured a smattering of slot machines. Portholes looked only at water. Hush Puppy crept along silent as three in the morning. He found that Jeffrey was in his hands, wire stock in shoulder, and he honestly didn't remember drawing. He checked his ammunition behind a craps table.

And it was there that the smell wafted over him. That dead smell: rotting, sweet as spoiled milk.

Hush Puppy peered over the craps table.

Cowering against a row of machines was a gambler, crying, split-browed, tongue hanging funny. He had his hands up to ward away the dogs. The dogs were on chains. One had a brindle coat and deep chest and the other was black and rangy as a wolf. Their balls hung like ornaments. They savaged the air in front of the gambler.

Hush Puppy counted their legs.

They were not the monsters he'd imagined.

Their leads were in the hands of Charlies I and II, the first older and stone faced, the second a young man who was watching the proceedings curiously.

Charlie I let his brindled mutt lick the gambler's face. Hush Puppy realized he was just assuming the guy was a gambler. Try as he might he couldn't put logic to the situation. What were these factions in relation to each other? Was Charlie just terrorizing the guy for kicks, on account of how much harder it was to find kicks in the jungle?

Hush Puppy felt for the gambler, he really did. And he decided to leave the man to his fate. His plan was to sneak back up to the casino floor, where he would sit at a slot machine and pull the lever just to watch the numbers spin. While he was deciding this the black dog howled. The dog—which had to be half-wolf at least, the legs and feet on the beast!— howled because Charlie II had rapped him over the head with the stock of his rifle. Charlie II shook the blood from the stock before putting it back up to his shoulder. Nobody was talking. Charlie I was a robot. He was Gort. He didn't look like anything.

And in that moment Hush Puppy came face to face with his convictions. Who was he, this changed man, this deserter, if he skulked away while a dog was tortured? The black dog was growling yet, game enough, but he'd settled back on his haunches and he was sometimes barking in the wrong direction.

So the question really was: could he take both Charlie I and Charlie II before either fired a shot? Because if they fired and someone heard it… well that would be the end of that.

Almost without realizing it he grabbed the coin beneath his shirt. Then he untied the leather thong and held the coin in hand. In his imagination the coin was heavy as

actual silver. Heavy with its value. Heavy with all the time it had hung around Everson necks.

He held the coin to a slot. The machine's glass reflected the room. He was suddenly very grateful not to be in the jungle but to be indoors for the end. In civilization. Because this was his end, if he gave himself more than a moment to think about it.

Even if he killed Charlie I and II, and even if he successfully made it off the boat without getting nabbed, what were his chances out in the jungle, alone? In the face of certain death he wanted to take one more chance. He wanted the option to win, one last time, before he lost. Hell, maybe this moment was the reason he'd been carrying the damn talisman around in the first place.

So Hush Puppy took his family heirloom and pressed it into the coin slot. He pulled the lever and imagined his coin surging through the machine, flipping switches and indicators to position point "spin." He cared not a bit that winning, however unlikely, wouldn't mean he'd spare these two men. Or that he wouldn't die too. As the coin travelled into the bowels of the machine he cared only about chance itself. Chance: whether in the next moment he would lose... or *win*, despite the frantic improbability.

The face of the machine spun in three columns. The figures dashed into one another until ancient runes blinked between blurred cherries and the number 7.

One by one by one the columns settled into identical drawings of silver coins.

The slot machine shrieked like a zealous Christmas ringer. Coins poured from the machine's maw into the coin catch, wave after wave, until the catch overflowed and Hush Puppy gathered the overflow in the hammock of his shirt.

My god, he thought, what were the chances!

And how cleanly the coins shined, as if the slot machine had been filled straight from the treasury and this tender hadn't seen the light of day in years. He looked closely at those in hands. Their dates were the same: 1957.

Idly, he wondered if the original coin regurgitated back out in a jackpot.

Then the boat lurched violently and flung him into a slot machine. Quarters thudded into the deck. The dogs and their handlers slid backwards towards him but the gambler was stuck, somehow, to the slot machines. Charlies cursed and their dogs whimpered. The boat lurched again, a seismic shift, and Hush Puppy saw the Mekong and the jungle and the sky, and when the world righted itself the craps table upended into his head.

***

Hush Puppy awoke in a forest clearing. His mouth was full of pine needles and his head pounded with his heartbeat. He struggled to his feet. Jeffrey lay a few feet away and there was sharp red pain in the small of Hush Puppy's back where the pistol must've scraped free.

Slowly he found his breath, let his hands roam his body to check for any wounds, hefted the pockets full of quarters from the slot machine. There was a sticky, bloody taste in his mouth like he'd accidentally eaten bad meat.

It was only then that he began to wonder where the river had gotten off to. Hush Puppy looked upon an impenetrable forest of pine and oak. Penetrating this forest was the riverboat, cracked asunder widthwise, lolling from a tiny pond like a cut tongue.

From the pond trickled a stream boisterous enough to float a paper hat. Sunset shot between branches and the roving casino seemed to glow in faerie light.

Corpses littered the clearing. They sparkled among the debris. Yards away a slot machine showing triple silver coins was tombstoned into a patch of ferns. The gambler lay against it and he was dead. A roulette table hung from an oak branch four stories. Men in triple-breasted suits hung in the branches around the table. One of the men struggled in the canopy and abruptly he fell. When he hit the ground his breath left him in a *whoosh* but after a few seconds of silence he began to moan. Or wail. It was hard for Hush Puppy to tell. He was dazed and beginning to realize that many of these corpses were starting to stir, as if the falling man's cries were all that were needed to resuscitate the wounded.

Hush Puppy didn't have the energy to go looking for the source. He staggered a few feet towards the riverboat. Pinned down beneath a slot machine was Charlie II. The one who'd been beating his dog. The black dog was trapped along with Charlie II, but only by the end of its leash. The dog looked none the worse for wear and Charlie looked three breaths from death. Charlie didn't look curious anymore, though he looked even younger. He didn't speak at all. But he shook his head up and down, violently, until Hush Puppy realized that he was pointing with his chin. Pointing down.

Hush Puppy walked up the man wary as a feral cat. But Charlie was thoroughly crushed. He was not going anywhere. The black dog was in leash range but it didn't deign to glance at Hush Puppy, as if it could smell his past and was, understandably, disgusted by it. Hush Puppy reached down into the man's shirt—what he assumed was

the gist of his chin pointing—and found a rabbit's foot amulet. Charlie must have worn in day in and out because he had a chain-thin tan line around his neck.

Charlie yelped. It was a sound of triumph. He opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. *Give it to me*, he was saying. Hush Puppy placed the rabbit's foot in Charlie's mouth. Charlie bit down. Immediately he seemed calmer.

But he speared Hush Puppy with his gaze. The whites of his eyes were slowly pooling red. He glanced down at Jeffrey. Back up at Hush Puppy.

Hush Puppy understood the message. Same one as before. *Give it to me*. And who was Hush Puppy to say no to this man? This man with a rabbit's foot in his mouth. This man who was more like himself than he would have ever suspected. This man who would suffer out the last few hours of his life. Hush Puppy was trying to relearn mercy. He was guilty he'd been ready to murder only a short time ago.

Hush Puppy took Jeffrey from his holster. He checked to make sure Jeffrey was clean and loaded. He aimed carefully down Jeffrey's iron sights.

And he played Jeffrey's song for the man, much too quietly for the man to hear.

Then he knelt down next to the body and cut the dog's leash.

The dog ran up the hill, towards the wreck. He ran past corpses and also the wounded. At his passing it became clear who was dead and who was nearly dead. Hands reached out towards the black dog. Some of them grasped fur, or caressed a flank, but only fleetingly. The dog did not stop running even when he came to the riverboat. He ran right past and disappeared from sight.

Hush Puppy picked his way along the dog's path.

He would not run past the reaching hands.

CHAPTER V

STEAKS FROM THE TRAINER'S HAND

Years ago, when Zach was a kid, he let his parakeet pick the food from his teeth. The bird would perch on the back of his hand and stick its head into his mouth and all but disappear. Once he told me he liked the way the beak clicked off his teeth. The bird was called Blueberry. I never learned whether it was male or female, it's hard to tell with birds. Zach decided him male and named him after his color. Zach also had a stuffed animal named Mr. Beaver and you can guess what kind of animal it was.

The air is muggy tonight and my left armpit is beginning to sweat. The afterimage of the sun is still hanging over the hills. Twenty feet behind the fence a raven is gouging at the molars in a deer skull, lit by the garage light. The strangest things can remind you.

The beasts are stirring, as they do after dusk. I can see their shadows thrown up against the corn. Elderly, infirm, and retired circus animals. Hamilton County has the only preserve in the Midwest. The closest dairy farm is a few miles away: Holsteins don't produce as much milk when they know a predator is nearby, even when it's locked up.

But the ravens come in droves. Until I saw one up close I didn't think there was much of a difference between them and crows. Before I started this job I don't know that I'd ever seen a raven, but the volume of corpses deposited here brings the big birds. The ravens run off crows when they see them, quiet and black as death. That's the eerie part. They're loud as anything most of the time. When they kill a crow, they never eat it. But they stand around it for awhile and stare. Makes me think of a black mass ritual, something that might have happened outside Salem on a moonless night.

I killed Blueberry the night Zach came out. Snatched it from the cage. If it's worth anything the bird was old and on its way out. Blueberry was the only pet we ever let Zach have and he felt for it as he might for ten animals. A goddamn bird, just enough brain to fit inside a horse pill. Completely incapable of love. My thumb crunched through its skull.

We haven't talked since he's gone to school. Two years now, as long as I've been working this job. He's a bright kid, brighter than me or his mom. Him being with men doesn't make me love him any less.

The truck door opens and Tyler, my son's best friend, hops in. "Felt good," he says. "Took a Ken and wiped my Dutson."

He must have heard that from Zach. I said it all the time when he was growing up. When he was thirteen Zach looked at me as serious as I'd ever seen him and said "that one stopped being funny when I was eleven."

Even at that age he looked like me. I imprint hard as a Labrador. You can always see the Lab in shelter dogs, at least in the ones without that dingo look they'll get if their mutt lineage runs back far enough. Zach's a shade bigger than me. Hair blonder but still

curly, longer than mine. Has that proud Dutson hook-nose. One dimple cornering his mouth—I've got two. All's he got from his mother are flat feet and pale skin: I tan, he burns. Old ladies stop us in the street and tell us we look like family.

Tyler fiddles with the radio as we drive. To be honest I don't really need any help tonight. In fact, I'm paying Tyler out of my own pocket. I think that's why he agreed in the first place. Cash under-the-table works for guys like him. I suspect he's still dealing grass to the high schoolers as his primary form of employment.

"So how's Zach been lately?" I ask, casually.

"You know," says Tyler. "Same old."

"I guess he's studying zoology," I say.

"I guess so," says Tyler. Those big sausage fingers twist the dial and even under his shirt I can see the tendons strain up to his shoulders, shoulders a vulture could perch on. If anything, he'll be good help.

I have a feeling it's going to be a slow night. Usually I've got a pair of possums by now. Chances are we'll get a rush in the hour before dawn. I've found six deer, one dog, and half a cat in 45 minutes. And every one was still steaming when I got to it. Critters move around more near morning and most of the drivers are half-asleep from going all night.

Without roadkill our beasts go hungry and are liable to start eating each other. On the day before his retirement Walt Hooper told me that in the seventies a couple of lions ran down a bear after too many days without food. The bear got in a few good licks, Walt said, but only a few. These days in the Enclosure we've got six lions, two tigers, and a bear that walks on its hind legs half the time.

It costs a lot of shekels to keep the animals fed so a few years ago the county board decided feeding them roadkill would be not only more cost effective but it would help clean up the roads. I'd just lost my job as a lab tech with Favil & Ehlke. Zach had already left for school and I was living in a bachelor's duplex, separated.

Turns out I like working outside better than I ever did working in a lab. Even in the winter, when it gets so cold you can see your farts cloud. Nighttime is best/worst because the meat is fresher. Three or four times more roadkill on an average night than during the day. Five or more in the summertime, especially with no moon.

The pavement is still wet from the storm. We pass a pair of headlights attached to a little F10 doing about seventy five and it strikes me how ludicrously dangerous driving is. One hundred thirty miles per hour of combined speed if we'd struck head on. My seatbelt would probably save me. Save me by splitting my ribcage on the diagonal. Gnash of bone, teeth of chest, probably a busted clavicle. If I were going faster maybe even torso me clean. Body flying free in two halves. Hands in the hair, foot on the brake.

"Put your seatbelt on," I tell Tyler.

"It didn't beep at me."

He's grown a paunch since he graduated high school. Greasy hair with dandruff sprinkling his shoulders. I can see the earwax curling out of his left ear.

"Hey," I say. "I've got a favor to ask. Think you could pass a message to Zach for me? Say his old man wants to talk?"

Tyler looks stricken. "I don't know Mr. D. We—we sort of lost touch."

"That so?" I'm bewildered. This is a possibility I never considered. I stare out the window at the shrouded fields and lines of forest running between them.

Zach and Tyler are like brothers. They've been friends for ages. They started palling around in sixth grade. Tyler was always showing up on our doorstep asking if Zach could play. So I met him on the stoop and told him that it was about time he stopped phrasing the question that way. "Ask him to play volleyball, not just play," I'd said. "You don't want to give the wrong impression."

"We don't like volleyball," he'd answered.

One day, after watching an Errol Flynn Robin Hood flick with the boys—I didn't tell them how creepy old Errol was, they'd figure that one out on their own soon enough—we got it in our heads to shoot some archery. I dredged a few of my old bows from the garage and when Zach and Tyler got bored slinging at the target they started arcing arrows up at the sun. I had to visor my hand to watch. At the apex the arrows would freeze and silhouette against the sky, the sun blinking from the steel tips in starbursts, fletching remembering the birds they once were.

I was sitting on the porch with a six pack, watching. Keeping an eye out when they started shooting straight up in the air and running around beneath as the arrows thunked down half a foot in the lawn. You lost sight of them, that way. Missile up, disappear, like a trick reappear a second or two before they were back in the earth.

In hindsight the brews had gotten the best of me. No surprise there. After the sun set I shooed Tyler home and put a T.V. dinner in the microwave for Zach so I could take a quick nap. Woke up to something like Armageddon in the house: I got an earful from Clara like I'd never had before. And from Tyler's parents, which was rich coming from

those trash-burners. As if that kid wasn't doing stupider things everyday while they were strung out.

But I still got sweaty thinking about it. Like the feeling you get when you realize you just about fell from a death-height but somehow kept your balance. Adrenaline pumping in late, shuddering fingers, clarity piling on in waves and slowing everything down, just a little bit.

Tyler speaks up. "How close do you get to them?" We are driving within sight of the fence.

"Close as me and you," I say. "The lions like it best hand fed. They've basically gone tame."

"No way."

"Too many years in the circus makes them soft. How do you think they got fed? Steaks from the trainer's hand."

"I don't know if I can do that," says Tyler. "Shit, man. I had no idea."

"Sometimes they want a belly rub after."

Slowly he gets the joke. I can see it dawning on his face, starting in his eyes and going south until he grins. "You're shittin' me."

"You just chuck the bodies over the fence," I say. "Or if they're too big you drop them at the inner gate, drive out, and close the gate remotely. The possums and rabbits are the most fun. I like to see how far I can throw them. They splat."

"Lions and tigers and—"

I cut him off with the stereo. At nights I can get the college station from up the road, low on the dial. Some guy that sounds like he has pimples begins spinning The Pretenders.

"Is it always this slow?" Tyler asks.

***

You have to be careful to check the carcasses for bugs. Usually termites or ants. The lions will eat anything up to three or four days dead. The tigers are more finicky. But it doesn't take long for Mother Nature to start taking her children back, mainly using her other children.

Last summer a lioness got bit to death. I found her right as the sun was setting. She was a gnarled old bitch. One eye, the other socket like the puckered mouth of a geriatric. Clumps of her coat sprinkled around same as roadkill that's been frying on the tarmac for a couple of days.

She was poxed with red fire ants, the kind so tiny I didn't see them until I was almost on top of her. From a few feet back her coat shimmered like heat over the desert. She was still moving in death. The ants must have got in her brain and were tugging her levers. She'd died against the fence, trying to claw herself out, maybe, or just using it to scratch the ants off. She was bulbous and inflated. The bites were so extensive they looked like tumors that had grown violently enough to split the skin. Her paw was curled as if she was about to play-swipe.

The doe we are about to load has ants trailing from her punctured belly. We are standing on the side of the road in our waders and wearing thick rubber gloves that go up to our elbows. The blood and grime can get overwhelming; it's easier to get into the

thick of it when you know you won't get greased up. What remains of the deer is jack-knifed on the shoulder. Back so busted the spine is perpendicular to itself. Tyler is holding a Coleman and under the light I can see red painting the road for a good ten yards. This doe got hit by something big. Probably one of those half-monster trucks the redneck kids drive. The light catches sprinkled glass amidst the blood.

I kick at a crow hopping around the corpse. It dances at the edge of my reach and squawks. I'm wishing a raven would skim over and scare it off when a stone whizzes past and drums the crow's head. Almost before it can hit the ground Tyler's leapt past me and grabbed the bird by its neck.

"See that shit?" he says. He rings the neck and with the bone-snap I detach from the moment. His head seems to float backwards, farther and farther, until it's a lost balloon. Then it slings back towards me but this time Tyler's head has been replaced by Blueberry's, man sized. His beak looks like a blood-red incisor.

"Throw it in the truck," I say. He steps back and squares up, shooting the body like a basketball into the small-animal barrel. It clanks the back wall and falls among the possums and squirrels and skunks stiffening at the bottom.

We take a hoof in each hand, me the front and him the ass side. "Watch that you don't get ants in your waders," I warn him. "These red ones bite hard."

"I got stung once," says Tyler. He points. "On my arm right here."

"Only once?" I say. "Zach's been stung five or six different times. One time real bad. We were at a Pizza Hut. I slap the doe's crown. "You ready?"

We heave the doe onto the tailgate and her belly pops like a ketchup packet, ketchup all down our fronts, and close the gate. Tyler lights a cigarette.

I can't stand the smell of that place," I continue. "Burning tomato sauce. But it was Zach's favorite. We got him his own kid's meal. He inhaled it so fast I had to pat him on the back once to shake loose his pipes. I was a little toasted to drive back yet. I hear a knocking at the window and when I look up I see Zach with his face to the glass, wedged between two bushes.

"Then all of a sudden he gets really serious and starts moving kind of herky-jerky out of the shrubs and towards the entrance. Two sets of doors with an entryway between. He made it through the outside door and they hit him in the gap. Ground hornets. Before I got the door open he was stung something like thirty times."

"Yeah, he told me," says Tyler.

"Really?" For some reason this surprises me. "Anyway, the venom fucked up his body chemistry. For good. Remember junior year when he got stung and he ralphed all day?"

Tyler's eyes are on me but seeing far away. Cigarette smoke surrounds his head and floats into a foghat. "You ready to rock?" he asks.

"Gotta use the loo," I say.

I walk to the tree line to pee. Due to the deer and the varmints I can smell the truck from twenty yards out. I imagine the stink as a visual, living thing. Decomposing octopus arms waving in the air stream, blindly but insistently reaching into the cab and overpowering the 'Black-Ice" air freshener hanging from the rear view. I'm paranoid the reek follows me all the time, infiltrating my clothes and skin and hair. Even my bones and organs. Purpling them. Rot so deep it starts you dying early.

***

We are lofting the small ones, birds and vermin, over the outer gate and passing a joint that Tyler took from his cigarette pack. We are having a competition to see who can throw the furthest corpse.

The truck is parked on the gravel driveway before the Enclosure. I backed up so we could sit on the cab with our feet in the bed. Bright halogen lights are set at intervals but they're smothered by the country dark. The fence is that of a prison more than a zoo, and more of a wall than a fence—prevailing logic being a lion on the loose would shake-up the locals. The gates too are soaring and impregnable, slatted vertically with boards every few yards for reinforcement. There are two: the inner, on the same line as the fence, and the vestibule of the outer gate. From above it looks like a wedding band with a tiny stone.

I have a remote with two buttons marked **I** and **O**. To feed the beasts I place the corpses in the corral created by the gates, drive out, then close the outer gate and open the inner. Dinnertime.

Tyler is winning our competition. He tells me he was the pitcher on the Jaybird High baseball team. I did not know this, though I suspect I should have, and at some point may have.

The Enclosure covers 2,132 acres in a landscape that varies from wood to field to swamp, rolling with drumlins like upside-down bowls beneath a sheet. Around the Enclosure is the corn, which in August is man height. I used to have a dream of the rows shaking fanatically then settling into a wake that flowed towards me, concealing the lions that were in the stalks.

I underhand a squirrel that catches in the barbed circle-wire topping the fence. Out of the black flies a raven that sets to caving in the squirrel's skull. I've got the same feeling I used to get when I was in junior high and about to put my arm around a girl.

"About that favor I asked you," I say. "I gotta be honest with you. Zach won't talk to me. I just really need to get a hold of him."

Tyler's quiet but I can tell there's something he wants to say to me. Energy spilling from him, radiation. I swear the air around us gets warmer.

"Not a word," I say. "It's been awhile."

"Why'd you have to kill that fucking bird?" Tyler says, finally. "That's some psycho shit. If you had let him get that puppy you'd have set it on fire."

I never even knew he wanted a puppy. In dull epiphany I realize how Zach must have wanted more pets. "He loved that bird," I say before I can stop myself. Sounds stupid the moment it hits oxygen, but Tyler ignores me and hurls a rigid cat at the raven. He misses.

"Didn't mean to kill it," I say.

"Sure looked like you did."

"I figured, since Zach's a zoology major and everything that he might like to come work with me for a summer," I say. "If you could tell him that." I drag on the joint to seem relaxed.

Tyler makes like he's studying the distance for beasts. "Now that I'm thinking about it, maybe Zach's not a zoo major anymore."

"What're you talking about?" He must have his information wrong. Zach loves animals. He fucking adores them.

"Yeah." Tyler won't meet my eye. "He might be in the business school now."

"Well," I say. "He's still into the wild, huh? Feeding the beasts with his old man. Just because he left zoology doesn't mean he's lost all interest."

"Chance of that," says Tyler.

"Yeah, sure," I say. I try to stay positive. It's important to have a hobby you can be passionate about and a job that can pay the bills. Zach would be a natural businessman. Savvy, handsome, logical. He sold rice krispies treats door-to-door in elementary school.

"All I was thinking is that he could see some of the birds around here," I say. "Ravens have better language retention than a parrot. Smart as a five year old, swear to god."

"Whatever you say," says Tyler.

I have a petty urge to mimic him. "So what's he focusing on?" I ask. "In the business school."

"Accounting."

"Accounting," I say. "How do you know all this? I thought you guys didn't talk."

"This was before we broke up," says Tyler. "Shit, I mean before we—" but he can't recover and begins to laugh sort of nervous and horrified.

"Oh," I say.

And I have a bizarre, two-pronged reaction. First: relief. A guitar string tuned concrete finally loosened. I'm not as surprised as I should be. On some level I guess I knew. But I never let myself believe it, never really let it enter my mind. I think about

all the sleepovers. Zach and Tyler, all this time. So on the heels of relief, betrayal. Or something close to it, that sick feeling you get when somebody's been lying to you for a long time.

"You cool, Mr. D?" Tyler's hitting the joint like an orangutan might. The drug has made him more agreeable.

"I'm cool," I say. I realize my hands are tremoring, very fast. If I held them against the truck they'd slice through like breadknives. A part of me thinks clinically about how Tyler's neck would look if I were to throttle him, right before his Adam's apple pops and esophagus flattens. I take the joint from him and he fish-faces thin air.

"Hey," he says. He's still got his finger pinched with nothing in-between. I inhale and burn that cherry red and leave it in my mouth, then reach into the barrel and come out with the last critter, a bloated muskrat of all things, and make to chuck it as hard as I possibly can. The movement starts in the truck bed beneath my foot, torques into my ankle, calf, thigh, buttocks, channels through my shoulders and when I finally release I'm staggered, catching onto the truck for balance, and that muskrat is halfway to the moon. We lose sight of it in the darkness but I half expect it to come flying back to me.

"You win," says Tyler. "Hot damn, I think you cleared the inner gate too." He seems overly enthused and he's moved a few feet away from me.

The adrenaline wears off and I feel empty, like inflated skin without a body inside. All at once what we've been doing feels stupid, childish. Tyler's got this kicked dog look on his face and it occurs to me that this is exactly the look he had on his face

standing behind Zach on that night. The night Zach came out. A "Sorry I just pissed the floor" look.

That night was a Sunday. I remember because for awhile there I was taking a bath every Sunday. Sweating out the booze into the bathwater.

I'd fallen asleep and the garage door opening shot me awake and I lurched up, room spinning, Labatt cans clattering in the waves. Grabbed a bathrobe. Walked downstairs. Looking back it's almost like I was meant to awake all of a sudden. No thinking, only acting. My lizard brain working on a deeper level.

Zach said he wanted to talk. He was in the living room. At the time I barely noticed that Tyler was there. After Zach talked I didn't say anything. I felt like a tin man, a being solely of instrumentation and logic. It all seemed very logical at first. I finally understood why he was so enamored of that bird. Why he wanted all those animals to care for, to nurture. Traits a mother might have.

Blueberry's cage was halfway between us. A spot of rust was growing along the latch of the cage and the rust left a maroon streak on my thumb. I remember Zach saying "Dad" when I was reaching in. Not really asking, or pleading, just stating it like a fact. It didn't seem terribly important at the time.

Sometimes I think about what that must have been like for Blueberry: a mammoth hand invading his home. He buffeted me with his tiny wings and flew and bit at me even though he knew me. This time he sensed a difference.

I could fit him in one hand. I held him like you might hold a lighter and pressed my thumb and he burst. Then I stuffed him back in the cage and wordlessly climbed the stairs. It was very quiet in the house. I was already halfway to the landing before the

rage hit me so I could feel it. Big shocking gulps of hallucinatory rage. For a moment the walls pulsed in houndstooth and the staircase became a dog's tongue and unfurled. In a few steps I was at the bathroom door.

As I slipped back into the bathwater, now tepid, and listened to the murmuring voices below me my rage seemed to leak out of my body and into the water. Then all the rest leaked out, all feeling, until I was very quiet and the room was quiet and everything became quiet.

I wondered if Zach had always been this way. Was he born or made? It seemed to me that it must be his destiny, written in his bones for years, even as Blueberry dug the food from his teeth.

I still keep the jar of Zach's baby teeth in my nightstand. One of those airtight Pyrex jobs; I stole it from a chemistry lab in college. Before bed I take it out and shake the teeth around. A bone maraca. In their age the teeth have yellowed and one is cut bloodshot with red veins. It's my favorite. I shake until I can see it and think about Blueberry the parakeet and all the meals he ate. I've never opened the jar. I imagine at this point the teeth might smell but I can't be sure. Do bones stink if they've been divorced from the flesh?

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I'm sitting in the truck by the open outer gate. I've instructed Tyler to carry the doe to the inner gate on his own. She's a big girl, all of 105 pounds. He's dragging her by her forelegs but he hasn't accounted for the dead weight and she's slipping out of his grasp like a salmon. His destination is a neon circle spray-painted on the grass and mud a yard from the inner gate.

I keep the truck doors open. There's a quarter joint left and as I'm lighting it I press the **O** on my remote and the outer gate closes behind him. Standard procedure and he knows that, but still he looks over his shoulder as the gate locks. More ravens have gathered by the meat-stripped squirrel on the barb wire. They are watching with me.

My finger drifts over the **I**. It strikes me that pressing a button is a tiny, efficient movement. Simpler than holding a pen or brushing your teeth. Hell, I could sneeze and accidentally push it. One depression, one accident, is all there is between Tyler and the beasts. The pad of my finger brushes the button and I marvel at the utter control we have over our bodies.

I take needle-nose pliers from the glovebox and pinch the very edge of the joint. A bass roar comes from somewhere close and Tyler drops the doe and flies to the gate where he interlaces his fingers and mashes his lips right up against the chain-link.

"That'll do it, Mr. D," he says.

But I don't hit the **O**. Instead my hand hovers over the **I**. My mind leaks out in the wind and blows away and I'm a husk. For a moment I simply exist. Draw breath and nothing else.

"Very funny," says Tyler. He shakes at the chain link. I wonder if he can hear their pawfalls as they circle him, death waiting just out of sight. The joint has gone out and I'm swimming in my own head. Tolerance low after many years.

He shifts a foot to the right and suddenly his eyes catch light and glow, just like an animal. But the glow fades and when it does I see how scared he is. All at once I feel awful, picking on a nineteen year old kid. I get out of the truck and walk up to the gate, then carefully press **O**. He scampers back to the truck. "Asshole," he says.

I look for the ravens but they've left. Bones crunch under my boots when I pass the gate. Close by somebody is burning leaves. It doesn't quite cover the rot but it helps. As per protocol I press the **O** and close the door behind me. I walk forward and stand next to the doe.

I'm not scared. I've done this a hundred times before. But possibility licks at my brain and I get that rush of blood, the same surge you might get shooting arrows straight up into the sky.

The clouds dampen the halogen lights but movement catches my eye through the slats of the gate. Something prowling at the edge of light. A few moments later the black bear strolls past on her hind legs. Her nose is held up in the air and she is snuffling. She looks haughty. Then all at once she's back on all fours, hearing or smelling something in the dimness. I imagine the lions sliding in the grass, their tails curled into C's. The sow makes a hard angle and streaks out of sight. She reminds me of a person, for some reason. Like a woman in a bear-suit.

Then, feeling the copper weight of eyes on my neck, I turn to see a lioness five or six feet away, sitting on her haunches, regarding me. She's right at the gate.

Her nose is cleft laterally and one of her ears is torn but she is handsome. Her muscles are unrelenting under her fur. She is barely arrested locomotion. She has the focused look of a housecat on the prowl. Nothing like rage or hatred; only pragmatism and hunger. She sees me very simply, at the most fundamental level. I wonder if she ever had any children. I wonder if she is family to the red-ant lioness.

"I could probably talk to Zach, you know," says Tyler, loudly. His voice cracks in the middle of the sentence.

I do not turn to look at him. The lioness cocks her head at me.

CHAPTER VI

FAMILIAR DEPICTIONS

This was the third move for Leah's job, and also the third time Paul had unpacked alone while she'd gotten straight to work. Due to the many moves in his life he'd long ago given up hating the process and instead strove to sculpt himself into the perfect practitioner of picking-up-and-moving-away.

So, preternaturally skilled as he was, he was surprised when he opened the flaps of the final box and found not a snugly packed box, but a child's clay diorama. The diorama depicted a dining room, framed from above, as if he were a giant peering through the torn roof.

And Paul recognized it at his new dining room, or at least a dining room similar to an uncanny degree. The artist had gotten the table the right shade of cherry-wood. A hutch cabinet stood in the corner with white windows and colorful clay bits to imply the bright glasses inside. Tiny clay moving boxes dotted the floor, some open and others closed, as if the un-packer had left in the middle of the job. If he could take a picture of his dining room with clay this would be the image. With the major departure of a red-clay dog, he just now saw, curled up at the foot of a chair.

Yet as intricate as the detailing was, the workmanship was that of a child. Each straight line was bulging like intestine and the walls were that of a painted green cavern. The dining table had uneven legs plus five table mats and a dog bowl— perhaps an entire clay family was mean to sit at that table, dog included.

This was likely one of those bizarre moving mix-ups, resulting in a child crying in her new bedroom with nothing to remind her of her old one. Quite the little artist, though; and Paul looked fondly to the time when he would have a child creating dioramas like this one.

Which would be a long time, according to Leah.

***

When Leah got home late that night he waylaid her at the door. Already on the long hours, he thought, making her mark at the new job. The self-proclaimed hired-gunslinger of Tax Season, travelling with her faithful sidekick, Paul, to wherever taxes most direly needed calculating.

"Hey, how was your day?" he asked.

"Great," she said. "Productive. Yours? Find any photo gigs?"

But he'd already guided her over to the diorama. He pointed.

After a long moment of consideration: "Kid's got a good eye. But, ach, take the time to do the little things, you know? Straighten those table legs, at least."

He looked over her shoulder and to his surprise the diorama presented a different scene than before. This time the dog was standing. An Irish Setter, he thought, if cave-drawings could be dimensional. Covered in red-snake fur and slightly too large for the room. That same dog in his dining room would be a horse.

And the dog was barking into the "ceiling," and therefore into Paul's face. He could tell the dog was barking by the giant speech bubble sticking from the dog's mouth that read BARK.

"That dog wasn't barking when I saw it before," he told her. "Just lying down. The scene changed."

"When did you make this?" she asked.

"I found it in one of the moving boxes. I thought it was from one of your nieces."

"Those cretins? Please," she said. "They live Up North now, anyway. Near Ashland."

"Well I didn't make it," he said.

But she'd already changed gears and cycled past him. "Did you find any freelance jobs today, honey? Great work cleaning up in here, by the way."

After dinner they took a walk and Leah talked about her new office-girlfriends. Real characters, it sounded like. He was thinking that walking would be much better if they had a dog. He told her so.

"What for?" she asked. "Explain to me how a dog would make a walk 'better.'"

"Relaxation," he said. "Companionship. Someone to talk to."

"I told you what happened to my great aunt," said Leah. "I've told you a thousand times. I'm not letting an animal into my house that will eat my body after I die. Eat my body, Paul."

"They're just animals, babe," said Paul. He stalked off, took the imaginary dog with him, felt it pull the invisible leash all the way to the house.

***

In the morning, before running his errands or beginning his job search, Paul took a moment to check the diorama for any nighttime changes. He knew in his gut that what he'd seen yesterday was not, actually, self-molding clay.

He went to the dining room and opened the box. And he'd been right, fluke of memory: there was that dog barking in speech bubble just it'd been last night. Then he noticed that all but a few of the boxes were gone in the dining room—progress—and that a clay man was kneeling next to the dog.

The clay man was frozen in the process of looking over his shoulder at what the dog was barking at. The man's face was a dough-mashed and featureless mess. He had the twisted, broad limbs of an orangutan. His hair and clothing were painted on, blue jeans and a checkered shirt. He held his dog's collar with a flesh mitt.

Was Leah the real perpetrator here, playing a joke on him? Because as stupid as it was, the figure in the box reminded him of himself, like he was gazing at his voodoo likeness.

With one difference, he thought. Clay Paul was surrounded by the placemats of his family.

***

Somehow the grocery trip Leah had sent him on— via sticky note on the fridge— had turned into a walk through the Hamilton County Humane Society. Animals tended to like him and in the Humane Society they were really laying it on thick. Their barks echoed on the concrete and Paul felt suddenly like he was beneath a bridge.

One of the dogs sat regally at the back of his cage when Paul walked by. Paul had a Society Member open the cage. He held out his hand and made clicking noises with this teeth.

"That's Bubba," screamed the Society Member over the barking dogs. "He's kinda aloof."

"Does he have his shots?" asked Paul. Then he asked again, much louder.

***

Their new dog, Caesar, *née* Bubba, was patrolling the outer rim of the room. He weighed 51 pounds and was as pretty as a lioness. His ears were improperly docked and they flapped like bat wings. Paul kept an eye on him in case he started hoisting.

"What if we have to move?" Leah asked. "You don't just buy a dog without a discussion, Paul."

"Caesar, come," he said. The dog didn't even look up. "We just moved here. Why would we move?" He sat on the ground and whistled and Caesar trotted right over. He patted the ground next to him and Caesar laid down.

"I don't know why" said Leah. "I don't know what I meant there."

"Don't make me move again," he said.

"The dog's ugly," she said. "I used to have this dream where a dog with a rotten head was waiting in my garage. And my dad would ask me to get something from the toolbox out there, you know?"

"Caesar? Ugly?" Paul was appalled. "He was the best looking mutt on the lot. This guy's a beggar prince, Leah."

When he saw the look on her face he realized all at once that she was a little scared of Caesar, judging by those sidelong glances, and quite angry, pissed off, even, as she'd only ever been a few times in their six years together. "You won't have to take care of a thing," he said. "I'll do it all."

"I need to think about it." She walked up the stairs and into their bedroom and closed the door. Good. This would give them both time to compose. In any case he wanted to check the diorama before bed. He'd come to terms.

The sun was setting into the room. Paul closed all the shades and left Caesar to explore. He turned on the floor lamp near the box.

This time an entire clay family sat around the dining table.

The father, Clay-Paul, sat at one end of the table and the mother at the other end. Between them an older sister and middle brother and younger sister. In front of this younger sister was a miniature shoebox diorama. The dog sat right up at the table with the rest of them. His bowl was empty and he reclined with his paws behind his head and his legs crossed. One of his eyes was open and staring at the ceiling.

The forms of the children and mother were so general as to be amorphous. Their faces were smears. The youngest sister deformed further by a facial thumbprint.

He had no sense that the mother was Leah, as he did that the father was himself, or at least someone like him.

Distorted as they were, the clay figures didn't disturb him. Instead he saw raw material. The prediction of a family. Even the clay father, his own figure, was yet to be fully modeled. Only the dog was refined. The dog knew who he was. That single eye regarding Paul held an intelligence that the human faces did not yet exhibit.

That could be my family, he thought. Now that Caesar was in the picture the only thing separating him and the diorama-family were children. This was the family-that-could-be, if Leah were open to it. And couldn't he see some auburn tones in the clay-mother's painted hair? See the shade of Leah's slender shape within the untended clay mass?

No. He didn't think he could.

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Leah was either asleep or "asleep" when he came to bed, and trying to sleep next to her was like trying to sleep next to something cold-blooded. On top of that, Caesar wasn't allowed into the bedroom, even in the crate. Didn't matter that Paul thought it might be nice to let the dog sleep on the foot of their bed.

Somewhere he'd read that lying in bed for too long without actually sleeping led to poor sleep habits. Armed with this knowledge, and unwelcome in the bedroom anyway, he crept downstairs.

He released Caesar from his bonds and they sat together in the dining room. Paul opened the box but waited for awhile with the lights off.

When he flipped on the light to see what the box conveyed, he wasn't surprised to see his counterpart also sitting at the dining table. The scene was dim, the family gone, and dinner long since over. The clay father had his head in his mitten hands and a drink on the table. He looked as bad as Paul felt. An argument with his clay wife, surely. His big red dog was sitting across the table, sipping its own drink in brotherly commiseration.

The father's clayface was closer to human than ever before. His eyes and mouth, though rudimentary, conveyed deep sadness, almost wretchedness. Paul poured himself a

drink and sat back down, then held the drink out in cheers to this other man. They were the same now, he saw. Drinking alone in the middle of the night. Only company the dog. Family or no family, maybe it didn't really matter.

At least I have a drinking buddy, he thought. He saluted the diorama again and was almost immediately tipsy. Drinking on an empty stomach, what a bargain.

But while he had a drinking buddy, his clay counterpart did not.

How could this man in the box be so sad when he had daughter making art? If he was thinking about what it was like the other way— sans-children, Paul's way— there was no sense in it. It's unhappy on this end too, buddy.

And in a rush he realized that he was finished with the diorama. He'd seen another family. He didn't need the view any longer, but after seeing the clay man with his head in his hands and that stricken look he thought that maybe the clay man did.

He took a last look at the diorama, feeling like this was the Rubicon. Then he took the clay figures from the box. Instead of being soft clay, as he'd always imagined, they were dry and brittle and several broke to dust in his hands.

He gathered up a shoebox, a pair of scissors, two cotton rags, printer paper, colored pencils, a sharpie, scotch tape, and a ping-pong ball.

"Caesar, come," he said.

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The guest bedroom had a walk-in closet where Paul's clothes lived. Caesar plunged into the room, delighted in territory he'd not yet explored.

Paul set the empty moving box on the bed. He tumbled his supplies onto the bedspread and started building— sectioned the closet from the room, cut the guest bed

from the shoebox, and sliced rags into little clothing shapes before folding them into piles around a miniature cardboard suitcase. He drew Caesar and attached a bark to his lips. He made himself from rolled paper and the ping-pong ball. Finally he built the tiny diorama of his own diorama and set it in front of Paper-Paul.

Paul opened his real suitcase on the other side of the guest bed. He took trips in and out of the walk-in closet, making piles on the bed before packing to better utilize his space. His new diorama was surrounded, just as the diorama depicted.

He thought he should probably leave a note for Leah. But, then again, the diorama could serve that purpose too.

And all at once Caesar stopped his perimeter patrol. He raised his hackles. He looked straight up into the ceiling and began to bark.

CHAPTER VII

THE TIN SPORTSMAN

After his doctor's appointment Marcus Silvius, All-Pro defensive end for the Hamilton Hellcats, sneaked into the locker room to steal his Game-Arm. That he was forced to steal was an injustice. The arm had been constructed specifically for him but it was owned by the Hellcats organization, much like a game ball or elliptical machine. The Everyday prosthetic he owned and currently wore over his stump was chafing him bloody. And he wasn't feeling so great besides—running a fever with phantom pain from elbow to neck, cold and brittle but flushing molten on his heartbeats.

The hard hat sound of practice sank through the stadium into the earth around him. Despite his pain and the fear of being caught he was filled with deep satisfaction. One of his true loves was being alone in empty structures: the weight room in the offseason, the abandoned bowling alley he'd lost his virginity in, airports in the very early morning.

He was sneaking around during practice to avoid his teammates, as he had since week six and the supposedly season-ending arm injury. He had become estranged. Or maybe only *felt* estranged. Bragg he had been avoiding most of all; he didn't want any

friendly advice. He found it unexpectedly shameful for his prosthetic to go rogue from his body—like he couldn't control his own bowels.

Despite Doc Smith's solemnity during the appointment, Mark was skeptical of his diagnosis that to wear the Game-Arm was to threaten his own life. Sure, it'd made Mark sick on the sidelines once or twice. But never anything more than nausea and a head-rush.

In the locker room he checked around all corners and judged himself alone. A deep sour smell pervaded. Lockers blue and yellow, alternating in rows but not columns. Sinks with separate hot and cold taps, both on spring timers so you could never use both temperatures at once. Only two weeks since he'd been in the locker room, and he was surprised to feel alien inside his old comfort. A side effect of low morale? Of time having passed?

He opened his locker with his right hand, the Everyday Arm m.7. Elbow to fingertips, complete forearm, wrist, and digital motion. Matched to his skin tone, tacky as the non-stick side of a Band-Aid, beach ball pungent. All in all the arm reminded Mark of the cylindrical red practice "hooks" he cast in his basement as a child. It acted like the real deal, but it couldn't hook a fish. And with the Everyday Arm he could not feel. He could shake hands, butter toast, and knuckle-roll a quarter. But if he lopped off a Band-Aid finger it would be the same as lopping off a broom handle.

Cut a finger from the Game-Arm and he would feel the every mote of pain, because the Game-Arm could feel along with the rest of his body. He wore nothing when he wore the Game-Arm. He experienced this for an hour at each practice and on game

day for five. Afterwards he'd reharness the Everyday for the week's remaining 72 waking-hours. Two weeks on injured reserve made for a lot of Everyday time.

Mark heard footsteps slamming. He whipped around and closed the locker and watched Bragg, his substitute on the 3-4, walk in—plastic exoskeleton, impossibly muscled from the anabolics, tall enough to swat geese out of the air, whole-bodied.

"Silvius, long time," said Bragg. "Miss you out there."

"Not like I do," said Mark. He cursed himself for his lazy escape. Bragg, concerned, might corner him indefinitely with questions of his health.

But Bragg didn't seem to hear. He was gutting his own locker and a pile of refuse grew at his feet. Mark wondered, as he imagined a lot of augmented guys must, if he could hack it if he were whole— restrictions and limitations placed on augments aside. In any case, Bragg could play at temperatures below zero without his sinews freezing solid and he didn't have a pit crew hounding him on timeouts.

Bragg, head stuffed into the locker, reappeared holding a pair of gloves. He swung his head to Mark like a marionette. "You hear about this kid who—" he considered "—cut himself off?"

"Christ, no," said Mark. "His dick? On the team?" Bragg's pupils were different sizes, he noticed. This seemed to have incredible import. He was disturbed, as if Bragg was half in the dark but he couldn't see the dark part.

"On the news, man," said Bragg, frantically excited, waving the gloves. "I can't believe you haven't heard. This high school kid, seventeen, wanted to go pro but he knew he didn't have the size. So he stayed after school till everyone was gone. Picked

up the phone in the woodshop and called the cops, said there was going to be an accident. Then he jumped into the shredder."

A wash of nausea. "The shredder?"

"Yeah. You know, a shredder. The industrial kind. It's pretty smart if you think about it. Getting a full new set." Bragg stuck his arm out flat as if it were to be cut. "Got anything sharp?"

"He lived?"

"Oh yeah," said Bragg. "He had a system. Tied rope from his shoulder to the kill lever so when the shredder got all the way through his arm it cut the rope too. Swung the lever right off. Kept him torsoed."

"Clever," said Mark. He put on a brave face. "First maiming this month."

"Yeah, if you don't count the ones over eighteen," said Bragg. "Once you hit the magic number it isn't crazy to slice yourself up anymore." He slammed his locker and rolled the lock. "Anyway, did Erin tell you about dinner tonight? The four of us?"

"Yeah," said Mark. "I mean, not yet. I'm headed home now."

Bragg winked over the smaller pupil. "Sure, amigo. I'll see you tonight." He clapped Mark on the shoulder.

Mark waited a ten count after Bragg left. Then, before anyone else could interrupt, flung open his locker. Hanging in its synthetic cocoon was his Game-Arm. The most furious part of him; screaming bright and tattooed, ligaments dormant beneath ½ part authentic skin, translucent patches with needle-drop points for quick injection. Blunted spade digits, rubber and plastic seams and seals. Titanium encased tendrils growing from the open side of the elbow.

Doc Smith be damned, he knew what his body needed.

Mark sat down. He pulled out his belt and folded it on his lap. He unscrewed the Everyday model and tossed it into the locker. The removal left a crisp metal feeling about his jaw and temple. Installing and divorcing his prosthetics at the beginning was like touching an electric fence and feeling his blood sizzle.

On his right arm the meat ended just above the elbow; beneath that a polyester-laminated plastic cap, inverted, bowled into the flesh with colander holes and screw thread. Inside the holes were bunches of redraw nerve strings twined together Pippi Longstocking and enshrouded in gold. His skin bunched around the synthetic contact points like a tucked shirt of flesh might. For a year after the accident this spot itched and almost drove him mad. He'd had dreams a cockroach scritch-scratched inside the workings.

Around that same time he'd tried to figure out what percentage of his body he lacked. He'd looked up the average weight of the trunk, head, and limbs of a man his size. As it turned out, his arm accounted for only five percent. And since he still had half an arm he figured he'd only lost around three percent of himself. He would've guessed fifteen.

The Game-Arm lay on the bench like a beached squid. He brought the arm between his knees and hunched over so his stump lined up with the tentacles of the prosthetic. The installation procedure, known informally as "the Drive," was to be performed only by a licensed prosthetic physician according to the official rules of the AFL. The degree took five years of graduate study but Mark was confident in himself. The Arm was part of his body, after all, and he could handle its installation.

At the moment of connection the Game-Arm would drive a four inch needle into his stump. Four inches didn't look long on a ruler, but when it was plunging into your nervous system the needle stretched for miles.

With his free hand he threaded the wires into the colander holes. Tricky business, and his sweaty fingertips fumbled. He grew a forest of tiny cuts.

The Drive was supposed to be accompanied by a potent painkiller cocktail called the Special. Mark had no idea where to buy the Special, but he thought this lack of medicine surmountable. If he screamed, he had the belt. And he'd Driven so many times he figured he could imagine the Special and take a ride from the chemicals left over in his body.

He bit down on the doubled belt and—after a long pause—began to screw the arm into the socket. The rotation put the opposing tendrils into contact, golden hoods pulling back to expose raw nerve. Then a tiny pinprick on the frozen tube that ran from his stump to neck, a push further, and he was taking the Drive.

Immediately the pain was so complete he pissed himself. The urine felt cold, doubtless some neurological crossfuck. And an endless icicle was relentlessly impaling his arm, sliding beneath his tongue, up into his sinuses, fizzling his vision, turned up so high he began to claw at his forehead like a trapped fox chewing its leg for freedom. He ventured a look at his stump: the Game-Arm had sprouted limbs and, like an insect snatching prey from its burrow, was grasping and torturing his skin with glinting shepherd's hook hands.

And then the needle set, hooks receded. It was over. Arm installed. An ice-cream headache fading away. Deep breath. He flexed the arm, worked the elbow, wrist,

each finger. Stood up, clapped, shadowboxed, felt the air skate over. His sinuses were pressure tight but clearing. Just a quick jolt, really. Worth going through to get to the other side. He felt the same way after sex: lazy but loose with potential energy. Pregnant. Imminent.

It felt good to be whole again.

Before leaving he ran the shower and cleaned himself. He turned on a number of other showers and imagined that they'd been running for decades with no one beneath them. Blood beads rosaried from the crook of his arm. He wiped them away with his thumb.

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In order to get to his car without being seen Mark took a concrete hall that wove through the ant colony lower levels of the stadium and eventually took a sharp turn upwards to the third basement level and parking garage. Despite his apprehension he kept a leisurely pace. Junctures upon intersections upon crossroads beneath the earth. Tons above him. Seemed sinful to rush the journey.

A dogleg staircase led to a glass hallway edging the practice field. He told himself he'd forgotten the practice field was on the way. The sounds of choked breath and whistles and colliding bodies careened into gridiron symphony. He lingered for a moment to watch the players.

Beyond the glass their figures seemed divorced from humanity—a team of charging mechanical bulls. A practice squad QB called Roz hung back in shotgun. They were running defense and he found Bragg out there lined up across from Davies, a left guard with a gleaming silver piston for a leg. At the hike Bragg came on and Davies

bolted that piston down like a kickstand. Bragg bounced off and cut back left without losing momentum, cleaved through off-balance Davies and tackled QB Roz like a hawk diving a ground squirrel. The impact seemed to shake the walls and Mark half-expected Roz to crawl away in distinct pieces.

But Davies helped Roz up and slapped his pads encouragingly. Bragg was toeing the line and straining at an imaginary lead. Mark could smell Roz's fear and he yearned so much to jog onto the field that he forced himself to begin walking, down the glass hallway and to the parking garage.

He'd ask Bragg about practice at dinner tonight. Last week, prisoner to the Everyday Arm, dinner with anyone would have been unbearable. But to his surprise he was looking forward to dinner with the Braggs. After all, he did have the Arm. He was a changed man. Expectation hung about the Arm in aura. A loose, heavy stretch inside him like a big cat, ending in the back of his wrist and fingers.

He lingered again at the end of the hallway. On the snap Bragg lifted Roz in savage ballet, but instead of crumpling him he set him upon his feet. They tapped helmets and lined up on opposite sides of the line. On a whim Mark spit on the back of his hand, on that big cat spot. Felt the splat, the warmth, the drip. Felt even more than his born-arm.

***

Mark was washing dishes in his kitchen and the crook of his elbow ached with the memory of losing his real arm. He was wearing dishwashing gloves because his fingers pruned and also he didn't want his wife, Erin, to see the Game-Arm. She wouldn't understand that it wasn't theft so much as rightful claim.

The accident happened at his landscaping job the summer before his senior year of high school. The idea was to keep himself in some kind of shape for football season. 17 years old, 6'3", 220. Still on the small side for a DE but leading the conference in sacks.

That day Karl's Landscaping & Green Repair crew was at the sprawling formal gardens of a professional golfer. Intruding the sculpted nature was their shuddering gray machine: the Rascal Wood Chipper. A chipper so massive it had to be towed from place to place. A black, white, and red ink comic on the side depicted the chipping of a man if proper safety protocols were not followed. A huge scarred raccoon, the Rascal himself, leered over the intake hood.

A thatch of sapling elms was due for sacrifice. His coworker was chainsawing, Mark dragging the trees into the Rascal, shoving them root first to be gnashed and exhaled into a close-boxed bed. The safety bar stuck over the top of the intake maw like the handle of a beach bucket. The Rascal was buzzing the asphalt beneath it. That was his last clear recollection. The rest he remembered only in swirls and rubber bands, as if in the deepest hole of a fever. The green, tight smell of ruptured saplings. Sap running along the veins of his forearms. Headphones sounding the Brewer's game. An errant branch snagging the mesh of his safety vest. Heels sliding in the mud. A homerun cracking in his ears and a stadium-full cheering for the Rascal. While it was happening there was no pain, but sensation past pain into something greater. Purer than pain.

At some point the back of his head pushed the safety bar and the Rascal halted. He'd tried to pull out. Nothing budged; flesh stuck in the machinery. The EMTs had to cut off his t-shirt, too.

Mark turned over the exact moment again, the one where he was caught by the branch. The single most important second of the day. Of his life. And he hadn't noticed. It'd happened without him.

"You're so cute with those gloves on," said Erin. She'd drifted back into the kitchen. "If you were my baby I'd've eaten you at birth."

"I'd make you sick," he said. The dead-end vein leading into the Game-Arm was pulsing dissonantly with his heart. His molars were sending radio signals to his sinuses.

Erin was in sweats but already made up for the evening and impatiently slinking about. From the first she'd reminded him of a cat whose indulgent owners let prowl nightly to terrorize the wild things of the neighborhood.

"You're in a good mood today." She smacked his ass. "Good news from Donald Duck?" Her nickname for Doc Smith, whom she considered a quack. She was a creature of logic and result. Everything could be codified and thus was solvable and surmountable— which made for a rigorous brand of optimism.

"Only a few more weeks." He wasn't worried about getting found out; he was a great liar. As they chatted he continued to wash. Suds billowed. The spades tipping his fingers slid against the glasses and china. He flailed trying to find a hold, then clutched joyously with the Game-Arm and pulverized a porcelain bowl. Fortunately the sink had a garbage disposal.

"Did you hear about Tommy Hande?" she asked. "The kid who cut himself up?" She was very casual about the asking, very delicate. Clearly she'd been cultivating a moment to introduce the topic.

"So they're calling him Tommy Hande now," he said.

"That's his name."

"Bragg said he jumped into an industrial shredder. Cut off his arms and legs."

"He said that to you?" She was disgusted. "That was in very poor taste."

"That's what he said."

"It's not what the news is saying." She was straightening table mats into parallel lines with the table's edge. "It was a circular saw. And he only got both legs and an arm. Impossible to remove the last arm, obviously."

"Obviously."

"There goes that good mood," she said. "When are we leaving for dinner?"

Before they left Mark made a quick bathroom run. He splashed his face with water and pulled back the sleeve over his right arm. A mottled purple bruise in the crook. Blood coming through his skin along with yellow and viscous discharge. He pressed the spot and his arm went to iron. Teeth skittered. He puked. Then he rolled down the sleeve, mouthwashed, met his wife in the car. He drove.

***

Bragg and his wife Julia waited for them on the patio of Muffler's Second Cousin's Steakhouse. To the west were the lights of the city and to the south cornfields. The cornfields rustled to the edge of the patio, stalks as tall as he was, green-golden steakhouse palisades.

All this open space was making him nervous. He was uncomfortable under so much sky—he'd always preferred playing in domes. But his eyes drifted continually to the grid of corn. Walking through the rows could be similar to strolling through the

bowels of the stadium. Nothing pressing above but plenty from the sides. Just tall enough so he couldn't see over the tassels.

The steakhouse's owner, Muffler, had two bitch mongrels that lived in a chicken wire hut butting the cornfields. They were the most ferocious-looking dogs in the North Midwest, but they'd been tamed by the scraps of customers. Mark let them lick his fingers through the wire. He made sure to turn his body so the tattoos and shovel-fingers would be hidden.

The seating situation was a nightmare. Due to the odd arrangement of the Braggs they sat as if playing euchre. He peered at Erin around the bottles of specialty steak sauce. Even worse: he hated high-top tables and eating with elevated feet. What if he had to scoot closer to the table?

"Why don't restaurants have booths outside?" he asked.

But the others were nose deep in their menus. Mark was chilly but sweating. His arm was throbbing vigorously. It was covered by his sweater sleeve and held his hand beneath the cloth napkin on his lap. Eating with his left hand wouldn't be a problem as long as he stuck with pasta or a salad. Maybe soup. Now that he thought about it he didn't think he could hold down anything heavier.

They ordered drinks and tapas. Though it was a warm night the waiter switched on the heating coil at the center of their table. Like a sprinkler head Mark watched the conversation, banter so constant he was best served with continuous motion. Julia was a tall bronze woman who moved and spoke in uncertain starts. She was tiny compared to Bragg. He smiled and agreed when she looked at him but he seldom offered his own opinion.

Mark looked over at Erin and she gave him her third concerned look of the night. He pretended not to notice.

"Prosthetic technology has come along so far," said Julia, as if she knew what she were talking about. "Mark, what is your Everyday model like?

"We love the ads," said Erin. "That's why we got one. The interface is just superior, you know? What do you think, honey?"

"It's like when you fall asleep on your arm," he said. "And you try to scratch your nose but punch yourself in the face."

They all laughed. He flexed his arm under the table. Sneaking around was thrilling. He understood, now, why people cheated with their spouse's friends.

"I'm gonna get a refresh," he said.

Before anyone could react he launched to his feet and to the bar. A jackalope mount with Christmas lights twining its antlers hung over the bartender's shoulder. The counter was a glass fish tank housing pine squirrels in a faux-forest habitat. The squirrels were gaunt as junkies. Air holes were drilled in the corners of the tank and pinecones and seeds littered the floor. One squirrel was gnawing another's back. A gout of red shot up and the predatory squirrel doubled its efforts.

From the bar he couldn't see the table and therefore he couldn't be seen. A couple of fans wanted to take shots and he obliged them. They were so polite he revealed his Game-Arm and juggled the glasses between his fingers, then crushed the glasses into rock-candy shards.

He had one more shot, alone, and went back to the table.

"What took you so long?" Erin asked.

“Food’s getting cold,” said Bragg.

“He hates that,” said Julia. “Cold food. I’ve got great kitchen timing now. Everything finishes up at the same time.”

“What do you want me to say?” said Mark. “I had to use the bathroom.”

As they ate he couldn’t keep his mind from this Game-Arm. Wearing it for a day had proven just how wrong Doc Smith was. He was fine to play again.

“Mark, I need to address something,” said Bragg. “I’m sorry about earlier, in the stadium. Making jokes about the shredder. I knew how you’d lost your arm and I said it anyway.” Bragg held out his hand. In a brief lapse of common sense Mark removed his right hand from the napkin, but before it could breach the table he caught himself and clutched Bragg’s hand awkwardly with his left.

“No problem,” he said. “Think nothing of it.”

“Really though, I’m sorry,” said Bragg.

“I believe you,” said Mark. He struggled to keep his breath even. After the shot glass trick the slight movement jarred his arm; somebody had broken a fluorescent light-tube beneath his skin.

“Turns out he didn’t even use a shredder,” said Julia. “Tommy Hande I mean.”

“I believe it was a circular saw,” said Erin.

“Old news. You can’t cut your arms off with them. Blade sensitivity, you know? He chopped off his hand with his daddy’s parang.”

“What’s a parang?” Mark asked.

"I don't know, a big knife," said Julia. "I guess his dad is a doctor and went all around the world and brought back souvenirs. Took Tommy six chops. The knife wasn't sharpened."

"What are the chances he did *that* with that last name, you think?" asked Bragg.

"The name made him do it!" said Erin.

They laughed except for Mark. A maimed child. Yet maybe, he thought, the name did influence Tommy Hande's decision. Some part of him long preparing to chop off his own hand. Chop off his own name. That wasn't so crazy, was it?

"I guess he didn't feel like himself," said Mark.

The comment met silence. Suddenly Bragg stood. "Who wants shots? Mark, can you help me carry them?"

"They don't have trays here?" he asked.

"Don't be lazy," said Erin.

The bar was busier than before, attracting an affluent, faux-poverty-cum-Daniel-Boone sort of clientele. The squirrels threw themselves at the glass. Mark's elbow stuck to the counter. Bragg's eight seppuku shots—"You mean hari-karis?" the bartender had asked—huddled on the tray. Bragg spoke in a whisper.

"Listen, man. I couldn't say this in front of my wife. I was high as shit. That's why I said that stuff. I hardly remember."

That explained the insane pupils, though Mark didn't know what drug or combination thereof had that effect. "You don't have to apologize to me," he said. "Not again, for God's sake."

"I'm not." Bragg picked up two of the shots and held one out to Mark. "Get healthy and come back."

"I appreciate it, man," said Mark. He was touched. He took hold of the shot glass.

'Holy shit," said Bragg. "Is that your Game-Arm?"

Mark looked down. He'd grabbed the shot with his right hand. Without thinking. And just like that, after all the subterfuge, he was caught.

Pain was already punishing him for the movement. Blood in the back of his throat, a metallic crimp from his neck to where his born-flesh met the Game-Arm.

Bragg looked like he was about to put his hands on either side of his face and scream. "You can't be wearing that. It could stroke you out, man. That thing could kill you."

"Relax," said Mark. "I'm fine. I've been wearing it all day."

Bragg slapped the bar top and the shot glasses tinkled. He looked embarrassed at the noise. "If that connection goes bad you'll fry out," he whispered.

"It's not as bad as that," said Mark. "I've come a long way in two weeks. This proves it." He waved his hand in Bragg's face. "Operational."

"Take it off," said Bragg.

"Fuck off," Mark said. He began to walk away, but Bragg stepped in front of him.

"You know when you're watching a movie, and somebody is doing something really stupid and dangerous, and you, the viewer, just knows they're gonna fucking die and you're screaming at your TV 'Don't do it! Don't do it!'? That's you, Mark. Go take

that arm off. Right now. You're scaring me half to death. I'll tell the ladies you aren't feeling well."

He stuffed a handful of pills into Mark's hand. "Oxycodone." Then he slipped a capped syringe in Mark's shirt pocket. "For the capital-P Pain. Don't put this shit into anything but your Game-Arm. Honest, you stick that thing in your ass and you'll OD before you can pull your pants up. Take the arm off a few minutes after it sets in."

"Holy shit," said Mark.

"Yeah, holy shit."

At Bragg's urging Mark went straight from the bar to the bathroom. He let the momentum of the moment and Bragg's push carry him there. The bathroom had marble countertops and the urinal trough was an infinity pool. An abandoned yellow mop-bucket and mop leaned against one wall. Bragg's drugs were clutched in his hand. As soon as he made it to the sink he puked. Two on the day. His sinuses felt like they might pop out his forehead.

He squatted to check if anyone was in the stalls. He was alone and in a fit of inspiration slid the mop through the door handle. He took a minute to center himself and consider his options. If he detached his arm he would have to stump his way out; the Everyday was in his locker at the stadium.

He brushed the fingers of both of his hands against the cool marble. His right hand was amplified. He knew the grain of the stone, could feel the temperature in layers, the collecting friction at his fingertips. Godawful to give this up. To lose a part of what made him. He crossed his arms. Right hand grasping left bicep. His born-arm felt like somebody had tried to create snakeskin in a lab. He stroked the Game-Arm. The

kaleidoscope tattoos melted and shifted like oil paint on water. He knew which pores were blocked and which weren't in sequence as his hand shifted, could feel the potential energy in the Game-Arm as if a bomb had exploded inside.

A knock on the door. He slid the syringe from his pocket and uncapped it. The injection ports of his Game-Arm were bared open.

"Hey man, open up, I gotta piss," someone said through the door. The mop jiggled.

He didn't answer. Then he realized he'd forgotten to take the pills. He took two. The illusion he'd been under that morning—that he could install the arm sans medication—had been dispelled by cold urine. He remembered hearing once about mothers having significantly less interest in a natural birth the second time around.

"Other people have to go too, you know," came the voice again. Righteously angry.

Pretty soon this guy would go to a manager. Mark pocketed his remaining pills and syringe, then tip-toed to the door and slid the mop out of the handle. He ran back and into a stall, locking it just as he heard the bathroom door open.

"Lock yourself in? Hey I think this guy locked himself in here."

"You think?" said a second man.

"Just using the bathroom," Mark said. "Couldn't get to the door." He unsheathed the syringe and set the needle to injection port. Stopped. Re-capped. Pulled his pants down to his knees. Slipped his belt off and doubled it over on his lap. Uncapped the needle. Back at the port. He'd shoot up, wait a minute, detach the Game-Arm. and sneak

out the back door. Head to the stadium for the Everyday, then meet them all back home. Bragg would cover for him.

If only he could be doing this in the locker room. The distance and alienation he'd felt for the room that morning had disappeared and now he felt only nostalgia. This bathroom stall lent a modicum of pressure and separateness, but he yearned for the ant-colony of the stadium, to be tucked into the final corner of the last recess.

It struck him that the tendrils connected inside his arm, the electric snake-mating at his joints, were a network of connected tunnels. Tiny labyrinths swirling in place of his veins. He walked through these warm corridors. Clean white walls radiating red beneath the spectrum of his vision. Felt the weight of his own body pressing down upon him, became aware of the meat rippling under the skin, the stretching bone, the composite ligament.

With a calm hand he guided the needle into the injection port.

Voices again from outside. "I heard his favorite player was Silvius."

"So?"

"He was emulating his idol, dumbass."

Mark stopped. They were talking about him.

"I saw him out on the patio."

"Who, Silvius?

A faucet turned on. "Yeah"

"Tonight? No you didn't."

Mark listened to their footsteps click towards the door. He stared at the syringe—needle nestled into synthetic flesh, thumb taught above the plunger. Guess he was Tommy Hande's favorite player. He wasn't sure if that changed anything.

One of the men threw his voice back into the bathroom. "You've been in there awhile, buddy. You sure you're okay?"

CHAPTER VIII

"ANYWHERE IN A STEP"

We cobbled the beds and dressers and the rest of the furniture from the bones of dead relative's estates. We had the baby stuff from the shower and Clara bought what we didn't have secondhand from St. Vinny's.

But in this new home, our first home as a family, we did not skimp on the Doorframe. We went at least middle of the road, even the upper side of average. Pre-Owned but Just Like New. Seventeen thousand one hundred and fifty three dollars and nineteen cents, plus seventy five a month network fee.

In other words: $17,150.19 + 75.00 p/month

We took out loans.

***

The Doorframe started malfunctioning four days after we'd moved in. Our place was a studio—kitchen on one side, couch on the other. Only the one door, particle board, and behind it the matte black Doorframe.

I was drafting a new article tentatively titled "Freedom Fighters Flee the Man after Bombing," hoping it would be as successful as my previous article, "Jackbooted Corporate Thugs Implicated in Voter Scandal," when baby Stephanie began to wail.

I punched the Doorframe number for the nursery and came out in a public bathroom somewhere—probably a stadium, judging by the banks of high-velocity hand dryers. Standing at a stadium trough with a pack of diapers and glass bottles of reheated milk. I turned around and went back through the frame and showed up in Steph's nursery. Thirty seconds out of my way but God knew how many miles.

Steph gurgled at me while I wiped her and she did this backstroke thing she's been doing lately. Pretty soon she was sucking my fingers and I got a bottle in her mouth and held her against my chest while she suckled.

But I kept an eye on the Doorframe. Hard to trust the thing now. It came with fifty programmable location slots but Clara and I were using half a dozen. We'd been recommend a fifty slotter based on familial growth patterns for our age and socio-economic indicators. And now it loomed over Steph and me. If it tipped would we collapse inside, *hocus pocus*, don't worry there's two more shows this week? How had I never noticed the menace of that impenetrable black? I'd been fooled, it seemed. To my endless shame, the ads at the Cartography Doorframe Depot had battered me and Clara into purchase:

"Anywhere in a step." Accompanied by a hip couple, pictured from behind, walking into a black Doorframe and appearing someplace exotic—in misted jungle, before the Great Sphinx, atop the Hoover Dam—step after step.

"Enough time for *you*...to take the kids to the game." A gaggle of cleated youth footballers were shooed in the black abyss by a svelte mother. The next image of a football field, fireworks and drumlines and cheerleaders, the footballers plunging from

the Doorframe into this adoring crowd. A third screen was back in the house, quiet, Mom with a mimosa and wearing a classy-yet-was-it? silk bathrobe. Treating herself.

"Sail away on savings, all without getting wet!" Three generations of New Englanders poured through their Cape Cod Doorframe onto the deck of Catamaran. This one had been Clara's favorite, and the straw that put the camel in traction. She'd always wanted to sail but never learned to swim.

After I put Steph down for her nap I called Cartography and scheduled maintenance the next day. The repair would be free, the robot said, since we were still under warranty. Thank Cartography for small favors.

***

Clara decided to take the day off work and tend to the baby while I got the Doorframe back in order. We'd decided the risk of ending up anywhichplace wasn't worth a few days' work. Well, she'd decided. I'd soon as chalk it up to freak accident, run the risk of walking to Antarctica, and save the bank account.

Clara was an elementary school teacher. She payed the bills, mostly. For dollars I wrote freelance for the *Calumet Gazette* but I spent most of my time writing a column in the *Old Mole Free Press*. Under a pseudonym, of course. Written on a typewriter and hand-delivered to the drop point.

The Cartography guys were scheduled to show up between 10:00 AM and 3:00 PM. I prepared myself with a brew and expected them around 3:30. But, at a quarter after, a man and a woman wearing bright yellow safety vests stepped through the frame and into the apartment. That yellow could be seen from the ISS. It wasn't loud so much as screaming.

"You guys with Cartography?"

"Just so you are aware, sir, we are no longer called Cartography. We've rebranded as Cartography-Encompass." This from the guy, whose nametag read "Lester."

The three of us stood beneath the Doorframe. I was thinking even though this repair was free we were still going into deficit here, since Clara had too much integrity to fake a sick day.

"So, what's wrong with it?" I asked.

"Well I can't really say, sir," said Lester

"You telling me you ain't scrying in your crystal ball, Lester?" said the woman, name tagged "Hallie." She addressed me. "You expect a doctor to diagnose you before you sit on the examination table?"

I left them to their work. And by that I mean I took a step back and watched quietly over their shoulders.

Lester selected a phillips head from his belt and unscrewed the touchpad. Hallie shined a light inside. Lester poked among the wires with metal chopsticks. Hallie stuck her head right into the gap and looked inside for almost a minute. Then she emerged, as Punxsutawney Phil might, and spoke her judgement.

"Nothing seems to be the problem, man. Probably a fluke accident."

Lester holstered his chopsticks. "We can't verify any malfunction at this time," he said. "Though if anything else goes wrong I urge you to contact us swiftly." He handed me his card like a praying mantis might strike at prey.

I took the card, cursed myself for such doglike obedience. "You sure there's no problem?"

Neither acted as if they heard. Lester was rescrewing the touchpad to the wall. "You'll be billed two hundred dollars for our repair fee. For your convenience we will add this fee directly to your monthly network bill."

"I was told it was free under warranty," I said. "And you guys didn't even do anything."

"The repair was free," said Hallie. She typed a few numbers into the touchpad. "But you think me and Slim come out here for peanuts?"

Judging by her tone and leer, they did not.

Lester reached to my hip and shook my hand. "Pleasure meeting you. I'm sure we'll speak again soon."

And with that he and Hallie stepped into the black.

It was only after they left that I noticed my typewriter and article sitting on the end table. In other words, in full view of the Doorframe. The headline in bold: **Freedom Saboteurs Flee Authorities after Daring Act of Corporate Demolition**.

***

After replaying the incident ad infinitum in my head, and then re-enacting the scene a few times with Clara (she was a theater major), I was able to rationalize that neither Lester nor Hallie had seen the article. Lester drank the Flavor-Aid, sure, but neither was unduly skittish or suspicious during the repair.

Clara returned to work the next morning. I called my editor at the *Gazette* to get a new story and planned a walk to Korth Park both for my own sanity and to drop for *Old*

Mole. I strapped the baby carried to my chest and packed the baby bag. Then I checked Steph on the baby monitor: drowsy and satiated from her first feeding. The perfect time to strap her on and go for a little walk. Steph was doused by motion as surely as she would be by opiates.

I punched the number and walked through the Doorframe and came out in my living room walking the other direction. It was, far and away, the most disorienting moment of my life. In something of a fugue I staggered into the kitchen and prayed to the sink. Then I had to dig out my prayers, seeing as we couldn't afford a garbage disposal.

I marched back up to the Doorframe and, I'm almost ashamed to admit it, had to steel myself. I wasn't exactly eager to dive back in, and for the first time it occurred to me that I didn't really know where I was for that split second, that moment between spaces. The moment of my step.

It was one thing to consider that you might, theoretically, be brushing your teeth in Botswana and bedding down in Belvidere, Illinois. It was quite another to spend half a second in the black space between departure and arrival.

But I repunched the touchpad for the nursery and walked back in. This time when I staggered back out in the apartment I wasn't half as nauseous.

No problem with the Doorframe, my ass.

I called Cartography and demanded service. The pleasant feminine robot on the other end of the line checked my address and account number. "The best damn technicians you got, not those jokers from yesterday," I yelled.

"Your technicians are expected to arrive between 10:00 AM and 8:00 PM," said the robot. "Thank you for choosing Cartography-Encompass."

The line closed.

According to the baby monitor, Stephanie was still sleeping peacefully. My watch read 12:15 PM.

Lester and Hallie showed up at 7:59.

***

"Now you've got a problem here," said Hallie, exactly as if she'd never said there was no problem at all. "One of your routes is rotten. Hey, you got a glass of water or something?"

"Have you got a clue?" asked Clara. I shot her a look. Then I got Hallie a bottle of raspberry Intellect Water. The diet kind, which Clara purported to like but never drank.

I hadn't called Clara at work once I realized that Steph was stuck, thinking all she could do was worry along with me. At 5:15, the moment she came home, (through the Doorframe, no less. Could you imagine her wanting to come home if she knew the thing was still on the fritz?) the baby monitor ran out of juice. We were flying blind.

Subsequently, those three hours before the heroic arrival of Lester and Hallie tested us to the foundation of our vows. Which is to say, I apologized fervently while she blinked away tears and asked if I was *actually* serious about fatherhood.

Lester finished digging around with his chopsticks. "We'll get this fixed as soon as possible, folks. I've just rerouted the nursery to slot 7. One moment please." Lester disappeared into the Doorframe.

A second later he came back cradling Stephanie like a veteran father. He chuckled with corporate mirth. "Is this your baby?"

Clara all but snatched Stephanie from him. Stephanie, sobbing, latched onto Clara's breast with vampiric thirst. I held them both. You would have thought one of us had come home from war.

"We've gotta get into your network at HQ and reset the connection," said Hallie. "But its only 30/70 anything will change, and there's no chance if it's a fried circuit." She finished the water and held out the empty bottle. I broke my embrace took it from her, without thinking. "My money's on a fried circuit," she said.

Lester had his hand to his ear and was looking up as if at God or some high peak. He kept nodding. "Yes, sir," he said. Then he turned to the rest of us. "I've just gotten off the phone with Southeastern Wisconsin's VP of Customer Relations. He's authorized me to double your family's location slots from fifty to one hundred. On the house."

Clara squeezed my hand and gave me a Look, I guess because she noticed that I was very very still, which meant I was about to lose my temper. Her Look said *Be an adult, for God's sake*.

I thanked the two of them, and asked how long the repair would take.

"Oh, we'll put the rush on," said Hallie. "Four weeks, a few months, maybe longer." She took a deep breath. "And don't forget to rate your technician's performance through the Cartography-Encompass App, found on Smart Phones, Smart Arms, and even the new Smart Eye, another groundbreaking innovation from Cartography-Encompass."

She disappeared through the Doorframe.

Lester blew Stephanie a raspberry before he followed Hallie out. "Thank you for choosing Cartography-Encompass. The fifty dollar infant handling fee will be automatically adjusted into your network fee." He handed me a business card. "And don't forget to call me directly with your future maintenance needs."

***

I never write personal pieces for the *Old Mole*, for the obvious reason that I don't want to be kidnapped and shipped to a black site. So this new piece I cast as the plight of a common family, the Scotts: David, Cathy, and baby Stephen. The piece was tentatively titled: "Going Off the Map: Cartography Separates Family." I expected to come up with something more inspiring for print.

Stephanie was sleeping just a few feet away and so I was writing this one longhand. That typewriter was louder than gunfire. But my pen dashed through the paper in blue wounds and I wanted not to write but to *act*. Enough with these flaccid words! I wanted to pull Clara from her sleeping bag on the couch (we were camped out, Clara having decided the Doorframe wasn't worth the risk until its bug was squashed) and take her hard and quiet while Stephanie slept on. I wanted to chuck a brick through a post office window. I wanted to march on buildings adorned in white Corinthian columns.

I did none of these things. Instead, below my title and four inches of puckered underlines, I wrote:

"David Scott pays his taxes, supports the arts, and once bought a homeless saxophonist a sub sandwich. By all accounts a *participating* citizen. Yet even so the Government-Funded Monopoly **Cartography-Encompass** all but murdered his only

child. Picture if you will, loyal reader, six-month-old Stephen Scott languishing in his crib. A crib, once a place of respite, now a cushioned dungeon. “

I paused. Crossed it out. Began again.

“A baby weeps in his crib. His mother hears, but can do nothing. She watches the baby monitor as her child settles into tortured sleep. He is Stephen Scott, he is six months old, and he is trapped by the incompetency of **Cartography-Encompass**. This corpo-governmental quantum displacement company has a monopoly on the market…”

The tea candles at my desk were guttering by the time I finished the draft. I decided to sleep on the piece for a night and read it over in the morning. I’d just hidden the pen and paper (beneath the floorboard, slipped around the inside edge of a coffee can) when a man in a screaming yellow vest strolled through the Doorframe. I’d never seen him before in my life.

And this Cartography lackey was cradling a baby in his arms.

“Is this your baby?” he asked. And he didn’t mean it, not really. What he meant was that he *knew* it was our baby, because how could it not be? Not a rare occurrence then. Higher ups must have him out on baby delivery duty. Same canned line as Lester: *Is this your baby?* Cartography was wry as bread.

“Shh,” I said. I pointed to Clara and Stephanie asleep on the other side of the room. All of a sudden I felt almost sorry for the guy, like it was our fault he’d come with the wrong baby a day late. “We’ve got our baby. That one belongs to someone else.”

He peered at Clara and Stephanie. Then at me. Then he said very loudly: “You sure this isn’t your baby, dude?”

Stephanie swept awake and shrieked murder at him. Clara leapt on the grenade. Against this onslaught the Cartography lackey dove back through the Doorframe.

"Asshole," said Clara. She was trying to soothe Stephanie back to sleep. I took Stephanie and walked around the edge of the room until she was snoring. When I came back Clara was already out. I wondered if she would even remember in the morning. She was grinding her teeth hard as a miller.

No longer did I feel sorry for this idiot who'd barged into our house in the middle of the night with someone else's baby. He was a willing cog of the authoritarian heel. Those absolute bastards, I thought. And the more I brooded, the deeper I realized the problem went. For instance: wasn't it wrong on its own, baby or no, for him to waltz into my living room unannounced? What if I'd been sleeping naked?

The studio apartment, already small with the three of us living in one room, felt tiny as a bunk after the intrusion.

I would say I didn't sleep all night but I think most people who say that are lying. I slept for at least a few minutes. I dreamt that the Doorframe fell off the wall and through the floor, and that it couldn't stop falling because everything it touched fell inside. The end of the dream was just black.

***

The next morning Clara ventured to work despite it all and ran into no issues. I dropped by the *Gazette* and picked up a new story. Everyone came around and made noises at the baby strapped to my chest.

At home I upload the *Gazette* notes to the computer and moved on to the Scott family. I unearthed the typewriter from beneath the floorboard. Pinned in the type bar was Lester's business card. I'd forgotten I'd pinned it there, I guess.

Which made me remember that Lester had given me two business cards, and in hindsight that seemed mighty odd. The first was so innocuous I was surprised I pinned it anywhere—it gave Cartography HQ's address and number and also Lester's office extension. Everybody had an office nowadays. The Cartography guy with the office and me with this coffee table. Nothing was ever cheaper than a local newspaper.

I took the second card from my pocket.

Meet the Freedom Saboteurs

Tomorrow

0000

76

My first thought was: trap. But after a moment I figured it couldn't be a trap. If it were, the Jackboots would've already taken me and Clara off to a hole somewhere. Probably put Stephanie up for adoption.

My second thought was: Lester is fighting the good fight. Bringing down the Man from inside. I thought about my post office brick and my white Corinthian columns. I wondered how many readers I had at the *Old Mole*.

It was easy to let myself take action.

***

After dinner we watched a nature documentary about how America's shrinking wetlands weren't much of an issue after all, since the shrinkage would concentrate animals and plants in contained locations, "facilitating an evolutionary quickening."

I did Sudoku on my computer, sneaking glances into my lap where the business card lay. Clara got up in arms about wetlands but fell asleep halfway through.

It didn't take a genius to figure out Lester's coded message. I swaddled Stephanie and set out a glass of water in case Clara woke up thirsty.

At midnight I pressed for slot 76 on the touchpad. I was dressed in black with black sneakers. I wore those tiny gloves that stretch to your size, a balaclava, and a backpack. Inside was a hatchet, coiled rope, a flashlight, and binoculars. I felt as if I could run quite fast if necessary. I felt at home in my body, an animal, savage enough to crush a man's larynx with my bare hands. The sneakers had something to do with this, and the embrace of the backpack.

The Doorframe buzzed black.

I walked through.

Into daylight and a brisk wind. Lester was just a few feet away. We were on a hill looking down into a great field. I couldn't see much because of the bright and I admit it took me a minute to get my bearings in the sun. I wondered what time zone we were in. This was why I hadn't wanted any windows in our house: nothing screws a sleep cycle like eating dinner at dusk and going to the bathroom to wash your hands as dawn breaks out the window.

The field was filled with windowless skyscrapers. They stretched to the horizon and over it, past what I could see with the naked eye. Past, maybe, what you could see

with a Cartography-Encompass Smart Eye. The newer towers were grey and sleek as TV remotes, older ones built of stone and mortar and not as tall. Doorframes sat in the grass at junctions between the buildings. For maintenance, I presumed, much like the frame I'd come through.

I crouched down beside Lester. "The man himself," said Lester. All traces of corporate finesse had left his voice. It was a real greeting, not the kind you memorized from a mandatory training video. I felt like I knew him, now. He'd been hiding in plain sight just like I had. We had an understanding deeper that the few minutes we'd spent together.

"Sorry for the false advertising, dude," he continued. "Only one of your "Freedom Saboteurs" remains. The rest of my cell got grabbed after the last bombing."

"They'll give you up," I said. Everybody knew that nobody could withstand questioning of the governmental sort.

"Shit," said Lester. He was rustling in a duffle bag at his feet, curled over it like a dog's tail. "They can only give up Lester Cohen. He's about as real as St. Nick."

There was a propane tank inside the duffle. Long rolls of putty stuck to the tank.

"Did you make that?" I asked.

"Sure as you're sitting here, amigo." Lester lit a joint he'd pulled from his work boot. His screaming yellow Cartography polo was untucked from his screaming yellow shorts. His work belt was slung low around one hip. He dragged the joint no-hands and unbuttoned the two buttons on the polo, revealing a circlet of bronze chest hair.

Lester was a man transformed.

"Let's roll," he said, and we spontaneously shook hands, brotherly, as if we both knew this was the thing to do.

We walked between the rows, not bothering to crouch of sneak. We were hobbits in a tremendous forest. The towers soared so high their tips became pinpricks.

In college, a roommate and I had once scaled our way into the football stadium. We were drunk, it was three in the morning, and we'd recently graduated from stealing "No Parking" signs and standing them like metal Triffids in our living room. The stadium lights were out but the city shone with enough ambient light that it was as if they were on. We ran up and down the field, practiced routes, approximated positions. The stadium seats around us stretched accordion into the sky. There were enough seats to fit my hometown inside a dozen times.

Running on the field that night: that's how I felt walking with Lester among the towers.

"See that one?" Lester pointed to a featureless oblong egg, probably a hundred stories tall. "That's Cartography HQ. The Man flocks here from all over the world. Roaches in a rotting tower, amigo. Fucking unaware. Right next door to a tower of tenement housing. Worldwide ghettos in the same field as Ebenezer in his golden swimming pool." Lester's voice had elevated to a scream. He drew a pistol and punched at the air like he was going to shoot a cloud.

My hairs were all standing up. I didn't know if I was terrified or caught up in Lester's fervor. The wind whipped through the field and played a song in the reeds. Lester stretched out his arms like he was on the cross. I looked over my shoulder. I couldn't even see the Doorframe I'd come in through.

Lester yammered on. "You can take off that ski mask, brother. You're going to be a ghost in about five minutes. Floors one through eight are the Personality Aggregate Database. They don't just have your social in there, they got your DNA and the exact duration of last time you stroked off. We take out the first floor and the Midwest goes off the grid."

And all of our debt, I thought. *Hocus, pocus,* gone like magic. Clara, Stephanie, and I could do anything without those silver chains immobilizing us. I rolled my balaclava up into a hat.

Lester unzipped the duffel and half-lifted the propane tank out, revealing an egg timer stuck into the plastique. He turned the timer past the 15, then went back and let go on the 10. The timer began to tick. Lester zipped the bag.

"Help me up there," said Lester. The tower wasn't as smooth as it had appeared from far off. Gaps stretched between the metal panels, rivets protruded far as soup cans. I laced my hands and Lester stepped in the stirrup and clambered up six or seven feet. He stretched high and slipped the duffel handles over one of the rivets.

I helped him to the ground. He was huffing and puffing. We began to jog back the way we came. Or so I guessed, having lost my way in the maze. I trusted Lester's superior sense of direction.

At any second I expected the bomb to explode and send shrapnel kiting. The sun hung even higher now and the wind came against us. My ears ached. I guessed Clara and Stephanie were snuggled up in the living room and dead to the world. Or maybe they were awake, wondering where I was. Clara was a light sleeper. If she got rattled she might not be able to get any more all night.

We made the hill that I'd come in on. Trust Lester to find our way back. By this point I was running with my arms up around the back of my neck in nuclear protection posture. It felt to me that ten minutes had come and gone five or six times already.

Lester hunkered down and peered over the edge of the hill. I joined him. Once you knew where to look I saw that the Cartography tower was among the closest skyscrapers. I could actually see the duffel bag from here.

My hands were shaking. The half-smoked joint perched behind Lester's ear and I desperately wanted a puff of it, felony charge be-damned.

"Let me hit that thing," I said. Lester lit the joint without looking away from the egg. I hit it and coughed so hard I heaved. "How much longer, you think?" I asked.

"Forty six seconds," said Lester. He took a drag himself. "Let's read them their righteous sentence, brother."

The wind kicked up the dust and pollen in the field. I could smell the swamp from far off—what little wetland was left. Once this land was unclaimed. My own family had lived somewhere close by, for generations, on farmland we'd homesteaded after the Civil War. A great uncle or some such had sold the land so he could afford to buy a gym franchise.

"This one's for anyone who can't go outside and feel the change in the air," said Lester. He started popping shots with his pistol and whooping like a cowboy.

I didn't say anything. This is for Clara and Stephanie, I thought.

The bomb exploded and I felt the heat all the way up on the hill. The building rattled and groaned in the blast. Debris arced parabolic from ground zero, pinging from

the nearby towers like pinballs. That propane tank, I reflected, had likely been filled with something more potent than propane.

Cartography-Encompass Headquarters did not fall, or even buckle. We waited for the smoke to clear. I took the binoculars from my backpack. The wind blowing like it was, it didn't take long for the scene to reveal itself.

We'd exploded bathrooms. It seemed half the world was made of them, these days.

But I had to hand it to Lester—he made a mean firecracker, because probably six stories were gaping open. But whatever the Personality Aggregate Database was, it wasn't where we'd placed our bomb. Sinks and automatic hand dryers dotted the landscape. A stainless steel toilet bowl jutted from the side of the hill not fifteen feet from us. Closer to the wound, granite countertops and shoe shine machines slotted from the field like half-buried teeth.

Floating in the breeze were leaflets. Manifesto of the bomber, I thought. At first I'd mistook them for more debris, toilet paper, perhaps, or antiquated tenements that still used paper hand towels. But they were too many and too uniform a shape. I began to army crawl down the hill, past smoking wreckage, toward the leaflets.

"Damn," said Lester. He was walking upright next to me, tall as one of the towers. "We missed. Better luck next time."

I stood up next to him. He took the binoculars from my hands and peered down at his handiwork. He whistled.

The sun baked my face. What time was it, for me? Two or three AM? It felt like afternoon in August. My nose was running from the smoke and the kicked up pollen but I had nothing to blow into. Christ, I thought, why had I trusted a guy who needed an eight hour window to be on time?

"Did anybody die?" I asked.

"Don't see any bodies," said Lester. He tossed me the binoculars. I didn't catch them. They clattered on the ground next to me. I'd finally gotten my hands on one of the leaflets. It wasn't a manifesto, as I'd thought. It was a copy of the *Old Mole* from last week. More specifically, the front page article: **Freedom Saboteurs Flee Authorities after Daring Act of Corporate Demolition**.

"Happy coincidence," said Lester. "Packed the bomb before I even met you."

I looked back through the binoculars. Water fountained from nearly every exposed bathroom. Bathrooms with woven rugs and earthen sinks, bathrooms with alpaca-fur lid covers and birthday cake scented candles, bathrooms with bidets and bathrooms with holes and handlebars. It made me wonder: which floor was my bathroom on? When I brushed my teeth, was the spent froth circling in the same drains as the spit from the guy with the three-tiered Smart Plunger?

And, as I watched, one of the bathroom doors opened. Somebody on the fourth floor. An old man in blue pajamas with matching stocking cap. A thin, powder-blue Santa Claus. He must have been awake for a late nighter. Well, his toilet was nowhere at to be seen. I couldn't even find it with a quick scan in the binoculars. He stood on the edge of his tiled floor and squinted out into the bright sunlight.

"Look at that," I said to Lester, and pointed at the old man.

The guy was old but his vision was still good, because he pointed right back at us and started screaming. I couldn't hear him but with the binoculars I could try and read his lips.

The wind gusted and took his stocking cap right out into the air. He didn't even watch it go, just kept on yelling. I could hear him, now, behind the buzzing in my ears. No words, but the general lilt of his anger.

I peered back through the binoculars. Focused on his face. He had a sparse white beard and his eyes were gray or blue, it was hard to tell. I tried to match words to his lips, get a sense of what he was going on about. Even with the binoculars I couldn't make out what he was saying.

But what made me think I could read lips, anyway?

I've never been able to do that.

VITA

JACOB BREWER

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