

CHASING STRANGE: A COLLECTION OF SHORT
STORIES

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CHASING STRANGE: A COLLECTION OF SHORT
STORIES

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Abstract: *Chasing Strange* consists of stories written between 2006 and 2012, many for graduate level workshops at Oklahoma State University. The collection consists of connected stories featuring characters on the brink in every sense, men barely holding on to their passions, families, and lives. The two main characters experience the world through the lens of working musicians, while other characters inhabit the underbelly of American culture. The stories in *Chasing Strange* seek to illuminate the grey areas in life and the complex and flawed characters that so often inhabit those areas.

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CITY GARDENS

The problem arose immediately, almost before you opened the door to your apartment and you walked the hundred or so yards to the overflow parking lot of your apartment complex, and you stood in the now empty parking space where you left your car the night before, and you literally clawed the edge of your scalp with the overgrown fingernails on your right hand, a meaningless gesture meant to jumpstart some nonexistent synapses that could trigger some memory—any memory, no memory—that would remind you that you really did not park your car there last night, that in fact you were too drunk to have a clear idea of where your vehicle may be, despite the fact that it is morning and you feel good—at least not hung-over, the first morning in several days. No, you know for a fact that your car was parked in this very location last night, but this knowledge doesn't keep you from walking around the entire complex, almost a whole city block, three times over, always returning to the same empty spot. So the realization finally begins to solidify, like the bacon grease you left in the frying pan on the stove after breakfast. Someone stole your car. Someone stole your 1988 Honda.

And therein is the problem. Sure, it irks you that some son of a bitch took something that wasn't his. Sure, you also know that the rest of your day is shot, that you will now be saddled

with the coming hassle of police reports and insurance agents. Sure, you know too that money problems will arise, what with having to replace your car, the very thought of which makes you taste stomach acid because you really, really hate car salesmen. But what truly bothers you, what makes you suffer an anxiety that makes you feel like you have a million fire ants dancing across your skin, is the knowledge that very shortly, even before you call the cops, before you call the insurance agent, before you call your mom and your buddies to bitch about what happened, you must call her. You have to call your wife. You have to call your wife and tell her the car was stolen. This is a problem. See, technically, the car is hers.

Two large brick buildings of two stories each compose the east side of the City Gardens apartment complex. The buildings overlook an eight-lane expressway, U.S. 51 through the heart of midtown Tulsa. The apartments are separated from the corporate headquarters of Thrifty Rent-A-Car by a high wooden fence with boards missing in several strategic locations—the handiwork of the complex’s teenage population, or “hoods” as your wife calls them. You consider for a moment if one of the hoods stole the car, if they told one of their older, more seasoned criminal friends about this old Honda just ripe for the picking. But then you realize that you parked in the overflow lot last night. You park there if someone takes your covered parking space, usually the redneck asshole that lives next door. He’s the guy that has to hop down from the extended cab of his one ton dualie, the one with the brush guard and the confederate flag painted in the back window. He’s typically drinking what looks to you like a grande latte from Starbucks, the sound of NPR wailing as he gets out. You never do get used to these contradictions, like the guy you work with who is a minimum wage earner and a Republican. But then the redneck doesn’t disappoint too much as he inevitably spits out the wad of Copenhagen in his left cheek, which

always lands on your front porch and, if it weren't for your wife's constant nagging for you to clean it up, would eventually consume your small porch like a salivated tobacco moss.

You walk up to your covered parking space and see the pick-up and you consider an act of revenge, a key to the paint job, letting out the air in a tire or two. But then you think better of it and know that your problems would only be multiplied, especially if the redneck finds out, because he's a fighter. You hear him every night with his girlfriend. It starts as a simple argument and the volume of their yelling grows, until one of them begins to throw things, sometimes each other.

"I don't give a shit, I'm calling the cops," she says. "It ain't my probation violation."

"If you don't shut up," he says. "You ain't gonna get no more dick!"

It's really quite surprising, how thin the walls at City Gardens are.

No, you don't need to make an enemy out of the redneck. You don't need to make a friend either. The thought makes you consider something. You and your wife have lived here for four years and you don't know his name, the redneck. He and his woman have lived next door separated by one of the thinnest pieces of sheet rock in the world for two years and you've never once caught his name. He's even winked at you a few times in the morning, after he and his lady kept you up all night with the twisted sounds of their raucous lovemaking.

But now, here you stand near his pick-up truck, realizing that he hardly qualifies as a neighbor, in the traditional sense, in the way you had actual relationships with neighbors that lived around your house when you were growing up: playing house with the Zervas girls, trading baseball cards with the Cheney boys, eating cobbler in Mrs. McCormick's kitchen after you helped pick weeds out of her flowerbeds. The old man with the three cats that lives on the other side of you is simply the old man with three cats. He has no name, no past, no family or friends,

no interests or hobbies. Nothing but the fact that he's old, has cats, and has lived at City Gardens longer than you have.

The only reason you think of any of this is because you wish you had someone to talk to. Someone other than your wife.

Inside your apartment, you pick up the phone and call your boss at Qwick Copy. You tell him what happened, that you probably won't be in today and you can tell he's pissed, that he doesn't believe you because of last week when you came to work hung-over and spent most of the day in the bathroom throwing up. You don't really care what he thinks and once you hang up, the fact that you're probably going to lose this job too hardly even fazes you. You can make copies for seven dollars an hour anywhere.

But then you think about how the wife is going to react to that on top of everything else and you get that slight ants-in-the-pants feeling again, so you decide to get it over with, to call her and just get it over with already.

You walk through the living room of the apartment. The buildings on this side of the complex consist of two-story townhouse units, with a living room, kitchen, small dining room, and half bath on the bottom floor and two bedrooms and two bathrooms on the top floor—a layout which makes the place feel twice the size.

"Like an actual home," your wife says.

As you walk toward the kitchen to get a drink of water, you smell the remnants from your wake and bake session, so you reach under the side table and pull out the ashtray with the roach in it and light it again, trying to get your head right.

Finally, you go back to the phone and dial her number.

She answers, “Why aren’t you at work, it’s ten thirty.”

She has Caller ID on her phone at work. She has to be at work a full two hours before you, another matter of contention.

“Well, you’re not going to believe this,” you say. Then you tell her.

She reacts very calmly, taking you by surprise.

“What do the police say?” she says.

“I haven’t called them yet.”

“Well, call them, you idiot,” she says. “Call me back, too. I’ll try to get away as soon as possible but it all depends on Cindy.”

Cindy is her coworker that gives her rides every day to work, since you only have the one car between the two of you. You wonder if one of the assholes you work with will take you to work everyday. Probably not.

You call the cops next. The dispatcher says that someone will be out shortly. You decide to wait for the cop in the parking lot, not wanting to give him access to your house, just in case. Figuring you have some time, you decide to make coffee. After it brews, the aroma soothing your nostrils, you go to the refrigerator to get some milk. But then, on top of the fridge, you see it. An unopened bottle of Bushmills—a gift from a buddy of yours from a week or so ago. So, you pop the top and drop a few two counts into your mug. No reason not to take the edge off.

When you step outside your apartment, the wind gusts between the buildings, rocking the lawn chair your redneck neighbor keeps on his porch. Not surprisingly, his truck has vacated

your reserved parking spot, so you decide to set up a lawn chair in the spot, to guard it in case he comes back.

You are not quite sure how many hours have passed since you called the police. You do know that about an hour ago you switched from coffee and Bushmills to Bushmills and water. On the last refill, you skipped the water all together.

Finally, a police cruiser pulls up, an older man steps out. He's wearing a uniform and has a badge, but no gun. And you thought your job was bad.

"Good afternoon" the cop says. "How are we doing today?"

Oh, absolutely fucking fantastic, you think. But you keep your mouth shut, smile and nod.

He takes your information, make and model of the vehicle, your insurance agent's name, the contents of the vehicle at the time it was stolen—two old tennis rackets and some tapes. He takes his time filling out the report.

"So what happens now?" you say, careful to keep your distance *and* your balance.

"What do you mean?" the cop says, writing things unknown on his little notepad.

"Well, is there going to be an investigation?" you say. "Will I need to talk to a detective? Maybe look at a line-up?"

The cop laughs, "Son, this happens half-a-dozen times a day in this city. Considering the age and value of your vehicle, the fact that no one saw anything, odds are you'll never see it again.

“And no,” he continues. “You won’t hear from a detective. We just don’t have that kind of manpower.”

He tells you that someone will contact you if anything turns up but not to hold your breath.

As the cop pulls away, you wonder what you should tell your wife.

Around three o’clock, you know it’s three because of the daytime TV schedule, a large green truck rolls into the parking lot and six Hispanic men hop out and head into the opposite building. They don’t even notice that you’ve come outside with a pinch hitter, that you’re smoking in broad daylight in the open. The Bushmills has made you reckless, you suppose. The last time you were inside, there were three messages from your wife on the answering machine. You still haven’t called her and it’s times like these that make you glad you don’t have a cell phone.

“There’s fifteen of them dirty Mexicans that live in a two-bedroom townhouse, you believe that?”

The old man with the cats next door is standing in his doorway, the screen door slightly opened. He’s dressed in a sweatsuit and a brown fedora. He’s holding a small calico. He’s sporting a creepy grin. It’s the first time he’s ever spoken to you.

“You smoking reefer, boy?” he says.

You quickly move to put the pinch hitter away.

“No, no, it’s okay,” he says, pulling out a spliff the size of a hotdog from behind his back. “Come on in.” He motions with the cat hand.

Why not, you think.

You enter the old man's apartment and notice it's the mirror image of yours. He has it decorated sparsely, a futon against one wall, a recliner near another, a small TV stand and a coffee table. You look at the coffee table and notice one of the biggest bags of weed you've ever seen, at least a half pound.

"I'm Wendell," he says, offering you the now lit spliff. "You're the husband, aren't you?"

"Sure," you say. The whiskey and smoke, you feel good.

"Yeah," Wendell says. "So how's married life? Not too good from the sound of it. I always hear you two arguing. That wife of yours is always going on about something. But when you two make up it sure is nice, right? I mean, it's been a while since I heard anything like that, but you know what I mean."

You feel caught off guard, like you want to be offended but you just can't.

"I think you've got us confused with other people," you say. "Maybe the couple on the other side of us."

"Nah," Wendell says. "I recognize your voice. Say, you want something to drink?"

He sets the cat on the floor and moves to the kitchen, comes back with two bottles of Guinness.

"I'll tell you, boy," he says. "I've lived here for twenty three years, back when this was the only building to the place. I've got some stories, you betcha. This place just goes to shit more and more each year."

You want to stop him, make him go back and understand that he's got you mixed up with the redneck—that there's no way he's ever heard you and your wife fight. You don't fight. Not like that anyway. Instead, you keep your mouth shut, embrace the surrealism of your current situation.

You sit with Wendell and smoke and drink a few cold beers and listen to him bitch about City Gardens and how it's all gone downhill.

Your wife walks in your apartment and you are surprised when she immediately comes to you, embraces you. Like she wants to provide comfort, like you've just been through a horrible ordeal. You sit in your comfortable grey recliner, remote control in hand, the five o'clock news just starting.

"I'm sorry it took me so long to get home," she says. "We were swamped and Cindy couldn't give me a ride until now."

No admonishment for the ducked phone calls?

"I just can't believe this," she says. "When are we going to catch a break? It just seems like we have the worst luck. I can hardly stand it anymore."

"Well shit happens," you say.

She looks at you, seems to notice the empty bottle of Bushmills.

"Are you drunk?" she says, her voice rising, her nostrils flaring as they always do when you've fucked up.

"Well, I--"

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she says. “There’s no way you’re serious.”

Just then, your attention, like a magnet, is drawn to the television.

“Our top story,” the anchorwoman says. “A spectacular crash after a high speed chase leaves Tulsa police searching for suspects.”

And then you see it, and your wife sees it too because she’s stopped talking. On the screen, an aerial shot from a news helicopter, the remnants of the ’88 Honda, T-boned against the corner of a house. There it is, your car, her car, the car that the cop said would likely never turn up, smashed into a house.

“Oh my god,” your wife says, pronouncing each word slowly, annoyingly deliberate.

“Police were chasing a stolen vehicle when the vehicle lost control in a residential area in the north side of the city,” the anchorwoman says.

You turn to her and notice she’s stood up, her arms fixed stiffly at her sides. You wonder what might come next. And then she begins to slightly shake, rocking herself on her heels. Then the sobs come, unmitigated wails the likes of which you’ve never heard from her before. Her mouth is open, fixed, the tears and the howls coming in arrhythmic spurts and though you know it’s the worst possible thing you can do, and you’re trying with all your strength not to, you can no longer control yourself either.

You begin to laugh.

And soon you’ve joined her in spastic uncontrollability, tears of your own trickling down the sides of your face, your face hurting from smiling, your gut cramping from effort. Then, without warning, you both stop. Silence.

She looks at you, a knowing look, and walks up the stairs to the bedroom. You half expect to hear her slam the door but are not that surprised when she doesn't. You can see the empty bottle of whiskey and you lick your lips, feeling how dry they are. There's nothing left in the house to drink. So, you step outside. The sun is beginning a slow descent behind the Thrifty Tower.

You start to walk to the liquor store, past the main office and the laundry room. Past the empty pool and the Coke machine that doesn't work anymore. The wind picks up again and pushes you from behind as you pass the entrance to the apartment complex. A large carved wooden sign says:

"Welcome to City Gardens, a very special kind of place."

CAL RIPLEY AND THE RIPTONES, LIVE AT THE TULSA AIRPORT RAMADA

Set One

St. Thomas

Cal likes to move quickly, to keep the audience's attention, so he doesn't let us improvise much, which is a shame because there are some real players in this band. I am playing with Cal's lounge act again tonight, but I try to remain professional. If you want to be a working musician you have to eat your ethics and play what people *want* to hear, not what *you* want them to hear. But it still kind of irks me that I maybe only get two real solos with the Riptones on any given night. I explain that most people aren't listening to us anyway, long solos or not, that the Riptones merely serve as background Muzak played by actual human beings, but he never listens. If he doesn't care, neither do I. I just need the guaranteed hundred bucks that playing with Cal provides.

"Here we go, Trey," Cal mouths to me, as if his faux encouragement really means anything. He has a self-assured, if not downright smug look on his face, like he knows that most of this music, St. Thomas excluded, makes me feel miserable and that power gets him off

somehow. I nod back at him and close my eyes, feigning concentration and sincerity—my usual routine if I don't want to look at anyone while I play.

The Tulsa Airport Ramada is one of the many places that books Cal regularly around town. It's one of the selling points of being in his band, actually. I can make semi-dependable money and not have to get out on the road. That's the main reason I started playing with him in the first place. I wanted off of the road because Katie wanted me off of the road. I thought being home would make things better, like somehow our problems would disappear if we just spent more time together. Things would work out if I only made more money.

The first time I played "St. Thomas" I was ten years old. I was taking lessons from an old guy named Dave Gordon who taught out of his house on the north side of Tulsa. I always called him Flash Gordon in my mind, but he was the slowest, most methodical guitar player I have ever encountered. Flash used to carry a pistol in a holster on his belt at all times, even during lessons.

"You can't trust anyone in this city anymore," he'd say.

A lot of players in jazz go for the "more is more" approach, but Flash took his time. Very deliberate. Like he knew that flurries upon flurries of notes wasn't the real way to evoke emotion, to be a soulful player. He was Old Slowhand before anyone had even heard of Eric Clapton.

So as we hit the head of the tune, and I double the bouncy melody with the sax player and the bass and drums lock into the quick calypso beat, I remember one more thing about this song: it was one of Katie's favorites. She always wanted to dance to this tune but I was usually on stage whenever an opportunity arose. I love Katie, but I don't dance. Call it an inconvenient side-effect of being a musician for all these years, of occupying a perch on stage night in and night out, constantly surrounded by people dancing—witnessing their painfully flailing honesty,

their drunken two-steps. I always feel like some sort of a vagabond voyeur, and, more importantly, the whole process makes me know in my heart of hearts that I *never* want to look like any of them.

I don't even care when Katie and I are at a club or when she comes to a show and dances with other guys, just so long as I don't have to. She has even tried to get me to dance with her at home, just the two of us, like practice is what I need to get over my aversion. But what she doesn't realize is that it will never happen.

All Blues

The Airport Ramada's stage is kidney shaped, like they were attempting to make a large crescent but lacked either the time or the ability to construct it correctly. In any case, the stage makes it pretty awkward for a band to set up. I am getting annoyed, not to mention a mild headache, because I'm so close to the drummer I'll be eating the ride cymbal all night. I can already start to hear a bit of ringing in my left ear, which reminds me of the ear plugs Katie tucked into my guitar case a few months ago. She was sick of having to repeat herself all the time, but I never wear them. People who don't play can't understand the way earplugs make you feel like you're playing in the next room. At least Katie didn't understand.

The first two songs of the show are the closest Cal can get to cool. Sonny Rollins into Miles? The rest of the first set is all ballads. I can still remember playing this tune with the band I was in while I was in college over ten years ago. Our first show we all shared a big bag of mushrooms before we went on stage. We opened with "All Blues" and I threw up halfway through the drum solo. I wasn't tripping or anything, I think it was just the combination of nerves, the shitty taste of the mushrooms, and the gut-moving thump of the kick drum.

I met Katie in that same club a few years later. I was playing with a different band then, an electric fusion ensemble called Deep Banana with four, read it four, trumpet players and a guy

who played the Theremin. It was like *Bitches Brew* on steroids, which, believe me, is not even remotely close to a good thing. That was when I first learned about playing “out,” which is really just jazz code for playing a bunch of sour notes on top of a chord progression in an entirely different key. Though now that I think about it, if playing “in” is playing like Cal, I just might have to go back to the Deep Banana days.

At the end of the night Deep Banana was packing up gear and Katie came up to me, wearing a Thelonious Monk T-shirt, as I was loading an amp into the back of a trailer and introduced herself.

“Hey, I really enjoyed the show,” she said.

Enjoyed the show? Enjoyed? Christ, I remember thinking, I have got to get this girl’s number. I mean, I thought we were a great band at that point, why else would I have spent three years in an Econoline van with those guys, playing empty clubs in Midwestern college towns? But, I knew that most people who were also in their mid-twenties like I was at the time had no idea what we were playing or why we were playing it. Looking back, I think Katie may have just been using a line, although she’s still the only girl I know who can tell the difference between Wayne Shorter and Coltrane.

Misty

“Misty” is like the “Sweet Home Alabama” of jazz. The casual listener, local drunk, or—in the case of the clientele at the Ramada—middle-aged couples out for a night of dancing, love this song. For me, I’d rather have the four trumpets and Theremin from Deep Banana go on a free-form exploration for a few hours than listen to or have to play that goddamned song again. The tune might be number two or three on my Songs-I-Can’t-Believe-People-Still-Get-Excited-When-They-Hear-Them-List, followed closely by Louis Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World” and pretty much anything by Lynyrd Skynyrd. As I strum through the chords which at one time

were challenging and fun to play, I think about a buddy of mine who's in the military. He told me that the Army blasts earsplitting American music over loudspeakers to play mind games with foreign enemies who are holed up in a bunker or a house. Most of the time they play heavy metal non-stop for hours and, eventually, the bad guys will surrender without a single shot fired. If they played "Misty," the poor bastards wouldn't make it to the second verse.

Katie wasn't a ballad lover when we first met, which I considered odd given her propensity for dancing. After that initial encounter at the Deep Banana show, I waited almost two full weeks to call her. I was terrified because I had never had such a good-looking girl show interest in me before. Put an instrument in the ugliest dude's hands and some girls lose their senses. Add an audience in front of the ugly motherfucker while he's playing that instrument and you've got an instant aphrodisiac.

But people have a romanticized idea of what it is like to be a musician, especially at the level I am accustomed to. If you are a gigging, traveling musician who plays bars and clubs, chances are you don't have a road crew. No road crew means that, every night, you are setting up and tearing down your own equipment, which after a three to four hour show can be pretty exhausting. This fatigue typically translates into a slower load out time. If the bar closes at two in the morning, you may not finish loading gear until four. A girl has to be pretty damn desperate, not to mention sober, to wait two hours to hook up with a complete stranger who may or may not be as attractive as she thought when the house lights come on and the music has stopped.

Unless, of course, you have a tour bus. But if you have a tour bus, you probably have a road crew. Endless fucking circle. Anyway, I always thought that being in a band that had a tour bus would be my definition of "making it." In the Deep Banana days, we played a festival date in Kansas City and somehow wound up partying on REO Speedwagon's tour bus. The bus had a

fully stocked bar, big TV, the works. We stayed up all night with the band's road manager, some roadies and assorted hangers-on. Not a single member of the band. They were all at a hotel. Even a band like that had no special place, it seemed, for a real tour bus. But not me. And despite all my experience, all my time on the road, I still have never even ridden in one.

Moonlight in Vermont

Another boring ballad with no guitar solo. I look around the room. We are actually playing in the lobby bar/restaurant of the Ramada, Rick's Café Americana. The management pride themselves on presenting the best jazz in the Tulsa metro area. Of course, this is the middle-to-upper class suburban white people's version of jazz. Simple melodies, little to no improvisation. There's an old guy that serves as the host near the front door. He wears a white dinner jacket and lives for people to ask him to do his Humphrey Bogart impression. He and Cal are friends.

There are probably twenty or so people on the dance floor, mostly couples in their forties and fifties, some a bit older. One elderly gentleman came up to the stage between songs and asked if we could play some big band, some Glenn Miller perhaps? He pulled out a dollar bill and placed it on Cal's keyboard. Cal said we'd be happy to.

I look to my left and see the drummer, Ricky. Or is it Clifford? I can never remember because Cal has a rotating group of drummers that play for him. The only set members of the band are me, Cal on keys, Walter on bass, and Ray Ray on saxophone. Sometimes Ray Ray's friends will sit in and make a full horn section, but luckily that's a rare occurrence. A full horn section only makes the drummer play louder, which in turn makes Cal turn his keyboard amp up, which causes Walter to raise the volume of his bass, which leaves me to crank my Twin and lose even more of those precious high decibels. Again, endless fucking circle.

I notice the drummer has his wire brushes out, only the left brush has started to fall apart and small, metal wires fall to the ground one at a time every time he strikes his ride cymbal. When we hit the third chorus of “Moonlight in Vermont,” Cal takes a solo—he is, after all the leader—and I see Ray Ray step back from his mic and light a cigarette, menthol from the smell of the smoke that immediately moves toward me. I glance out at the crowd and get a slight jolt because I realize that, for a moment, I had forgot they were even there, like driving the Econoline down the highway and then not remembering anything about the previous three miles, that sense of shock followed by self reprimand to pay attention to your surroundings, to the task at hand. But then I feel even more off kilter when I see all the couples slow dancing, that familiar uncomfortable sensation, like I’m watching something that I shouldn’t be watching. In times like these I feel like I know what it would be like to be one of those bathroom attendants who wear bowties and white tuxedo jackets, the ones in really fancy restaurants and country clubs, the ones that hand you towels and offer you a bottle of Old Spice after you’ve done your dirtiest of deeds.

We finish the song and receive a moderate amount of applause. I find myself ignoring audience applause when it’s for a song I myself didn’t write.

The bar is large as far as bars go. The stage is surrounded by a hardwood dance floor that blends into dark maroon carpeting that is so stained it requires the house lights to be too dim for even mood-lighting purposes. A lot of the older crowd has difficulty moving around because of the darkness. It’s not uncommon for tables and chairs to be routinely knocked over. Somehow, the wait staff has learned to navigate the maze, which is pretty impressive to watch, like a blind person moving around a room he’s been in so many times he has every square inch memorized.

“Thanks, folks,” Cal says into the microphone. He’s the only one with a microphone because we only play instrumental music. That and his name is on the marquee.

“We’re going to take a very short break,” Cal says. “Please don’t go anywhere. And remember to tip your waitress.”

He points at one of the bar’s ugliest waitresses as he says this. I’m pretty sure Cal’s fucking her, or trying to.

I look out into the crowd and toward the back of the room, trying to see if Katie has come by. She never said that she would for sure but I am hoping.

Setbreak

House Music (Tony Bennett, et al.)

I go up to the bar and order a drink. Tanqueray and tonic. The bartender hands me the glass and the host in the white dinner jacket walks by and I hear him say something about gin joints. I sit at the bar next to two middle-aged women drinking chardonnay. They don’t seem to notice me and it hits me how rare it is for anyone from the crowd here, from the masses of dancers who force their spastic intimacy on me and my colleagues, never come up to talk to anyone in the band, other than Cal. In the old days, every bar and club I played there was always someone there to greet me as I walked off stage for a break. Someone with a compliment or a handshake or a free drink to offer. Not here.

I am thinking about calling Katie when I see her come in the front entrance. The doorman stops her and asks her for the cover charge. She points to the clipboard he holds and I realize I forgot to put her on the guest list. Again.

I rush to the front and explain to the doorman what happened and Katie gives me an exasperated look, like I did it on purpose.

“Sorry,” I say to her as we walk back into the bar. “Everyone else was late and I had to help Cal bring in all the equipment, just the two of us. I didn’t mean to forget. I really didn’t.”

She nods as if agreeing. It’s a motion I’ve seen before, one that tells me she doesn’t believe me, kind of like when I ask her what’s wrong and she says “nothing” but there’s really always something, she just wants me to figure it out on my own, but if I could figure it out on my own, why would I need to ask her in the first place?

“It’s crowded tonight,” she says.

“Not too bad for a Saturday,” I say.

I get this feeling in my neck and shoulders, like my muscles start constricting, ready for a big spasm that never comes.

“So there was a disconnect notice from the phone company when I got home today,” she says.

Shit, I forgot to put the check in the mail.

“I’ll take care of it,” I say. “First thing in the morning.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she says, moving to an open table and sitting down. She takes a cigarette out of her purse.

We sit in silence for a moment.

“It’s just that you said you would do it,” she says. “I just don’t get how your brain works. You never remember anything.”

Cal interrupts us, asks me if I brought an extra D.I. box like he had asked me to.

“I put it behind your keyboard amp,” I say.

Cal walks away and I look at Katie. She looks tired.

More silence, then:

“I don’t want to fight with you anymore,” I say.

She says, “I don’t either.” Then she looks away, at something on the wall or at nothing.

I am reminded of her “nothing’s wrong” game.

“You have to tell me what you want,” I say.

I am about to continue, but I feel a tap on my shoulder. Ray Ray. He asks if I can help adjust his monitor levels. Sure, I say. Ray Ray says he’ll be at the stage when I’m ready.

I look at Katie and she has this weird look of eagerness on her face, as if she’s expecting me to say or do something.

“Just a minute,” I say to her.

“I’m going to go,” she says, the tired look coming over her face again.

I ask her not to, but she says she’ll be back, for me to have a good second set, she’ll see me later.

I am about to ask her where she is going when I hear Ray Ray whistle. I turn and see him standing on the stage motioning toward me. He points to the back door of the club and smiles. I look to the club’s front door and see that Katie is already gone. I get up and follow Ray Ray to the back. We have to go through the kitchen, which is being cleaned by a few Hispanic looking men and smells of deep fat fryers and bleach. After snaking our way around the corner, we eventually end up outside in the rear employee’s parking lot.

“Come on, baby,” Ray Ray says as he pulls a pipe out from his pocket. “Got some fresh herb for you tonight.”

I thank him and take the first hit, the taste of the smoke mixing with the stench from the nearby Dumpster and grease pit. I’m struck by the surreal sense that I have been in this situation so many times before, in so many different towns, it is unnerving. The address may change, but everything else stays the same. The environment, the cramped stages, the dirty bathrooms, the dark and smoke-filled rooms, the apathetic audiences, the frustration of playing the same tunes night after night, the endless hours in the van, the exhausting and infinite unloading and loading of gear. Everything on and on and on.

“You ready to get on it next set?” Ray Ray says.

Ray Ray and I get along great, and I can bullshit with him for hours. I almost decide to tell him about me and Katie, about how things are falling apart. About how I have no idea how to stop it. But as we continue to smoke, I realize there’s no reason to talk to Ray Ray about such things. Music is what we talk about. Beyond that, there’s nothing.

So we talk about music and by the time we’re done smoking and walking into the bar and stepping up on stage to a perturbed look from Cal because we’re the last ones on, I’ve temporarily put the conversation I had with Katie out of my mind. I tune up my guitar, sliding the fingertips of my left hand across the smooth, flatwound strings and I see several couples rise slowly from their tables, a few of the people rolling their heads around, some tapping their feet, like sprinters stretching before a long-distance race.

Set Two

Honeysuckle Rose

A few weeks ago, on one of the few Saturdays that I had off from gigging, I was at home learning this song when Katie came in the bedroom and told me she got a call from work and her boss needed her for a few hours. She had started this new job and she was basically at the mercy of her demanding boss, who would eventually make her work almost every weekend. She was upset and I felt bad for her because we had made plans to spend the entire day and evening together. She left in the morning and was still gone by mid afternoon, calling me at one point to say it would be after dark before she got home.

Later that night, I went to the grocery store while Katie was still at the office. I picked up some pasta and stuff to make Caesar salad. On my way to the check out counter I noticed a display with flowers in it. I picked up a single rose; it was only two bucks. I stopped in the greeting card section and found a card that seemed an appropriate mix of sincerity and sentimentality.

I fixed the pasta when I got back to the house. Penne with garlic and olive oil. Katie had called while I was at the store and left a message saying she would be home in an hour. I quickly put the salad together and searched the hall closet and found two candles. We didn't have a dining room table, so I put the candles and plates of food on the coffee table in the living room. When I turned off the lights I realized it was too dark, we wouldn't even be able to see what we were doing, so I ended up turning on the TV. I put it on the local time and temperature channel, which was actually pretty nice because the channel played an easy listening radio station, which spun nothing but love songs on Saturday nights. When she finally got home we ate slowly and talked for almost two hours. For a moment she looked like she was going to ask me to slow dance with her, but instead slowly rocked herself back and forth with her hands wrapped around her hips. We climbed in bed afterward, made love under the covers with the lights off. After I finished, we kissed for a while and held each other and, as often happens before I fall asleep, the tinnitus in my left ear, the one that's absorbed years of crash cymbals, began to act up. So, I lay

there, my left hand tracing the curve of Katie's hip, my gaze placed squarely on the rise and fall of her relaxed breathing, doing all I could to ignore the ringing in my ear.

All the Things You Are

I think about the beginning of our relationship every time I play this song. Katie and I didn't date very long before we moved in together. Maybe six months or so, most of which I was on the road. When I got back from the final leg of Deep Banana's last tour, a southeast run through Louisiana, Alabama, and Florida, Katie offered her place to me. At the time I was technically homeless, my lease on my studio running out right before I left. I really enjoyed her house too. The decorations, the nice furniture, the smell. The smell was what got me more than anything. Slightly sweet with just a hint of vanilla. Her place smelled clean, like a woman, the exact opposite of the smell of being on the road.

Around that same time I had met a guy who knew Cal and he told me about the Riptones needing a new guitar player. When I considered moving in with Katie, which was taking the relationship into territory I had never been in with any other girl, I knew the gig would more than likely be a good thing. She had never directly said she wanted me off of the road, but she had dropped enough hints and we had gotten into a few polite arguments about the subject so that I knew my life had to change if we were going to stay together.

I suppose that might be part of the problem. I stand here, playing these standards, sometimes feeling emptier than if I wasn't playing at all. Maybe I should get another original band together, like I have talked about in the past. I could get in touch with some old contacts; book a few short regional tours. In no time, I could be back at it. Traveling, on the road, making music with my friends. Like Willie Nelson.

But then I realize why I haven't put a new band together. There are parts of the life that I absolutely do not miss. The work, the endless hours of driving and riding. The good things are

even few, when I really think about it. Most nights, it's too easy to get hung up on small shit—being tired or sick, or too drunk, or fighting with someone in the band. But, even if it's only for a few seconds out of a three hour show, I know what it feels like to tap into something that may be the closest I'll ever feel to being spiritual. This feeling makes all the peripheral bullshit worth it in the end. For anyone that has not experienced it first hand, it's impossible to explain. I try to tell Katie, but she has no reference point for what I'm talking about.

But Katie was and is still supportive. Since we started fighting on a daily basis, these last few shows have been the only shows of mine she has ever missed. She's never once told me to quit music. She's never explicitly said that I have to make a choice—but I often feel like there's no way I can have both in my life. I often feel like, in the end, it's going to be her or the road.

Take the "A" Train

I truly appreciate my new guitar when it comes to this song. I say "new," but for musicians and their instruments, older is almost always better. I actually bought Flash Gordon's old Gibson 135 archtop. The pick guard is broken and the finish has worn off the back of the neck, but thirty plus years have mellowed the mahogany and rosewood body until the tone that comes out of the guitar, especially when plugged in to my Blackface '65 Twin Reverb, just drips like buttery molasses.

Flash gave me a hell of a deal too, only twenty-five hundred bucks. I blue-booked the instrument and found a few collectors who were willing to pay three times that amount. I think old Flash was just happy I had turned out to actually be a musician. Who knows how many hundreds of students he had wasted years of his life teaching "Smoke on the Water" or "Peter Gunn Theme" to and, after giving up lessons, never touched the guitar again?

The real problem with this new guitar came to me the night I had bought it, as I pulled into the driveway of Katie's house. I had come to call our place "Katie's house" over the sheer

number of fights we had gotten into over who had the most financial responsibility and who pulled the most weight in the relationship.

Cal had hooked me up with a blues producer who needed some session work done. After a three-day weekend of laying down tracks, he paid me a couple hundred bucks in cash and I was about to leave his studio when all the guys in the blues band decided to head to the casino. They asked me if I wanted to go and I was really torn because I knew Katie would shit, but then they broke out some weed and some bourbon and we smoked and drank until I didn't think it was such a bad idea anymore. So we went to the casino and played craps and blackjack for hours. I was on fucking fire and walked out of the place with four thousand dollars. I used several hundred to buy a quarter pound off the blues guys and then spent the rest on some new clothes and the guitar.

I didn't even try to keep the guitar a secret from Katie, but I did my best to mitigate her potential anger. I cleaned the house and then went to the mall, to a big department store with the intent of buying something nice for her, some jewelry or a handbag. But as I wandered the ladies department, the smell of perfume, leather, and newness weighed me down. After a few hours, I gave up and just got her a gift card. Figured she would rather pick out something she really wanted anyway, right?

So, Katie arrived home from work to find me strumming the new guitar, wearing a new pair of pants and shoes, which took away from the fact that I had spent the entire day cleaning the house and her giftcard was set out on the coffee table along with another two-dollar rose.

She came in and immediately asked me where the new stuff had come from. I asked her if she liked the way the house looked. She started yelling and before I knew it I was yelling back. I didn't even get the chance to give her the gift certificate.

"I even cleaned the goddamned baseboards with a toothbrush," I had said. "Who does that?"

Looking back, I guess she had the right to freak out the way she did. Her car needed new brakes and the washing machine was broken, but what was I supposed to do? One thing I've learned over the years is that you have got to take opportunities when they present themselves.

As she rushed out of the house in anger that night, I noticed a spot on the baseboards behind the front door that I had missed, a rather minor thing, but something that took away from all the other work, something that left the job incomplete. I had already thrown away the toothbrush, so I bent down and licked my thumb and tried my best to rub it clean. It didn't work at all.

But For Now

About six months ago, Katie kicked me out to this song. I had a bunch of old records out when she got home from work that day. I was building my standards chops, learning a bunch of songs that I would eventually grow to hate because of the Riptones. At the time I didn't mind the ballads as much, I found the chord changes challenging. The right hand was always simple quarter-note strums, but the left hand required quick movements and knuckle busting grips.

We had come to a sort of a turning point in our relationship, like a weird open-ended coda, where we could go back to the beginning of the song and repeat, or start a whole new composition altogether. I guess we chose to repeat because she took me back after two days. I had crashed at Ray Ray's place at the time and spent the roughly forty-eight hours apart from Katie getting high, drinking cheap cognac, and listening to music. When I went back to the house, my trash-bag-for-a-suitcase in hand, she seemed to think I had enough time to think things over. I would change. She would change. We would change together. Looking back, our predicament makes me think about life on the road. That never-ending series of different locations with the exact same features, unchanging.

The Way You Look Tonight

Christ Almighty. I feel like an automaton by this point in the Riptones' show, like I have one of those wind up key-things in my back and Cal has twisted it as far around as it will go and released it, causing a canned and repetitive response from my fingers. And even though this tune was originally a swing number by Jerome Kern, Cal insists on doing it Sinatra style. A ballad. Again. When it's at its worst, I almost become deaf to the music. I just see my hands moving from chord to chord, approaching the neck of the guitar visually through patterns and shapes, with no thought to the actual sound. Maybe that's how Beethoven did it too. Only the result was actually inspirational. But there goes that feeling again. I hit these low points in a gig and start to wonder why I still play with these guys and I realize that, even with all the moaning and lack of spontaneity, I'd still rather be playing *some* music than none at all.

It Never Entered My Mind

Cal usually likes to end the night with a mid-tempo number, but couples on the dance floor have asked for another ballad. I don't mind because it's another Miles tune. There's a couple dancing in front of my side of the stage. They've been there all night. From the look of their clothes and the man's somewhat labored dance moves, I guess they're probably in their early seventies. I know the couple looks familiar, but I can't place where I've seen them before, probably here at the Ramada. We have quite a few regular fans that come to our gigs around town. Cal thinks it's because of him, but I think it's because of all those ballads we play. Most of these couples love to slow dance.

The thought almost sparks my usual response to dancing, but there's something about this couple, something that seemed only peripheral most of the night but has fixed my attention now, like I had been looking out at the crowd with a telescope I was holding the wrong way all night—

every night—only just now turning it around. Only now seeing things the way they were meant to be seen.

I notice the man looks slightly more distinguished than Humphrey the Host, but the woman wears a sequined long-sleeve evening dress with shoulder pads, which almost make her appear hunchbacked. But then I notice how she's form-fitted against the man's body, almost floating like a thin mist, perfectly following the man's every awkward step to the point where it becomes difficult to discern where one person starts and the other begins. I think of Katie, gliding across the living room at her house, encouraging me to just *try* to dance.

I smell hard liquor and microphone cables, stale smoke and potpourri perfume.

The fact that the old couple's rhythm is off means nothing. The fact that the man appears to be struggling with some sort of physical malady, probably arthritis or gout, is irrelevant and does nothing to take away from the sheer beauty that radiates from the couple. They are in love and they are happy. They are dancing.

SHELL

I should have done more. I could have done more. To stop them, I mean. Matt Pittman and his cronies were playing in the woods near my house, near the fort my brother and my friends and I had built. We were down there one Saturday during the summer. I remember the way my clothes stuck to my body, the almost sweet smell of prepubescent sweat. The way the frothy creek that wound through the woods would be steaming, releasing a visible vapor of humidity that clung to your skin, to your pores.

We were playing near the water when we heard them. My brother and Jeff, our mutual friend, were scared. Jeff had been beaten up by Matt at the bus stop once. Matt had kicked my brother in the balls in the hallway at school the previous week. So when I heard them, when I could finally make out what they were up to and I told Jeff and my brother that I was going to go see, they didn't follow me.

One day near the end of the spring school semester, my brother and I were walking home when our old man pulled up next to us on his old Triumph. I remember thinking how weird it was that he was off work at that time, and that he had stopped us on the street. We lived only three blocks from the school.

“Hey boys,” he said. “Come here for a minute.”

My brother looked at me, dubious.

Our father was a pretty decent guy, at the end of the day. As I grew older, had children of my own and all that goes with it, I realized that he could have been worse. I suppose he did the best he could.

We approached him. He had turned the motorcycle off and was adjusting the bandanna on his head, checking himself out in his side view mirror. He never wore a helmet in those days. Actually, riding a bike was pretty unique then, before Harleys became the toy of choice for white-collar sufferers of mid-life crises. Our father always wore a bandanna, even if he had on his work clothes—he sold insurance. He had some thing with Peter Fonda. No matter, my friends always thought our dad was the coolest. He had long hair, mutton chop sideburns, and, for a while at least, a handlebar mustache.

“Why don’t you guys hop on?” he said. “I’ll give you a ride home.”

“Dad, it’s like fifty yards from here,” my brother said. “Besides, we’re not that little anymore. We can’t all fit on that thing.”

My brother seemed to think that was all he needed to say and walked off down the sidewalk toward our house.

“What about you, Trey?” he said.

I thought for a moment and then ran to the bike, hopping on to the back. My dad seemed to be pleased because after he kick started the motor and popped the clutch he screamed, “Hell yeah!”

We beat my brother to the driveway and Dad said, “So, I was thinking I could go down to the woods with you guys this afternoon, help you finish the fort. What do you say?”

“Can we use your tools?” I said.

I had apparently caught him off guard because several moments passed before he responded.

“Sure,” he said. “Sure, we can take some tools down there.”

He walked off toward the garage after saying this. My brother came up behind me, his backpack slung low.

“What’s gotten into him?” he said.

“I don’t know,” I said. “But he said we could take some tools to work on the fort.”

My brother looked at me incredulously, but then I said why would I make something like that up and he seemed to agree. Neither of us was going to question it too much. Our dad had never once let us even touch his tools, and he had a pretty remarkable collection in his work bench in the garage. Our mother had said one time that she thought if he had to choose between his family and his tools he would have to think about it. As a child, I always kind of admired the way my father could fix things, how handy he was.

* * *

I made my way down the creek embankment a few yards and saw Matt Pittman and his crew tossing rocks into the water. Eventually, they climbed to higher ground, like a higher vantage made things easier to hit whatever it was they were throwing the rocks at.

“Somebody help me,” Matt said.

I saw him near a tree on the other side of the creek. Two of his buddies crouched near him and the three appeared to be struggling with something—a very large, basketball-sized rock. They approached the edge of the water carrying the rock.

“When I say,” Matt said. “Throw it. Okay?”

After a second of scanning the surface, he screamed, “Now!”

The rock hit the water with tremendous force, followed immediately by laughter and celebration. All of them were high-fiving each other and smiling, except for Matt. He stood on the edge of the embankment, staring into the rippling water where the top of the stone jutted out, a menacing, almost chiseled look on his face—a look that would grow even more threatening as he got older. Suddenly, Matt jumped off the embankment and landed next to the stone, water up to his knees. His friends grew quiet. He bent over and pushed the rock several times until it rolled a foot or so. Then he plunged his hands into the muddy water, apparently searching for something. Almost immediately he raised his arms out of the water, having found what it was they had thrown the rock at. One of the largest turtles I had ever seen. Its shell looked crushed and as the sun peaked through the dense foliage of the woods and hit Matt from behind, I realized the mud dripping from the shell wasn’t mud at all.

* * *

My brother and I had always found turtles every summer. And we would keep them as pets for several months and then set them free in the woods as part of our father’s rules. The old man seemed partial to the creatures for some reason.

“See, the thing about a turtle is,” Dad said one summer when we were in the garage, crafting a makeshift pen out of cardboard boxes. “He *has* to be determined. Nature made him that way. Nature stacked so much shit against him, made him slow, made him ugly, that he *had*

to grow a shell to protect himself. And even though he's slow and ugly, when shit turns bad, he can always curl up in that shell and wait it all out. A lot longer than most."

My brother and I nodded in agreement. Our old man could have a way sometimes.

* * *

Dad let my brother and me pick out a few tools, mostly old ones that were in the back of drawers of his workbench. He said we could each pick two, so we needed to think carefully about what we really needed once we got to the fort. I didn't mind anyway. There was something about the smell of his workbench, of the garage, that made me happy—like axel grease, rusted steel, and summertime. While I was selecting my tools, my dad and brother thumbed through the pages of a Snap-On swimsuit calendar.

"Would you look at that," my dad said. "Jesus." My brother didn't respond.

I finally decided on a hacksaw and a sander. I figured I could cut some of the scrap wood we had salvaged to finally make a ladder that all of us could use to climb into the fort. I would use the sander to smooth the rungs down. After my brother picked his tools, Dad strapped on his tool belt, grabbed a small cooler with drinks in it, and led us out of the garage, around to the backyard in the direction of the woods. It was about a quarter mile to the woods, and we cut our way through neighbors' yards. Through Mrs. Dalrimple's lawn, and the Stevens' place. We would always have to bypass the Pittman's backyard though. They kept it overgrown and populated with two of the meanest Rottweilers you would ever meet.

The three of us approached the edge of the woods, which dropped sharply into a sort of ravine. The creek curled through the trees at the bottom of the ravine, flowing almost a mile to a spillway located underneath the state highway. One time, my brother and I had followed the creek just to see how far it would go, but we got lost on the way back and the sun was starting to

set. We had both started crying and contemplated stopping for the night when we heard the shouts of several men. Our father and a few other dads from the neighborhood had formed a search party. When the men finally reached us, my dad leading the way, the panic of being lost was replaced by a new fear—the expectation of our father’s wrath. I had directly disobeyed him only once during my childhood. That was all it took. The beating he dealt me was about as severe as you could imagine, so I did all I could to never put myself in that situation again. When he got to my brother and me, I was working up the fortitude to withstand whatever punishment he was sure to dish out. Instead, he collapsed next to us, pulling both of us into a tight hug, and began to cry with us.

When we reached the fort, Dad said, “Well this thing is coming along, boys.”

Jeff, my brother, and I had spent all summer carting old 2x4s and particle board to the site. We had chosen a spot right next to the water, a thick oak tree nearby that someone had tied a rope swing to years before. Jeff’s dad, who was an actual carpenter, had helped us build a platform in the tree, which served as the floor of our fort. The three of us had hammered particle board together to construct some ramshackle walls and a flimsy roof. The whole thing, minus the floor, looked like it could fall over at any moment.

We didn’t have the tools to cut any openings in the walls, so once you climbed the tree and lifted yourself through the hole in the floor of the fort, you could stay in there only a few minutes because of the heat and lack of oxygen.

“You know what you really need is some bracing on those walls,” Dad said. “In fact, why don’t I help you guys get those things a little sturdier.”

My brother looked angry, like he didn’t want Dad to walk in and tear down everything we had spent weeks building, but I knew that Dad knew what he was talking about. I wanted the fort to be strong, to last.

So we each took our turn scrambling up the tree and into the enclosed space. When we were all up there, Dad said we needed to do some demo first and that the walls would have to come down. He instructed us to help him get rid of the particle board roof, which we did, and then he proceeded to kick the walls off of the platform until the three of us could finally breathe again.

“You know I would have helped you boys with this sooner,” Dad said. “It’s just been really busy at work and your mother’s been on me about fixing up the house.”

“It’s ok, Dad,” I said. “Jeff’s dad came out here a few weeks ago.”

“Rick did?” Dad said. “Huh. Well I guess that explains how the three of us can stand up here then.” He stomped on the platform.

“Trey, why don’t you gather up those old walls and use that hacksaw to cut some windows,” Dad said. “Your brother and I are going to put up some framing.”

I climbed down the tree and moved the boards and my tools a ways downstream to a clearing in the brush.

Matt Pittman had just pulled the turtle out of the water.

“Man, you really got that thing good,” one of his followers said. The others laughed, but I could tell that the laughs were muted, like all of them felt awkward, maybe even scared.

My initial concern had been with Matt finding our fort, because I knew if that happened he would act like any conqueror: invade and occupy. But now that I had seen what they had done, what he had done, I was fixed to the addled shore of the creek, unable to pull myself away. When I finally got my bearings, I realized I had ducked behind some tree stumps, out of view.

Though I felt angry that Matt would do something like that to an animal, I favored self-preservation over any grandiose sense of environmentalism.

Matt started to walk back to the opposite side of the creek where his friends stood, like soldiers awaiting terrifying orders from their general. But when he stepped out of the water, he didn't climb the embankment to his friends. He knelt in the mud, placing the shell down in front of him. He was almost directly across the creek from me, and despite my best efforts, I felt myself cower closer to the tree stumps. For a few minutes, Matt knelt there, staring at the dead turtle, as if he were trying to determine what to do next. Two of his friends seemed to get curious and scampered down the embankment, stood behind him.

In a sudden motion, Matt reached into his pocket and flipped open a large pocket knife. I wanted to close my eyes, afraid of what he would do. But then I thought of my father, what he always said about turtles. I thought about that day that he had helped us work on the fort.

I had just given myself the third splinter of the day when my dad shouted my name.

"Look at this," he said.

I was away from the fort in a clearing, working on cutting holes into the walls. I walked toward his voice and saw that he and my brother had successfully put up framing posts in all four corners of the platform.

"You almost done on your end?" Dad said.

I looked back at the particle board, the uneven chunks I had cut from them, the blood on my left hand where I had cut myself with the hacksaw.

"Not quite," I said.

“That’s ok,” he said. “We’ll come down and help you.”

He slapped my brother on the shoulder and laughed.

My father accomplished in ten minutes what had taken me hours to attempt. With the windows cut and the frame posts set, it was just a matter of hammering the walls to the posts. With the three of us, the job took only an hour or so.

As we climbed down the tree and sat on some dried-out logs near the water, Dad pulled open the cooler and handed us a Coke, popped open a beer for himself.

“Looks good, guys,” he said, looking up at the finished structure. “Looks real good.”

“Thanks, Dad,” my brother said.

“Thanks for all the help,” I said. “We couldn’t have finished without you.”

“Well you just make sure Jeff tells his old man that, ok.”

Our father took a drink from his beer. The sunlight was starting to fade through the trees and cicadas began to warm up to a cacophonous symphony. The heat, the stifling humidity, had started to subside some.

“It’s kinda nice out here now,” my brother said.

I looked at my dad. He had an odd look on his face, like concentration, but looked almost disheveled. He downed the rest of his beer in one gulp. He stood up from his stump and walked toward us, stopping in front of my brother and me. Looking down he said, “Boys, I have to tell you something and its difficult and complicated and I need you two to act like men when I tell you.”

My brother and I exchanged glances but said nothing.

“I’m moving out for a while,” he said. “Your mother and I are separating.”

He had a look on his face that seemed torn between relief and sorrow.

“It’s nothing you guys did,” he said. “It’s just that your mother and I need a break from each other for a little bit, to work stuff out so that things will be better in the future.”

At the time, I couldn’t make sense of what the news of their separation made me feel. I could hear my father telling me that I was not to blame, that my brother was not to blame, but I didn’t believe it. I looked at my brother, wondering what the hell he had done. I tried to think back as far as I could, trying to remember when I had been bad, been disrespectful to either one of them.

My brother seemed to take what my father said to heart, to act like a man, and he stood up and started gathering tools together. My father took his cue from my brother and did the same, walking around the area, cleaning up materials. I simply sat on the tree stump, the amber dusklight falling through the foliage of the woods, reflecting dimly off the cream colored water. At the edge of the water I noticed some splashing and saw a small turtle moving up the dirt embankment. I went over and picked up the turtle, which quickly retreated inside its shell, and went over to my father who was gathering nails into a metal bucket.

“Look what you found,” he said, reaching his hand to me. I passed the turtle to him. As the sounds of night began to envelop the woods, my father held the turtle in his hands, stroking the top of its shell.

“What are you doing?”

The two cronies that had climbed down to Matt looked frightened at the sight of the knife. Matt said nothing. Almost methodically, delicate as a surgeon, he took the knife and plunged it into the side of the turtle, jerking violently, loud cracking sounds overpowering the gasps of his buddies. The two that were on the top of the embankment ran off. The two nearest Matt backed away. After a few minutes, Matt turned and pointed a blood soaked hand to them, saying, "Get over here and help me."

One of the boys began to cry, the other, visibly reluctant, knelt beside Matt and held the shell down as Matt completed his incision. I was not sure how long the whole process took, yet I was acutely aware of the gut wrenching helplessness I felt, wanting to do something, but not having the courage to even reveal my presence. Finally, Matt stood up with the cracked top of the turtle's shell—the size of a trashcan lid—in his hands, crimson running down the wet sand into the creek.

"I'm going to hang this on my wall," he said, walking back up the embankment, heading downstream the opposite direction of the fort. His two remaining buddies quickly followed. I stayed in my hiding place for a few minutes, unsure of how to proceed. I considered running home, telling my mother or calling my father at work. I considered going back to the fort to see if Jeff and my brother were still there. Instead, I found myself wading across the creek, toward the turtle.

I approached the carcass, doing all I could not to look. I stood there for a long time, not sure what to do. I thought about my brother and Jeff, wondered if they had run home. I imagined my father, how he would have reacted. It had been nearly a month since he had moved out, moved to a small apartment on the east side of town. It would be another month before my mother would finally file for divorce and my father would get transferred for his job.

Eventually, I saw a large stick on the side of embankment and picked it up. I went near the turtle and began to dig in the reddened sand with the stick, clearing away the soil with my hands.

As I scooped up what was left of the turtle and placed it in the hole, my mind turned to my father. I wondered what life would be like now, lived, for the most part, without him. Then I thought about Matt Pittman and his sick fucking friends. I should have done something to stop them. I should have done something to stop it all.

DOWN TO THE FELT

Jackson looks around the bedroom, can't believe that this is happening to him. Abigail peels off her shirt while Nicole tugs at his belt. For a moment, Jackson feels suspended in time, completely aware of what he is doing—despite the dozen or so drinks in his system—but unable to summon the courage to stop. As Abigail removes her bra, he is almost comforted by the familiar sight of her breasts. This is not the first time he has been with her. He would, in fact, call her his mistress if he didn't have such a hatred of the word. So, maybe Abigail is just his girlfriend, though Jackson knows you're not supposed to have one of those after you get married.

Nicole, on the other hand, is new to both of them. He immediately feels the electric shock of novelty that being with another woman entails, and he physically registers a jolt as he squeezes Nicole's smaller, firmer breasts.

Though they all work together at the Indian casino as blackjack dealers, Abigail and Nicole only recently became friends, and sort of by default, she was introduced to Jackson.

It all started after the third night that Abigail and Nicole went out for drinks and they ended up really drunk and all they could talk about was Jackson, or so Abby said. They both were talking about Jackson and Abby didn't tell Nicole that she was already sleeping with him. But, the girls kept talking about him and Nicole let slip that she was really attracted to Jackson and would love to "hook up" with him, she not caring that he had a significant other and child at home. So, as Abby tells it, the night wore on and the two girls kept drinking and talking and

eventually they kissed—Abby was always dirty-talking about being with another woman anyway, even though she claimed she never really had before. But, it turns out, Nicole is really experienced with both women and men, so she and Abby end up in bed together, naked, touching and kissing each other all night, though they didn't do much because they were both on the rag.

The next day, Abby tells Jackson and he's so turned on by the notion of the three of them getting together he can barely function. So they make plans to go out to the bar after their shift, though Jackson caught hell from home in spite of lying about who he was going out with.

The night had seemed a bit surreal, as Jackson, Abigail, and Nicole all were aware of why they were together, so there was this weird lack of pretense because the ending had already been predetermined. Abby was just oozing sex, like this super sensual person that she usually was not, but the idea of the threesome had somehow unlocked this animalistic, pheromonal spirit, and, let's face it, she just wanted to fuck, which wasn't all that different from the nature of her and Jackson's relationship anyway, but with Nicole in the picture it became more debased, more primal. After drinking for several hours, they end up at Abby's apartment.

He suddenly is conflicted because he looks at Abby and Nicole as they begin to kiss and he registers the distinct differences between the two and he is confused because, come on, being with two chicks is every guy's fantasy, but he can't help but see the differences. The differences between the two and even the way they are different than Sarah. And despite what he anticipated, different may not be good, may not feel so good. But then the three of them move to the bed, as if floating, and he changes his mind. There's the excitement of the new, the taste of the strange, and the smell of vanilla, lavender, and the vinegar sweetness of sex in the air. There's an awkwardness to the rhythm, all drunken groping, syncopated starts and stops, missed thrusts and involuntary collisions. And turn-taking, oh the turn-taking, the substitutions, like a basketball game, one player in, one out, or two in. Or, for a while, all three out. Out and on, and through

the door, into the car, driving, Jackson smells bourbon on his own breath and strange on his fingers. Driving, driving, back to a life he has the suspicion he's destroyed. For good this time.

Several weeks later, Jackson is sitting at the blackjack table at the Creek (it's his night off) and the dealer shows a six and Jackson can already see it in his head—what's coming next, despite the fact that the idiots at the table around him are excited because they think the dealer is going to bust. He's not going to bust. He's going to turn over a five and then draw a Queen of spades for a twenty one. A half-second later, he does just that and he takes the last of Jackson's chips. He wants to yell for more chips. For a marker or something, but Jackson knows better, this isn't Vegas. It's Oklahoma. As a dealer at a competing Indian casino, Jackson knows there are no markers. Hell, they don't even do any comps at this place—there's nothing to comp. Some weird tribal compact thing. This tribe got fucked compared to Jackson's tribe. He says “tribe” as if he is a “real” Indian. Technically Jackson is an Indian, why else would they have given him the job at the casino, but he doesn't feel like the member of any tribe. Jackson doesn't look too Indian either—his mom is white. He sure as hell doesn't look as red as this Creek tossing the cards. Jackson wonders if this guy had to repeat the training class three times like he did.

Jackson was pretty fucked up when he got the job. His wife had just kicked him out (fourth time) and was planning to move away with their kid (second time). But the tribe was intent on giving any card-carrying member a job before they offered them to the white folks, so they seemed to be willing to put up with Jackson's shit. The job actually kept Sarah from leaving. At least at first. Now, things are a little different. There is so much money rolling in, and more outside—and white—casino consultants coming in to manage the place, Jackson's not sure how much longer he will be around, which may make Sarah reconsider.

Jackson looks around the table and tries to guess each person's story, a habit he has gotten in to recently at work. Helps the time pass. He turns and notices the requisite old lady and cowboy, like at every blackjack table in Oklahoma. Then he notices a younger Indian woman and an Asian guy—both almost always present. But then he sees a young couple, probably in their late twenties—around Jackson's age. They look like they are having fun, like they are in love. Like they are here for the entertainment, not to make money. Jackson hates all of these types, which makes no sense when he really thinks about it. You would think that seeing people lose their kid's college funds every day would turn Jackson off to the idea of gambling. But, like a lot of things, he just can't help himself.

When Jackson comes home the day after spending the night with Abby and Nicole for the first time, Sarah is in the kitchen, making waffles for Brian, their son. Brian is three years old now, which seems impossible to Jackson, how quickly the time has gone, how little he himself has accomplished while this beautiful boy grows.

Jackson walks toward the bathroom, eager to take a shower, to wash the smell of sex off before Sarah's sensitive nose alerts her to his infidelity. He trips over a toy in the hallway, curses loudly.

"Do you have to talk like that around your son?" Sarah says, moving the toy out of Jackson's path. She has bent down near his crotch and he just knows she can smell it. She raises back up, though, and there's no look of suspicion, just one of frustration. The look is familiar.

"Sorry, I'm just hung-over and I need to get ready for work," Jackson says.

"Am I supposed to feel sympathy?" she says. She thinks Jackson went out with some guys from work and crashed at one of his buddy's houses.

Jackson takes a moment, regards Sarah. She looks tired, but still pretty. He knows she works hard, taking care of Brian and working part-time at Sears. He knows she has been there for him for a long time—through the years of being on the road as a musician—supported him, and he begins to feel guilty, guiltier than he did before. The awareness sets in that consequences will exist eventually for the fun he had last night.

“That reminds me,” she says. “When are you going to put in that shift change request? You know I’m getting tired of being here by myself all the time. I thought we were done with this kind of life. Your son misses you too.”

“I’ve talked to the manager three times,” Jackson says. “But she keeps saying they need to wait until the new consultants come in before they can approve any shift changes. Besides you know the nights and weekends mean more money.”

“That argument would work better if I actually saw any cash,” she says. “That brings up something else we need to discuss.”

Jackson knows what she is going to say, some diatribe about his gambling. He is not in the mood so he goes into the bathroom and shuts the door, turns on the shower. He can feel Sarah on the other side of the door, so he takes his time.

“You know what your problem is?” Abby says. “You’re too much of a child yourself. I mean you think like a little kid.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean,” Jackson says.

They are in the breakroom at the casino, eating “lunch” at 1:30 in the morning. Swing shifts are a killer.

“I mean you want what you want when you want it,” Abby says. “Like a little kid. You don’t care about the consequences. It’s a morality thing.”

Like he needed to be lectured on morals by her.

“So you’re agreeing with her?” Jackson says.

“No,” she says. “I’m just saying she has a point. Or at least a valid reason to get mad. And if she only knew there were other things she could really get mad about.”

Abby laughs after saying this, which only pisses Jackson off more. He swears, the mouth on this girl. Fucking lecturing him. And then dropping snide comments about Sarah all the time, like she really knows anything about her other than what he has told her.

“Hey, don’t get mad,” she says. “I love you, baby.”

She knows how to get at him, that’s for damn sure.

“Come on, babe,” she says, glancing around the room before moving her hand under the table, up Jackson’s leg to his crotch. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Jackson finally says, unable to think of anything else to say. Jackson has to admit to himself that he does care about this girl, but he goes back and forth on whether or not he really loves her. He has a hard enough time accepting that he “loves” Sarah, and they’ve been together for ten years. Maybe the problem is that love is just a word, a semantic symbol of abstraction. Nothing concrete like the feelings the word is meant to describe. Nothing that could come close to accurately describing the other night with Abby and Nicole. The thought spurs him.

“So,” Jackson says. “You talk to Nicole?”

He thinks he sees a look of annoyance come across Abby’s face, but only for a moment.

“Yeah, I talked to her,” she says. “She totally wants us to get together again.

Nicole. He has found himself thinking about her constantly. He has tried to be careful, he knows that Abby is the jealous type—she even acts jealous of Sarah sometimes.

He suddenly becomes acutely aware of the delicate and dangerous balancing act he has entered. He must choose his actions and his words carefully, for everyone involved. He does not, after all, want anyone to get hurt. Least of all himself, but also Sarah and Brian. He really can’t think about his life without either one of them. Not in the long run anyway. This thing with the other women is a phase. It has to be.

A week or so later, Sarah went out with her friends from work and Jackson had Brian by himself for the night. He had wanted to find a babysitter so he could meet up with Nicole and Abby. They were, after all, getting together with or without him. But he decided it would be too difficult and would require Brian to lie for him and, son of a bitch he may be, he did not want Brian to inherit his father’s loose association with the truth.

So he took Brian with him to the grocery store where they got a couple of frozen pizzas and some sugary snacks that Brian’s mother would disapprove of and then headed to the video store where they stocked up on Disney movies.

When they got home, Jackson threw the pizzas in the oven and popped in a video, which took Brian’s attention, at least for a little while. The poor kid must have inherited his father’s attention span because after twenty minutes he was bored and ready to move on to the next thing.

Jackson took out some board games and the two of them played *Chutes and Ladders* and *Candy Land* and ate chips and cupcakes and chocolate chip cookies and ice cream and washed it

all down with some Kool-Aid and Jackson knew he had made a mistake because Brian was acting really hyper.

Gradually the sugar wore off, which was exhausting because Brian had required so much attention and effort. Jackson knew something must not be right when Brian finally stopped running circles around the house and came and curled up in his lap.

Jackson was seated on the floor, his back against the couch, watching the Disney movies—he did, after all, pay for them. Brian came up and curled up in his lap and let out this moan, so Jackson turned him over and noticed he looked pale, skin waxy, and he could see what was about to happen so he hopped up and carried Brian into the bathroom where the little guy threw up all the junk food and Jackson felt really bad. When Brian was done being sick, Jackson carried him back into the living room and then sat on the couch, still holding him. Brian had fallen asleep.

“Daddy’s sorry, son,” Jackson said.

Brian’s eyes opened and he looked at Jackson and there was this moment where Jackson felt like the look was burning him, like Brian was somehow seeing through him and recognizing and knowing and hurting. So he said it again:

“Daddy’s sorry,” Jackson said.

And Jackson had this sense that Brian knew, that he comprehended what Jackson was talking about. But the thought brought no relief. Instead, Jackson only felt worse. He felt like Brian knew what he had done and was still doing and, though there was no judgment there, there was still a type of disappointment, a type of recognition that his father was not a good man.

Jackson buried his face in Brian’s hair and breathed deep. The boy smelled so good. He turned him and kissed his cheek several times, catching the smell of his breath, sweet and sickly

and pure. It reminded Jackson of when Brian was an infant. He had been a colicky baby and had also had some reflux problems, so he was constantly spitting up and never sleeping. Jackson was unemployed at the time, so he always volunteered for the night shift, staying up with the baby, rocking him, wiping the spit-up from his face. He always felt weird that he liked the smell of Brian's breath after the baby had spit up, but he did. Jackson would hold him close to his face, as he was now, and think about how in the hell it was possible that he had any part in creating something so beautiful.

As of this night, the night the Creek Nation waged war against Jackson, there has been almost two months of constant threesomes with Nicole and Abby. Jackson finds himself exhausted, physically and otherwise. He imagines his penis, mashed to a pulp from the rigors of constant sex with three different people, all the friction and the pressure to perform, not to mention the realization that someone has to be going unsatisfied.

Jackson is doing his best to gain some ground on the Creeks at the blackjack table, but it seems to be no use. Jackson sees the couple at the other end of the table again and their happiness is really starting to irritate him, which only complicates his winning problems. After all, gambling is as much about positive thinking as anything else. He has been dealing cards long enough to see the difference one negative person can bring to a table. So, in that sense, he can appreciate this couple. But they don't even care that they've lost twelve hands in a row.

Jackson can't help but think about Sarah. He knows she must be suspicious by now. He has told her that he has been taking some extra swing shifts, but sooner or later she'll wise up. It's inevitable, much like the house's odds of taking his money. Give them long enough and they'll always win. The trick is knowing when to stop. Knowing when to take your winnings from the table and leave.

He glances at the nearest entrance, looks for Nicole. She is supposed to meet him here tonight. He told her he would stay close to the west entrance so she could find him easily. He feels a bit of a guilt pang as Abby comes to mind. She would not be happy if she knew he and Nicole were meeting without her. The last few weeks, he and Nicole have hooked up on several occasions, without Abby. Even when the three of them have been together, Jackson finds himself paying more attention to Nicole.

A few days ago, Abby finally confronted him.

“Look, I think we need to take a break from all of this,” she said. “It’s just that you and I haven’t been together by ourselves in a long time and this whole thing feels like it’s getting out of control.”

At the time Jackson agreed with her, more to appease her than anything else. But there is no denying she is right. The whole thing is out of control.

About three or four weeks into the whole triangle thing, Jackson gets a call from Nicole. She wants to meet for a drink or something and Jackson says yeah and then makes up some bullshit to feed Sarah and meets her at this dive bar.

Nicole looks really good when he gets there, wearing this low-cut blouse and he can see her breasts and she’s obviously not wearing a bra and she’s got this short skirt on and long leather boots. She has this look in her eye, he would call it a gleam but that doesn’t do it justice, and she puts her hand out and leads him to the back of the bar, through the smoke, to a table in the corner.

They talk for a while; he tells her how good she looks. She does not respond because she knows. She doesn’t seem interested in talking, which is only confirmed when she orders half a dozen shots of tequila for them.

So the waitress brings a bottle and lines them up and Nicole just goes for it and Jackson has to try to keep up and he's tossing the shots back one after the other, just like her—no chaser—and he hates tequila but he's trying to act cool but he really just wants to throw up. Finally it's over and he can feel the burn all the way in his colon, it seems, and he's just glad it's over. He wants to talk to Nicole some more, get to know her or something. He is attracted to her, obviously, but he doesn't know enough about her.

"You and Abby talk too much," she says when he mentions this to her.

Jackson wants to come up with a witty comeback but before he can, Nicole disappears under the table. He feels her unzip his pants, put him into her mouth. He gets nervous, worried that people will see what they're doing, but then it turns into this exhibitionistic excitement and he doesn't care if anyone sees.

After a few minutes Nicole raises up and she has pulled her blouse down.

"What are you doing?" Jackson says, but is cut off when she shoves his face into her chest. Jackson knows he shouldn't be doing this, what if he were to see someone who knew him or what if the bar called the cops or something, but then he is pulled into that ecstatic frenzy like the times he has been with Abby and Nicole, though, oddly enough, this is even more stimulating, and he succumbs and doesn't fight when he feels Nicole climb on top of him and he doesn't try to be quiet as he enters her. And then he wants people to walk by, and finally a few people do come to the back of the bar because that's where the bathroom is and, boy, do they get a show. So he is really fucking her and she's moaning and screaming and pretty soon a crowd gathers and Jackson looks up and notices it's all men and then he starts to go limp because there are all these guys staring at him, it's just not sexy, but Nicole is yelling now, like really yelling at him to keep going because she's about to come, so he does and she comes and the creepy guys in the crowd are

grinning and probably touching themselves and possibly drooling and maybe even just looking at Jackson and he can't take it anymore and pushes Nicole off.

The crowd seems disappointed and disperses quickly and Jackson runs to the bathroom and locks the door. He splashes water on his hands and his face. He takes some paper towels and wets them and cleans himself, rubs really hard until it hurts. He stays in the bathroom for a few minutes, feels like hours.

He comes out and Nicole is sitting at the table smoking a cigarette, a few creepy guys nearby staring. He tells Nicole he has to go. She looks at him like he may be pathetic and he is strangely turned on by this.

She follows him out to his car, gets in with him. Jackson wants to say something to her, to make sense of what had just happened, but nothing comes to mind. She seems to sense his need, but instead of talking she reaches over and puts her hand down his pants. In the darkness of the car, she finishes him off and then asks him to take her home.

Jackson never tells Abby, or anyone, about what happened. He and Nicole get together a few more times, but either go to her apartment or get a motel room. The sex is no less inhibited, but there is no crowd and somehow the excitement seems to suffer, which is so weird for Jackson because he was so turned off at first by the experience. Jackson knows this is sick. But he thinks he has started to develop feelings for Nicole too, and the sex is unbelievable, despite never living up to the night at the bar.

So he is feeling twice or three or maybe four times the guilt as he was when he was just cheating with Abby because now he is cheating on Sarah with Abby and on Abby with Nicole and on himself and on his son with all of them.

Jackson still sits at the same blackjack table, though there is a different dealer and the happy couple has finally moved on to their happy and most likely unadulterous relationship.

He has been up and down too many times to count tonight. Right now, he is down again, but he is just biding his time until Nicole gets here, at least that's what he tells himself, but he can feel that burning sensation in his midsection, the same one that he always feels when he knows his luck should be going one way but winds up turning the other.

Finally he plays down to his last five dollar chip and is about to get one more hand when Nicole comes up and hugs him from behind. She sits down next to him—by this time the table is empty except for Jackson—and lays down two hundred dollar bills. She gives Jackson half the chips.

So they sit and play blackjack and kiss and talk and criticize the dealer's form and drink and get drunk. After a while, Nicole is playing with her chip stack with one hand, while the other under the table is down Jackson's pants. Jackson just starts to think that they are having a good time when he hears a loud sound, like a waitress dropping a serving tray. He and Nicole both turn around in time to see Abby rising from the floor where she had apparently knocked over a server with a plate full of drinks. She is almost running toward the exit. Jackson hops up and follows. As he catches up to her, he realizes he doesn't know what to say.

"Don't even try," she says. "I followed her here. I've been sitting out in the parking lot, trying to get the courage to come in."

Jackson doesn't respond. He feels terrible. But then as they both sit in silence, he begins to get angry because he remembers it was her idea in the first place to get together with Nicole and he is about to say as much when Nicole walks up.

The women seem to face off, like a big fight is about to erupt, but they don't say a word. Finally, "This is out of control," Abby says. "Jackson, I won't do this anymore. You have to be held responsible."

She walks out of the casino after she says this and Jackson feels torn because he thinks he should follow her out, partly to apologize, partly to make sure she isn't going to do anything stupid like tell Sarah what's been going on.

Jackson turns to Nicole and reaches to her, touches her shoulder but she turns away. He grabs her and turns her around but she has this repulsed look on her face. And then he wants to blow up at Nicole, to yell at her, to tell her who the fuck is she to judge him or to act the way she is, but he only tries to hold her hand. She keeps swatting his hand away and eventually walks away.

"I have to go," Nicole says.

He sees her walk back to the blackjack table and pick up all of the chips, including the ones she had given him. Jackson does not follow.

"Wait," he says, but it is too late.

Jackson knows he should leave. He knows he should do something to stop Abby from telling Sarah, if it wasn't just a threat. He knows he should run after Nicole. Or he should just go home, be with his son. But he can't go. He can't bring himself to leave the casino. He needs another chance.

Jackson walks back into the casino and up to the ATM and swipes his card, hoping that there will somehow miraculously be money in his account, but he isn't that surprised when the

machine spits out a receipt that says insufficient funds. He goes to the cage and asks the cashier for a cash advance slip. He knows his credit card is already overdrawn, but there's still a hundred bucks left on his cash advance balance, though it's like twenty-nine percent interest or something ridiculous like that.

Jackson gets the hundred dollar bill from the cashier and he's thinking, "This may be the last hundred dollars I have to my name," though he doesn't really believe that because there is always Sarah's payday on Friday and his next Wednesday. But the thought of having no more options somehow heartens him, makes him feel better about what he is doing and helps him stop thinking about Abby and Nicole and Sarah and Brian and on and on and on. He feels he is on a mission now. Like some sort of noble cause. Like some sort of righteous tradition.

When he sits back at the blackjack table—this one a single-deck pitch game—he feels like he has a purpose. To win his losses back, as if doing so will bring him honor. Like doing so will erase what he has done to the ones he loves. What he has done to the ones he only likes. So he sits and plays. He sits and plays and loses the first five hands in a row. He becomes frustrated and feels the noticeable weight of inevitability settle in near his abdomen. In anger, he slides the remaining fifty dollars in chips, all he has left in the world, and he knows he shouldn't, that doing so erases the fake sense of nobility, and he realizes that he was never and is not likely to ever be noble. To be worth anything. To be able to make the right choices.

So the fifty dollars slides into the betting circle and with it drains the fleeting feeling of purpose, of meaning. And the dealer pitches out the cards, but Jackson doesn't look at them. He knows he has already lost. He knows that hoping otherwise is, and will always be, futile. He knows, but he still wants to play. He still wants to flip over the cards. To finish the hand.

Jackson pulls into the driveway of his house. All of the lights are off. He wonders if Abby came straight over here after leaving him at the casino. He wonders if Sarah sits inside, waiting for him, waiting to kick him out. For good this time.

He sits in the car for a few minutes after turning the engine off, listening to the clicks and pings. Finally he steps out of the car, walks up the rotting wooden stairs to the front door. He tries to be quiet opening the door, like that will make any difference.

The lights are off, so Jackson stands near the door for a moment to get acclimated to the dark. He moves to the bedroom and cracks the door open, but doesn't even have to look. He can hear Sarah snoring. He feels slightly relieved—nothing has changed. Jackson makes his way to Brian's room, opens the door and stands over his crib. Brian lies spread-eagle in footy pajamas and is so big now he barely fits in the crib. Jackson asked him a few weeks ago if he was ready for a big boy bed but Brian said he liked his bed the way it was. Why change something like that if you don't really need to?

After a few minutes of watching Brian sleep, Jackson reaches down and picks his son up, carrying him into the living room. He sits on the couch and clutches Brian to his chest, Brian curling up into a fetal position. Soon, Jackson can feel his son's body heat and they both begin to sweat. He is reminded of holding him as a newborn, the sweet smell of his sick breath. Jackson bends his head forward and kisses Brian on the cheek. He is still asleep. As he is raising his head back up he hears the crunch of gravel outside, the squeak of brakes. He turns and peers through the blinds and sees Abby's car next to his. Jackson feels the familiar burning sensation in his midsection.

Abby's headlights are shining into the living room and Jackson can see Brian has opened his eyes. He has the sensation that Brian recognizes what is about to happen and, for a moment, Jackson feels the need to apologize, to verbalize all the regret and guilt and on and on. But then

Brian's face seems to change, to take on a warmth, like his son knows what his father is thinking and he doesn't need to say anything. He understands.

The lights of Abby's car go off and he hears the creak of the door open, making his pulse quicken. He feels the adrenaline rush that comes from the anticipation, the same way it feels when he puts a big bet out on to the table and the dealer starts to toss the cards. But that feeling is quickly swallowed up, dissolved by the knowledge that he doesn't even have to look at the cards. He already knows he has lost.

As he hears Abby's footsteps grind across the gravel and then creak on the wooden steps he leans forward and presses his nose softly into Brian's hair, breathing deep, the smell sweet and pure and so innocent

PARTICIPANTS

Participant. That's all the ribbon said. I rubbed the ribbon between my thumb and forefinger, feeling the jagged edges. Then I turned and patted my son, Brian, on the head and handed him his “prize.” He didn’t seem to care. He was eating candy corn and eyeing a funnel cake stand a few feet away.

But the ribbon bothered me. Big time. I mean, I knew I wasn’t that skilled at arts and crafts, let alone designing a Halloween costume for a four-year-old, but I wanted this night to be memorable for Brian—and me, I guess. I had envisioned the two of us walking up on some sort of stage, being handed a trophy or an engraved certificate or a gold-plated jack-o-lantern. I imagined a large crowd, packed tightly around the stage in the old part of this college town, cheering because they saw this sweet little boy dressed as the college’s quirky mascot.

Well, nope. There wasn’t even a stage and the damn thing was barely even organized. All the downtown businesses were supposed to hand out candy to kids on Halloween in some asinine attempt to make trick-or-treating safer, but the organizers, if you could even call them that, forgot that half of the store fronts were empty. And, the topper, swear to God, I think one of the candy stations was manned by this geezer who didn’t even own a business. He handed out black licorice. Black licorice, you believe that? I tossed that crap in a Dumpster before Brian could even put it in his candy bag.

Then there was the costume contest. What a joke. They just shuffled the kids in like livestock, lined them up, and then one judge, if you could even call her that, walked up and down the line one time, one time! This was the judge just for Brian's age division, a great big fat-assed woman with permed hair. I noticed the two-to-three-year-old division judge took his time, even asked certain children to step closer so he could inspect. Hell, he had a notebook, took notes. Fat Perm? She was holding a corndog. All she did was look once and then hand out ribbons. No ceremony or nothing.

There were ten kids in Brian's age division, ribbons from first to seventh place. Three that said only participant. So my son was in the lower thirtieth percentile. Short bus territory. I surveyed the other two "participants." Their costumes: Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*, except for ruby slippers she wore maroon Chuck Taylors and instead of Toto she was carrying a big fat hamster. The other kid didn't have a costume on, just a sweat suit, you believe that? I mean what kind of a parent dresses their four-year-old kid in a sweat suit? Do these people know what that does to a child, how much a sweat suit limits your options when you get older and you think it's still okay to wear a goddamn sweat suit?

Well, my kid's costume, while not the best, sure as hell didn't belong in the same category as these two. That's when I decided that I hated Fat Perm.

I guess I've always kind of hated certain people. I remembered my mother always said, Jackson, never say hate, it's too strong of a word and you should never say it about another person. You should just say you dislike them instead.

I always kind of hated her for saying that.

Anyway, I decided that not only did I hate Fat Perm, but I wasn't going to let her big ass get away with embarrassing my kid like that. So I walked up to her, tapped her on the pudgy shoulder.

I wonder if you spent enough time judging the costumes, I said.

Excuse me, she said.

It seems to me—and some other parents—that maybe you could have spent more time judging our age division, I said. Like that guy over there did with the two-year-olds.

She didn't say anything after that. Just stood there for a minute, holding her half-eaten corndog.

I'm sorry, this is supposed to be fun, she said. For the children, you know.

The way she said *children*, in this, like, super-condescending voice. Boy, what a piece of work!

Look lady, I said. All I'm saying is that you only walked up and down once. I think, you know, the kids who worked so hard on their costumes deserve more than that.

I mean, it's a respect thing, I thought.

I mean, it's a respect thing, I said.

Sir, Fat Perm said. The contest is over. Look, the children are all going to get more candy and play games. Which one is yours?

He's standing over there, next to the funnel cake stand, I said.

She looked up and then, unbelievable, she laughed! Pointed her corndog at Brian and laughed. Ooh, I was about to come unglued right there. But then I thought better of it. I wouldn't give Fat Perm the satisfaction of knowing she got to me. Man, the nerve of that fat broad!

So, I walked back over to Brian, didn't say another word to Fat Perm. Brian had just finished his candy corn and asked if I would get him a funnel cake. Sure, I said.

We stood in line for a moment, and my blood was still up a bit, and then it hit me that the little girl in front of us was the one who won first prize in Brian's division. Little Bo Peep. She even had a basket with little stuffed sheep.

The sheep. Wrapped around one's head: her first place ribbon.

I turned to Brian and said, give me your ribbon.

Why, he said.

Give it to me now or you won't get funnel cake. He gave me the ribbon.

Now go shake that little girl's hand, I said.

I don't want to, Brian said.

Do it or no funnel cake.

He walked over to the girl and held out his hand. Her parents turned, said how sweet, shake his hand, Sally.

I moved in too.

I wonder, would you mind taking a picture of our kids?

I handed the girl's mother—one of those late thirties, premature wrinkles from tanning beds, Junior League President moms—my camera. She seemed confused but said, ok. A woman like that not wanting to give off the wrong impression, not to me, but in case some pillar of this college town might be looking.

Here, I said. I'll hold their things. Brian, you get closer to her. Put your arm around her.

My son did as he was told. How sweet, the girl's mother said.

I grabbed the little girl's basket, the one with the sheep. I swapped out the ribbons, quick-like, handed the basket back to the girl after the photo was taken. Brian looked confused too, but then it was our turn in line to get a funnel cake. I said thank you to the little girl's parents, got my camera back and waved as they walked away. I paid for a funnel cake and then guided Brian over to a bench near the street corner. Boy, was my heart pounding! But, then Brian was so appreciative, of the funnel cake that is, and then I started to run my fingers up and down the ribbon, and soon we were smiling at each other. Even the sight of Fat Perm couldn't take it away.

Now, I know this looked bad, but just imagine if it were your kid. Just think! Wouldn't you do what it took to make things perfect for him?

And as for the costume, I know you're dying to know what I dressed him up as, but that misses the point of this whole thing.

When Brian finished the funnel cake, I made him throw his trash in the nearest can, a metal drum with those industrial liners. He came to me and said, Thanks, Dad.

Man, I'm telling you, how good can life be?

LEFTY

You begin to think you made a mistake, calling this old guy a motherfucking liar. He does have, after all, a prosthetic hook on his left hand and now that he's got the thing close to your throat, it looks pretty damn sharp.

"I heard he castrated a guy who cheated him at a poker game with that thing," another dealer told you the first night the old man came in to the casino. Everyone called the old-timer Lefty.

Not long after that first night, Lefty seemed to seek out whichever blackjack table you happened to be stationed.

"The Bitch takes it easier on me with you, Jackson," Lefty said after a week or so.

It took several nights of Lefty saying this before you finally asked him what he meant.

"You know," Lefty said. "The Bitch. The one who's got her hand in all this shit, taking people's money, givin' it back to 'em. Making 'em happy or sad. The one Old Blue Eyes sang about."

Lefty appeared to be in his late sixties, but could have been much younger, could have just been a byproduct of living hard, if his current table habits were any indication of his past: Dewar's neat, Marlboro Red dangling from a dry, caramel colored lip, five large stacks of green chips in front of him.

Most of the other dealers couldn't stand Lefty, the way he refused to tip, even when he won large sums of money. But, you didn't mind him so much, at least at first. Really you felt a kindred connection to the guy. Maybe it was Lefty's unspoken fatalistic aura, like he'd given up a long time ago. Maybe that's why it never seemed to *really* matter all that much if he won or lost, at least in a monetary sense. He seemed only interested in sticking it to the "Bitch." Maybe because the Bitch stuck it to him. You felt you understood.

But then something happened.

Your wife kicked you out, for good this time, and suddenly Lefty's charm disappeared. You first felt this change, this alteration in the way you saw Lefty a week ago, when you were working the day shift and he came and found you. You realized that he was telling the same story to you, that he *always* told you the same story, just with different names or cities substituted. That he probably never even experienced any of the loss he always talked about, that he had more than likely never found a woman to put up with him for more than a few days. That he referred to Lady Luck as "The Bitch" because he more than likely has some sort of Freudian mommy issues.

It was then you realized that the camaraderie you believed you felt was as inauthentic as Lefty's stories and, after that, he became as he was to every other dealer at the casino, a nuisance.

Which leads you to this night, a Friday, a good moneymaking shift—and you need the money—attorney's fees and child support and alimony and on and on. And you're doing well; the checks are flowing out to the players, which means bigger tips for you. You find yourself at a great table: all serious gamblers who keep their mouths shut. So you shuffle. Riffle, spread, riffle, spread. You toss out the cards and the players need no help, they're on top of it. Soon everyone has entered a rhythm and you lock in a zone, like in the old days behind a trap set, shuffle, toss, rake, pay. Shuffle, toss, rake, pay. Then you hear him. You don't even look up.

"Jackson, thank God I found you. All your amigos are killing me tonight."

Still not looking up, you see his hook push a stack of red chips in the betting circle.

“Come on,” Lefty says. “Let’s get her. You and me.”

Soon, Lefty’s chased all the quiet play away from the table; no one wants to sit with him, hear his stories, hear him moan all night. Gamblers avoid the kind of energy Lefty propagates.

Which leads to what happens next.

Lefty’s going on about a woman in Reno, supposedly has kids with her but she won’t let him see the kids, not anymore. Then he says,

“Jackson, you know what I’m talking about. Don’t ya?”

That’s when you lose it. You throw the cards at him, some chips too, and call him a motherfucking liar.

“You’re a motherfucking liar,” you say. But, as many times as you imagined going off on a customer, especially Lefty, you’re left feeling unsatisfied, the whole catharsis feels incomplete.

And now you’re left with the consequences. You’ll lose your job. You won’t be able to pay child support. You may lose your son for good.

And then there’s Lefty. There’s still that hook to deal with.

ELECTRIC LADYLAND

Trey heard the low, rumbling hum of the voltage before his body fully registered the shock—which made the act of being mildly electrocuted even more discombobulating. And though the jolt was painful—and indeed it was—he couldn’t help but focus more on the feeling of humiliation, the hot flush of embarrassment that seemed to travel across his face faster than the current had.

He was on stage when it happened.

The final tune of the night—the climax of the last set, if you could call it that. He was playing with Jimmy Lee Chew’s Blues Revue at the Cherokee Casino and Resort and Jimmy insisted that they end the night with a dual guitar solo complete with some Hendrix-inspired acrobatics. So, Jimmy had just finished the second chorus of his autobiographical tune “Damn Straight, Even Chinamen Get the Blues” when he and Trey met up at center stage and leaned back to back against one another.

The choreography Jimmy had come up with called for them to start the duet’s first few bars leaning against one another, then to quickly spin around and face each other, simultaneously whipping their guitars behind their backs for a few measures and then spinning back to their original positions. The grand finale had them kicking their legs out, bringing their guitars up to their mouths and playing with their teeth. It was here that Trey felt the little hairs on the back of his neck stand on end the nanosecond before the electrocution. His knees buckled and he fell

uncontrollably face first, on top of his guitar. After he realized what had happened, Trey couldn't bring himself to stand back up. In fact, he merely lay there on the stage, guitar uncomfortably jabbing his midsection as the band finished the song. When the song was over, Trey still had not moved.

"Shit," he heard Jimmy say. "Just great."

"Are you all right, man?" he heard the drummer say.

"Jesus," he heard a bartender say.

"That was the funniest thing I've ever seen in my life," he heard some asshole in the audience say.

Finally, he felt hands on his shoulders, gently rolling his body over.

"Is he alive?"

Jimmy was standing over him.

"Hey there," he said. "You ok?"

Trey blinked his eyes in response.

"I'm cool," Trey finally said. Jimmy helped him to his feet and the small audience gathered near the stage started to applaud, but it was applause peppered with snickers and jeers, like when the other team's star athlete gets injured and then carried off the field.

“See folks,” Jimmy said into the microphone. “Jimmy Lee Chew’s Blues Revue can be a shocking experience. Thank you and goodnight.”

Again, more laughter.

Trey was on his feet now, examining the damage to his ES-135 semi-hollowbody, which was probably more painful than the damage done to his body or his ego. He gathered himself quickly, unhooked his guitar and placed it on the stand next to his amplifier. The bass player and drummer had already started to tear their gear down.

“Seriously,” Jimmy said from across the stage. “You ok, brotha?”

Jimmy called everyone “brotha” or “sista.”

“I’m fine, I think,” Trey said.

He turned and picked up a cable and started rolling it. After about thirty minutes of tearing gear down, Trey joined Jimmy and the bass player at the bar, lit a cigarette and ordered a gin and tonic. He had not even taken a sip of the drink when a large woman with auburn hair and a casino employee’s badge around her neck approached the three of them and came within a few inches of Trey’s face.

“The sound man told me what happened,” she said. “Would you mind too terribly much to come with me?”

It sounded more like a demand.

Trey agreed, put out his cigarette, and followed her, ignoring the bewildered stares of his bandmates.

He followed the woman out of the main stage venue where they had played and across the casino floor, past the slot machines with their blue-haired, chain smoking populace and through a door marked "STAFF."

After maneuvering a labyrinth of hallways decorated with Cherokee art, they arrived at a rather sterile conference room. A burly looking man in a dark suit was seated at the table in the room, papers and a large black bag in front of him.

"Have a seat over there if you don't mind," the woman said. She pointed to the seat next to the man.

"This is Reginald," she said. "In addition to being a member of our security department he is also a registered paramedic. He's just going to have a quick look at you."

"I'm really fine," Trey said, but it didn't matter, the big man had already taken a blood pressure cuff out of the black bag and placed it on his arm. After taking his blood pressure, his pulse, and checking his eyes, the man seemed satisfied and turned to the woman and nodded his head. He gathered his things and left the room.

"Well," she said. "Good to know you're ok. I'm Mary Stone, by the way, the casino's entertainment director."

She didn't wait for a response.

"So, I have some forms here that I need you to sign, if you don't mind," she said.

“What kind of forms?” Trey said.

“Just procedural things really,” she said. “Saying that you won’t hold the casino liable for any problems that may arise from the accident.”

“Oh, and this one guarantees you a high rollers suite and a marker redeemable for three hundred dollars in chips in the casino,” she said, pointing to a piece of paper on the table.

Trey felt confused.

“It was really just a tiny shock, he said. “I mean I’m fine and I’m not going to hold you guys liable for anything.”

“Well, we appreciate the sentiment,” she said. “But it is a legal thing that must be taken care of. And besides, after that powerful of a performance, you deserve a little something extra. Just think of it as a way the casino likes to take care of its artists. After all, we want you to want to come back and play again.”

“Look,” she said. “I’m just doing what my bosses told me to do.”

She lowered her voice and leaned toward Trey.

“Honestly,” she said. “It’s some problem with the wiring that they haven’t fixed yet. I mean, we’ve only been open for six months so there are a lot of kinks to work out. You know how it goes, right? So, do you think you can cut me a break and just make this easy? They just don’t want to get sued is all.”

Trey appreciated her cutting through the bullshit and, like she said, he did deserve to be pampered a little bit. A big ass suite and free money to gamble with? How could he turn that down?

Trolling the casino felt a lot like being on the road: brief encounters with people whose names and faces become a blur, a whirlwind of sound and repetitive sights, smoke and booze everywhere you turn. Trey had gone back to the main stage after his meeting with Mary and told the guys in the band what had happened. They were pretty excited, gave him high-fives and backslaps, each one asking if they could party with him in the suite.

“Of course,” Trey said. “What kind of a band would we be if we didn’t?”

This, of course, led to old road stories, each of them trying to one up the other with tales of embellished debauchery, though, as far as Trey knew, none of the other guys had been in bands that traveled out of the Midwest. They continued their braggadocio as they went up the elevators of the hotel section of the casino, all the way to the top floor. When they entered the suite, their excitement seemed to multiply. The suite was massive and much nicer than anything Trey had ever stayed in before, especially after a gig. Though he and the rest of the guys in Jimmy’s band lived only a few miles away from the casino in Tulsa, there seemed little doubt that they would be attempting to tap into the rock star personae they had so largely faked for most of their adult lives.

“Let’s go back down,” Jimmy finally said, after the four of them had downed a few beers from the well stocked mini-bar. “I got a feeling there’s some hot sistas waiting for me.”

“You guys go on,” Trey said. “I’ll meet you in a minute.”

Though it was a large casino, Trey knew he could find them if he looked hard enough. Jimmy would be in the dance club probably, and the bass player and drummer would be playing poker.

After the other three left, Trey pulled out his guitar case and opened it. He gingerly rubbed the ES-135’s neck and fretboard, made his way down to the soundboard, feeling for any big scratches, dents, or gouges in the flamed maple top. Nothing but a few cosmetic blemishes from his fall. As he returned the guitar to its case, he noticed his hands shaking with a slight tremor. He wondered for a moment if the burly man in the office had been right, if his “check-up” had been thorough enough.

Trey considered for a moment whether he should call someone, get their advice, fill them in on the crazy events of the night, see if they might want to come indulge in some rock and roll decadence, to add something more to the night, to add genuine companionship. But, he couldn’t think of a single person he could call.

Trey felt comfortable in a casino. Over the last several years, since he had moved back to Oklahoma and been off of the road, dozens of Indian casinos had popped up throughout the entire state. The good news was that the casinos typically paid well, much better than bar gigs, and now that Trey was getting older, had begun to settle in slightly, you could make good money and not have to travel out of state. In fact, part of the appeal of joining Jimmy’s band had been that Jimmy was planning on becoming a casino circuit fixture. Once you got in with a few of them,

your name got around pretty fast. And the Blues Revue was a pretty decent band, jump blues with an Allmans-esque dual lead guitar attack.

Playing the Cherokee as one of their first casino gigs was a bit of a coup considering that the Cherokee was the largest casino in the state. An added plus for Trey was that he loved to gamble, blackjack and craps in particular. Slot machines were for the real suckers, Trey thought, and he always steered clear. But blackjack and craps offered an element of the tactile and of camaraderie and of strategy that was missing in electronic games. In the table games you got to touch the cards, shuffle the chips, and caress the dice. You got to plan your next move and berate the dealer with other players when things went against you, nothing like the automaton-like motions of pulling a lever or pressing a button.

Trey had heard that Jackson worked at the Cherokee, that he was a poker dealer or something. He and Jackson hadn't spoken in almost two years. There was no one reason Trey could point to, no fall out from fighting or anything like that. It was just one of those realities of life, the way people just tend to lose touch when one of them moves away or moves on. Trey had to admit to himself that he'd like to see Jackson, but if he didn't, that would be fine too.

After he made it onto the casino floor, Trey decided he could find the other guys later and immediately went to a nearby cage. He cashed in his marker as well as an additional hundred dollars that he had been paid for the gig and went to the nearest blackjack table with two large stacks of twenty five dollar and five dollar chips. He sat at a fifteen dollar minimum table and placed a fifty dollar bet in the betting circle. He liked putting out a big bet for the first hand. The dealer busted and Trey won. He felt great and looked around the table for sometime to share in

the win, but the only other person seated was an irritable looking octogenarian down to his last two chips. On the next hand, the old man was out and got up from the table.

Trey had been so into the game that he didn't see Jackson until the dealers changed tables and his old friend was in front of him.

Trey considered moving, but he was always a bit superstitious about such things.

"I heard you were back in town," Jackson said.

"Jesus, it's good to see you," Trey said.

Jackson signaled to a pit boss, who nodded, and then he walked around the table and gave Trey a hug. They stood for a moment next to the blackjack table, embracing. Finally, Jackson released him and they returned to their respective posts at the table.

"Let's make this streak continue," Trey said. "What do you say, Jackson?"

"Sounds good to me, man," Jackson said. Trey had almost forgotten the way Jackson's voice sounded, a slow, drawling accent, like he was from Arkansas or something.

Ten quick hands later, Trey was up five hundred dollars and had downed his second gin and tonic.

"So, you guys sounded good tonight," Jackson said.

"Oh, you saw us?" Trey said.

“Yeah,” Jackson said. “I was really digging that whole Allman Brothers thing you guys have going.”

“Thanks,” said Trey. Finally someone who got it.

“I especially liked the end of the show,” Jackson said.

Here we go again, thought Trey. He smiled, tried not to seem too gruff.

“Hey man,” Jackson said. “I’m just fucking with you. Same thing happened to me once. Before we played together. I went up to a microphone to sing the first note of a show and the electricity on the stage wasn’t properly grounded. Soon as my lips touched the mic it was lights out.”

“Yeah,” Trey said. “It’s a common thing. I’m ok though.”

Some more silence, cards being dealt.

“So what’s up with your front man,” Jackson said. “He’s a wild man, huh? Running around the stage the way he does.”

“Yeah,” Trey said. “He’s a showman.”

“And the whole name thing,” Jackson said. “I mean, I like Stevie Ray Vaughan as much as the next guy, but come on.”

“So,” Trey continued. “You still play?”

“Nah,” Jackson said. “Got a kid and everything. You know how it is.”

Trey didn't have any kids but he knew what Jackson was talking about. Being a working musician felt like a young man's game.

After this exchange, things grew quiet again. A few players came and went, as did some of the chips Trey had accumulated. The one constant was the flow of gin and tonics and the occasional comment on music or guitar gear. Finally, after two players got up and left the table and Trey had been plied with enough booze to feel comfortable to ask, he said

"So, do you know where I could score some herb around here?"

Jackson glanced around the pit, apparently looking for the pit boss.

"You need something tonight?" Jackson said.

"That's the idea," Trey said.

"Careful," Jackson said, pointing upwards to a security camera. "The eye in the sky is always watching."

"Tell you what," Jackson said. "I go on break in thirty minutes. Why don't you meet me at the west entrance?"

Trey decided to take a break from blackjack and moved to a three card poker table. Thirty minutes later, he was following Jackson out into what appeared to be the employees' parking lot. They stopped at an old Ford Ranger pick-up and Jackson ducked inside the cab emerging with a joint.

"It's all I got man," he said. "And these."

He held out a handful of white pills. Hydrocodone, he said.

“How much you want for all of it?” Trey said.

“You take it, man,” Jackson said.

“No, I can’t do that,” Trey said. “Seriously, how much you want?”

“Tell you what,” Jackson said. “Why don’t we split the joint right now.”

So, not long after, Trey found himself in the cab of Jackson’s truck, smoking a joint full of skunk weed listening to a tape of John Lee Hooker.

“So, what’s up with that little brunette dealer,” Trey said. “The one that was on the table next to ours.”

“Trust me,” Jackson said. “You don’t want to fuck with that bitch.”

Trey believed him.

“Hey,” Trey said. “They comped me a suite. You want to come up after your shift and hang out?”

“Damn, that sounds tempting,” Jackson said. “I have to get back to my son.”

“Could be like the old days,” Trey said.

“The old days,” Jackson repeated.

They sat in silence and finished the joint.

After saying thanks again to Jackson, and encouraging him to find a way to come upstairs, Trey went back into the casino and ran into Jimmy and the other guys. They looked like they were having fun.

“There he is,” Jimmy said. “Our lightning bolt brotha.”

The others laughed.

“Where you been man?” Jimmy said. “We been looking all over for you.”

Trey told them about gambling, scoring the pills. They asked if they could have some, so Trey slipped them each a tablet, saving two for himself.

“We’re gonna go hit the buffet, man,” Jimmy said. “You wanna come?”

“Nah,” Trey said. “There’s this chick I want to talk to.”

“Well it’s about time,” Jimmy said. “We thought you might be gay, you waiting this long. I mean, shit, all you got to do is wave the key to that suite around and the bitches will be lining up.”

Trey wasn’t in the mood for Jimmy.

“Hey, before I forget,” Trey said. “Here’s an extra key to the room in case you guys want to go up early.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Jimmy said. “After we eat, we’re gonna head to the dance club and I’ll use this to corral a whole herd of honeys up there.”

“Sounds good,” Trey said. “I’ll see you guys later.”

Trey looked over his shoulder as he walked away from the other guys, hoping they wouldn’t see him alone. It wasn’t that he hadn’t considered what Jimmy had said about the suite. He figured, on a Saturday night with the casino as crowded as it was, he could easily find at least one decent looking woman who would be charmed by his status as a musician with a high roller’s suite. But, on the other hand, he also didn’t feel up to dealing with the type of girl that would be that easy. He had been with a few of those types before. Again, maybe because he was getting older, he felt things had changed, including the way he viewed women. Then there was his old friend Jackson, the sting of guilt that had been growing over him for letting their friendship fade away.

He found a small bar situated between some slots and table games. The bar had video poker games built into it, so you could blow your money while you got hammered as quickly as possible. Trey ordered another gin and tonic and downed the two remaining pills he had. He sat and played video poker for a while and smoked cigarettes. Eventually, three young women came up to the bar. Two seemed to be holding up the third. Of course, they sat the most inebriated one right next to Trey.

“Wait here, honey,” one of the girls said. “We’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

Trey considered telling the other two girls that they shouldn’t leave their friend alone in that condition, but he kept his mouth shut.

The girl that sat next to him was attractive, a young, curly-haired blonde with pursed lips. She was thin and wore a revealing yellow blouse and tight jeans. She turned to Trey.

“Hi there,” she said. “Want to buy me a drink?”

Trey knew better but found himself signaling the bartender for two more.

“I’m Melinda,” she said, taking one of Trey’s cigarettes from the open pack on the bar.

“Trey.”

“Well, Trey,” she said. “It’s my twenty first birthday tonight.”

“Is that a fact,” Trey said. He began to feel worse.

“Yes, indeed,” she said. “And I don’t know about you, but I don’t think a girl should have to sleep alone on her twenty first birthday. What do you think?”

Trey waited a second to respond. Just as he was about to open his mouth, the girl’s friends came back.

“What the hell?” one of them said. “Did this guy buy you a drink?”

“Nice going, asshole,” the other said. “She’s only been cut off twice tonight.”

“Come on,” the other said, helping the blonde, who was protesting, to her feet.

“Pervert,” she said, as the two carried the blonde off. Trey thought he heard them say something about a dirty old man.

Trey sat at the bar for a moment and did nothing. Then he downed the rest of his drink and then did the same to the gin and tonic the blonde girl had left. He saw his reflection in the

Plexiglas cover of the poker machine as he stood up, the eyes looked familiar but everything else looked different. Tired and drained.

Trey made his way to the elevator in the lobby of the casino's hotel. He had to steady himself against the mirrored wall, the hydrocodone and the gin finally getting the better of him. He punched the top floor button once he was inside the elevator and felt in his pant's pocket for the key card to the room. He considered calling room service when he got to the suite—he hadn't eaten anything since lunch and he was beginning to feel lightheaded, queasy. He wondered if all that voltage running through him had thrown something off kilter, maybe damaged something internally. He felt numbness in his extremities, a palpitation in his pulse. Should he have taken those pills? What if they were interacting with his injuries?

Trey considered what it would be like to die in the elevator, to be found by some poor sap waiting on the top floor, just standing there minding his own business, thinking about playing the *Wheel of Fortune* slot machine, when suddenly the doors of the elevator split to reveal the hunched over body of an out-of-shape, thirty-five-year old musician, a half drunk bottle of beer clutched in his left hand, the key to a free suite, a comped high roller's suite—every musician's dream come true for sure—in his hand, a token of a type of payola that Trey hadn't even taken the time to enjoy.

Instead, when the elevator reached the top floor and a bell signaled the opening of the doors, he drew in three deep breaths and walked out to an empty floor. The palpitations subsided and the numbness dissipated. Trey walked down the halls of the hotel's top floor, dragging his

finger against the walls, feeling the fine texture of the wallpaper, occasionally coming across some wood paneling with ornate Cherokee symbols carved in them. When he finally reached the door to the suite, he again drew three deep breaths, steadying himself for the debauchery that was sure to greet him as he entered the room. After all, Jimmy had said he was going to go find some big black women to keep him company. The drummer and the bass player, though one was pretty old and the other married, were sure to have wanted to take advantage of the situation. Trey could see them all now, drinking, smoking, singing, dancing, breaking shit. The thought excited him; he couldn't wait to get in the room. He wished he hadn't waited this long to begin with.

He wondered if by some miracle Jackson would show up too.

But when he pulled the key card out of the lock and turned the door knob and opened the door, he was greeted with the strangest thing: silence.

The lights were all out.

"Where is everybody?" Trey said. "Hello?"

Nothing.

Then it hit him. Of course no one was here. Why would they be? When it was all said and done, he wasn't really friends with the guys in the band. They never hung out together when they were not playing. Besides, Jimmy was always full of shit. He was always talking about picking up "fat-assed sistas" and Trey couldn't think of one time that he actually did. The bass player had a wife and kid at home, of course he left. The drummer was too old for partying like that anymore; he surely had his fill by now. And Jackson. They hadn't talked in two years.

But Trey couldn't help but feel dejected and slightly pathetic. After all, not only had he wanted to engage in the type of debauchery the others had outgrown, but he was not even able to draw in three decidedly unhip people with a free suite for the night.

For a moment he stood in the suite's kitchenette, sipping the bottle of beer he had brought up from the casino. When he was finished, he contemplated ordering a late night meal; it would be free. He thought about raiding the mini-bar of its supply of scotch, drinking until he passed out. Instead, he found himself in the master bedroom, drawn to the large king-sized bed in the middle of the room. Slowly, he undressed and pulled the sheets back from the bed. He lay down on the mattress.

As he pulled the thick, goose down comforter over his body and rested his head on the soft pillow, he suddenly felt drained, like before with the blonde. He felt a certain nothingness enveloping him, a familiar sensation whenever he realized how short he had fallen from the life he always thought he would have at this age. The myriad career goals that had either fizzled out from bad luck or laziness or neither.

As he lay in bed, alone, in the large, empty suite, Trey longed for another electric shock to come soon, one that could transform his existence once again, even if just for one night. He rose from the bed and went to his guitar case. He pulled the instrument out, placed the strap over his shoulder and began to play.

SPINNING GOLD

I suppose I should have felt bad for these people, for having a hand in taking away their money, for enabling their addiction and greed. I was a second shift floor manager at the Prairie Star Resort and Casino, which meant that when I was at work, I was in charge. But I had bosses of my own—a casino manager, a tribal council. Most of the time, I simply did as I was told. Only occasionally did I feel any real power, any sense of control. Most often this occurred when I was required to collect debts from players who had gambled on credit. They all tended to act surprised, as if they could not remember entering into an agreement with the casino, into an agreement with me.

Often, I would come across players who were visibly upset. I would ask them what was wrong, if they needed anything. Invariably, the response was the same. They would offer some sort of collateral—a watch, a deed to land—for the opportunity to keep playing and I, because it was my job, would be obliged to accept.

But every time I came close to feeling sympathy for these people, all I would need to do was take a stroll on the casino floor. I would hear the annoying sounds of the slot machines, cough through the perpetual murk of cigarette smoke. Often, my time was spent near the slot machines, the games aimed squarely at the lowest common denominator, the type of person who required a game of chance that entailed the least amount of brain function to operate. These

players were a special breed. They moved in flocks. When the sound of bells signaled that someone had just won, that person's machine would suddenly be swamped by players who favored superstition over logic. I, for one, knew that a slot machine consisted of a computer that was simply a random number generator. There was no way to predict when the machine would "hit" and when it would go cold. But these people were convinced that if they rubbed the machine in a certain way, or if they performed a chant before inserting their money, that the spinning reels would suddenly spin out gold, riches incarnate. And it so happened that my presence was required whenever a big jackpot was hit, which ultimately led to players believing that I had some mystic power, some control over their randomly generated destinies.

One night, I walked the aisles between slot machines, a sense of nausea creeping through my system as I beheld player after player, their dimpled asses spilling over the sides of the stools as they pressed buttons and pulled levers, the stools creaking in pain every time the players adjusted themselves or every time one of them reached into a fanny pack for just one more cigarette. And looking down the line of machines, each player, each sloth, each slob, each degenerate, attached to the machines by a coil, a coil that held a membership "reward" card on one end, so that every machine attached itself to the person, like a great umbilical cord, but an umbilical cord that fed in both directions, from the player to the machine and machine to player, a symbiosis of the grotesque.

The players felt a certain satisfaction in this little life support system when they were attached to it. After all, the card was meant to track the player's overall play, how much time they spent at the machine, how much money they lost, and then reward them for it later. No one seemed to care, or even notice, that their comped, stale hotdog from the snack bar had cost them

approximately seventy six dollars. What they enjoyed was the illusion that they had won something. Just as the illusion that the spinning reels would pay them off big kept them feeding crumpled five dollar bills into the machines, cash that could have or should have been spent on their children, or on their diabetes medicine, or on groceries. Just as the illusion that if they did somehow win a large sum of money, all their problems would wondrously abscond. The illusion of spinning reels spinning gold, all of it spinning on and on.

Later in the shift, bells sounded and the flocks migrated. I received a call in my office; the large progressive jackpot had been hit. I made my way to the floor and was stopped by my security chief. There was a problem, he said. The guy who won sent up a red flag in the known offender database. In other words, he was a cheater.

I checked the file. The guy had been caught using slugs, counterfeit money, in the past. He also owed a marker of five thousand dollars to my casino. The topper, he was an Indian.

The jackpot he won was huge, would have set him up like royalty. When I went into the interview room where we had detained him, I knew right away that he had cheated; guilt seemed to be seeping out of him.

“Don’t you recognize me, man?” he said, after I had been questioning him for few minutes. “We grew up on the rez together.”

“I think I would remember that,” I said.

“No, you lived in that house by the water tower, with your grandmother,” he said.

“Not me, friend,” I said.

“What’s your name?” he said.

“If you know me,” I said. “You should be able to tell me that.”

“You’re a Bear Paw,” he said.

“Not me, friend,” I said.

“No, that’s right, he died in Vietnam,” he said. “But you look just like him.”

We sat in silence for moment, then: “Goingsnake?” he said, desperation in his voice.

I shook my head.

“Please, don’t call the police,” the man said. “I already have two strikes; they’ll take my kid from me for sure this time. Please.

“It’s coming to me, brother,” he said. “Honest.”

“Walker? Wolf? Ahquatageh?”

“That is not my name,” I said.

“Big Drum? Arrowkeeper? Mankiller?”

When the cops came to take him away, the poor bastard wept, but he didn’t fight anymore. He had to be coming to terms with the fact that he had lost, that his own greed was to blame.

I felt bad for the guy, I really did, but someone had to do my job. Someone had to keep the reels spinning, keep the gold from unspooling, lest the whole damn thing, the whole production, fall apart.

TIMELINES

“My point is,” Chino said. “How the hell can they be sure *when* those towelheads are going to come running up here? For all we know, they could wait for days.”

“Quiet,” said the sergeant. He pulled out binoculars and looked off in the distance. He then moved away, crouching as low to the ground as he could.

Chino had a point. There was no way to really know, so we had to trust the soldiers protecting us. I figured they were in as much, if not more, danger anyway. If bullets started flying, my ass would be hiding, not running into the fray.

Chino and I sat with our backs against the outside wall of the distribution station. Our crew had been in Iraq for four months. Baghdad had fallen two weeks before we left the States and Fullerton, the oil company we all worked for, wanted us out here as soon as possible to help repair and maintain the country’s numerous pipelines. Hal, our crew supervisor, had gone around the plant back home asking for volunteers. The hazard pay would be ridiculous, he said. I’m still not sure why I was the first to sign up.

“Wonder if he knows something he ain’t telling us,” Chino said, pointing to Hal, who was whispering intently with the sergeant. The sergeant led the small Ranger element assigned to our protection detail. The element was made up of only six men and the soldiers were young.

Earlier that day we’d pulled out of Kirkuk, heading east over the Khasah River. The river was murky and shallow in places. Water, both naturally occurring and otherwise, seemed hard to

come by here. The Rangers led the way in a sand-colored humvee. Next was the equipment truck I drove, with Chino riding shotgun. The crew truck and the second Ranger humvee followed. Kirkuk was a big city in Northern Iraq and the divided highway that took us eastward out of town in the direction of Jabal Bur was strewn with desecrated monuments to Saddam. Looting was a real problem in this area and we encountered large groups of citizens milling about the city streets, but most of them simply waved or stared with curiosity, a few yelling out “America” with smiles on their faces.

We had reports that there was a problem with a pipeline running out of Kirkuk, which had a huge oilfield that supplied oil to Mediterranean ports in Lebanon and Turkey. As the buildings of the city slowly faded away and the never ending sand of the desert gave way to a rolling countryside, we traced the problem to a distribution station on the top of a hill at the foot of the Zagors Mountains, about fifteen miles outside of town. I knew something was wrong when we pulled up to the small concrete building—the door had been ripped off its hinges.

When we got in country we had been briefed by a member of Fullerton’s corporate security. He said the Army felt that members of the Republican Guard and insurgents may try to tamper with the pipelines, and that they may try to stage ambushes to take hostages. Almost every day, we would head out from whatever base we happened to be camped, spend several hours making repairs, and return. After three months or so with no incidents or a single shot fired (which felt like a year), we had become comfortable, or as comfortable as someone could get in a country like this.

But not fifteen minutes after we started working inside the distribution station did we hear the M240 mounted on the Ranger’s humvee open up. I had lived around guns most of my life. My old man was an avid hunter and he tried unsuccessfully to make me one too, but there was a significant difference between the brief pop of a shotgun in the woods while hunting quail

and the hell-fire roar of a weapon like that. When we heard the firing, no one knew what to do. Beggs, who was a computer tech who helped us with some of the pipeline's automated systems, started crying. Hal told him to get a hold of himself. Freddie jumped under a desk, but Chino looked as calm as could be. Chino was a big man, two seventy five easy. Probably realized there was not much chance of him running his way out of the situation.

After a few more minutes of gunfire, total silence. Beggs squealed when the door to the control room opened, but it was just the sergeant telling us to relax. He said it looked like a group of Iraqis were at the base of the hill and were regrouping. They might try to storm the hill, he said. I could see through the open door that the sun was slowly retreating behind the mountains. I thumbed the small envelope in my pocket and thought of Katherine.

The elevator ride was what always killed me. The other people on the elevator staring holes in the back of your head as you got off on the fifth floor, clearly marked fertility clinic. Yes, we are getting off here *on purpose*. Yes, I am more than likely about to be shoved by a nurse into a little room with a small plastic cup and a video. Yes, that is the way my wife and I are conceiving a child. Anyone have a problem? I was about to turn around and glare at all of them when Katherine grabbed my elbow.

"Please don't," she said without looking at me.

This was our fourth trip. Today would be the second time we would meet with an actual doctor. All our test results were in, and he wanted to speak to us. Really "test" was just code for "fault," whose fault it is Katherine can't get pregnant. My money was on me.

We were ushered into the doctor's office—a beige anomaly compared to other doctor's offices I'd been in. The curtains were drawn across the windows, taming the glare of the Georgia

sun and bathing the small room in a subdued, amber haze. The numbing effect was increased by the overpowering smell of aromatherapy candles. The walls were covered in framed certificates and diplomas. Images of a fetus still in the womb were on one side of the room. A few Thomas Kinkade paintings covered the rest of the space. *Jesus*.

“So, Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds,” the doctor said, entering the office. “It appears we have put our finger on the problem.”

He motioned to a folder in his hand.

“It seems that Mr. Reynolds, your sperm count is fine and all other tests came back normal. Mrs. Reynolds, we have several things we need to discuss.”

He said Katherine’s immune system was recognizing a pregnancy as something to attack. He also said she had developed endometriosis, a condition that could cause infertility. I looked at Katherine as the doctor delivered the news. She took it pretty well. I was sure she would break down, but she didn’t even cry. She looked resolved.

“There are options,” the doctor said.

So long as I didn’t have to come here to jerk off anymore.

As we made our way back to the parking garage, Katherine said,

“Well now we know what to do and we just need to do it. We just need to take care of this thing.” She had stopped walking and was standing rigidly, apparently willing resolve.

I didn’t answer. All week she had been intimating that it had to be *me*. No women in her family had ever had any problems conceiving. Perhaps I was willing infertile sperm to come out of my body. That way I could go against the plans and promises we had made to each other five years ago when we got married. It had to be me. But, even if I was that angry at her, which I

wasn't, I could not bring myself to make her feel any worse than she probably already did so I kept my mouth shut. But, I knew there had to be other thoughts going through her mind. Ever since we had started dating our freshman year in college, Katherine liked to make plans. She wanted to be married by twenty-three, be a mother of a few kids by thirty. This "thing" that we were going through was messing up our timeline. It had to be killing her. Katherine was obsessed with timelines.

Hal decided that since we were stuck on the hill anyway, we might as well get some work done. The distribution station housed the main pumps, as well as the automated systems that controlled the pipeline. If we ran a few diagnostics on the system, we could get a better idea of where the actual problem was, even if we couldn't do anything to fix it until the Iraqis left. Chino and I made several trips to the truck, grabbing tools and schematics. The sergeant kept yelling at us to keep our heads down. Hal only made it worse by giving us one of his signature pep talks as we moved in and out of the building. It always seemed, even back home when we were under tight deadlines, that Hal's reaction in stressful situations was to be bossier than usual instead of actually working.

I pulled a tool box from a compartment in the back of the truck. The wrenches and clamps were covered in sand. It was almost pointless cleaning them anymore.

I had only traveled once before for work. Our crew specialized in pipeline construction, but most of our work was done at the factory and then shipped off to construction sites. A few years ago, we went to Florida after a hurricane to fix a pipeline. I remember that I was excited, but anxious about leaving Katherine by herself for the first time. She ended up spending most of the time I was away at her mother's house so she wouldn't have to sleep in an empty house.

Chino and I started working on one of the main pumps in the station. We needed to shut it off in order to check the line, but we could hardly turn the valve, it was so corroded. Oil seeped out of the joints in the pipes, spilling onto the concrete floor and drying like caked mud. Like so much over here, the desert had done its damage and callously moved on.

“This isn’t going to happen,” Chino said, out of breath after fifteen minutes of trying to turn the valve. “Just one time I want to run into something in this country that ain’t broke down or ancient.”

We leaned against the wall, passing a canteen back and forth. We tried again, placing a large clamp on the valve to get better leverage. Grunting and yelling, sweat dripping in our eyes, we finally made the valve move about three-quarters of an inch.

“Fuck it,” Chino said. “Sometimes you just got to know when to quit.”

I looked at my hands and noticed a small amount of blood flowing through the hardened calluses. As I poured some water on the wound and felt the sting, I wondered what Katherine was doing.

“Man, I got to take a shit,” Chino said.

“Maybe you should stop eating,” I said. He was on his fourth MRE already. The sun had completely gone down. I glanced at my watch and saw it was nearly 10:00. Almost eight hours we’d been up here. Chino and I got lucky and found a couple of ponchos in the back of the equipment truck, but it was still cold. We were all outside now, the crew sitting against the wall of the distribution station with the humvees in front of us, providing cover from the only entrance to the top of the hill. The sergeant said he didn’t want anyone to get trapped inside the building if they started firing mortars. The soldiers manning the M240 had on night vision goggles and were

scanning the horizon. A short time before, the sergeant had crawled to our position and told us that support would not be able to make it out here until the morning. A riot had broken out in the city and another oil rig, this one on the northeastern edge of the city, had been blown up by guerillas. Between the two, the Army was stretched thin. Hal had used the satellite phone to call his boss at Fullerton. There was a small possibility that Fullerton's contract security company might mount a rescue effort, but they could not say for sure until they spoke with Army command in Kirkuk. The sergeant was not excited about that possibility.

"It's bad enough you guys make more in a month here than my men do in an entire year," he said. "But, those contract security guys are reckless. I don't want them here unless we absolutely have to have them."

"Sir, it looks like they've dug in for the night," said the soldier in the humvee. "I see a few campfires at the base of the hill but there is hardly any motion. It looks like a few have even left."

"Maybe they'll lose their nerve," the sergeant said. He whistled loudly and made several odd motions with his hands. The rest of the squad materialized from the darkness.

"Listen up," he said. "Three hundred sixty degree, one-hundred percent security through the rest of the night."

He told two of the soldiers to take up cover locations near the perimeter of the hill. He ordered the squad sniper to get on the roof and told the other two to man the machine guns on the humvees.

"I'll be covering the rear and babysitting these assholes," the sergeant said, motioning to us. "Set your fields of fire to overlap. Stand to is at zero four thirty. If we get lucky, the bad guys will be gone by daybreak. If not, we got to be ready. Any questions?"

“How come the A-rabs get to make fires and we don’t?” Chino said.

The sergeant ignored him and dismissed his squad.

I saw him squat near the rear wheel of the humvee. He removed food from his butt pack. I crawled toward him.

“Do we really still need to crawl around?” I said. “I mean if they’re going to sleep and all?”

“You want to stand up and be the first to get a round to the head, be my guest,” he said. “No one ever said they were going to sleep.”

“I thought Hawkins did, was it Hawkins?” I did not really know their names. The soldiers kept a pretty strong division between civilians and their own. Like the sergeant had said, most of them resented us being out here.

“It could just be a ploy,” the sergeant said. “Get us to let our guard down, then they strike.”

I felt under the poncho in the breast pocket of my work shirt and pulled out the leather pouch I bought in Germany.

“You want a cigar?” I said.

The sergeant eyed me strangely and accepted. He smelled the cigar, almost lovingly.

“These are Cubans?” he said.

“Yeah,” I said. “I got them in Germany before we came here. We flew into Bonn and had a few days of R and R before we left for Saudi Arabia.”

“I was stationed there for a while,” he said. “In Germany I mean. Not too bad a place. The ladies are easy on the eyes.”

I agreed with him. He was using the edge of a tomahawk to snip the end off the cigar. A lot of the Rangers carried tomahawks.

“You married?” he said, pointing at my left hand.

“Yeah, you?”

“No,” he said. “I still haven’t found one that could put up with me for more than a few months. Moving around all the time doesn’t help.”

I stretched out a lighter to him. He used both hands to shield the wind.

“What’s your wife think about you coming over here,” he said, drawing on the cigar and exhaling. “Can’t imagine she would be very happy.”

“No,” I said. “No, she wasn’t. She won’t be complaining when that pay check hits the bank account though.”

“It’s good for morale to keep your eye on the prize,” he said. “But we’re not through this thing yet.”

I ignored him. Thoughts like that were going through my head all night; I didn’t need professional encouragement.

The doctor had ordered treatments that consisted of small doses of my blood cells being introduced into Katherine’s system, so that her immune response would change. One way or the other those nurses were getting some of my fluids. He also prescribed what he called “consistent

copulation” during Katherine’s ovulation cycles. Funny thing when someone tells you that you *have* to have sex. It becomes considerably less satisfying.

The day I signed up to go to Iraq, I returned home early. Katherine was in the kitchen in our apartment, starting dinner. I shut the door as best I could; it had been broken for weeks. Our landlord was terrible about fixing things—maybe he thought that if he waited long enough, we would forget about an old complaint because something else would break in the meantime. This was the type of thing I thought I would be rescuing us from in the future. With the money I was going to make we could finally buy a house and get out of debt. Pay back the school loans we both owed, even if we never got the degrees the money was meant for.

Katherine had the stereo on and did not hear me come in. I stared at her profile from the hall as she peeled potatoes over the sink. Her bobbed auburn hair held tightly in a clip, she had changed out of her work clothes and was wearing the same pair of grey sweatpants she did every night. I had to admit that I still genuinely loved the woman. She had stood by me for a long time. The last few weeks, after dinner, we would curl up on the couch together and watch CNN coverage of the invasion. Live broadcasts of war followed by consistent copulation. We had had sex more times in the last month than the rest of the year combined.

“Hey, I didn’t hear you come in,” she said. “Why are you off early?”

“Hal was feeling generous,” I said.

She glanced at me with an incredulous look.

I didn’t feel like I could tell her yet. I was afraid of acknowledging the reality that I was actually going to the place getting bombed on television. Signing the piece of paper and talking with the guys at work was one thing, but really owning what I’d done was something else.

Especially now. We were on a schedule for her to get pregnant. Start the family we had always talked about. Leaving now did not fit the timeline.

“I took another test today,” Katherine said, returning to the potatoes. “We need to do it tonight.”

Great, I thought. We ate dinner in the living room, the TV acting as a comfortable distraction for conversational avoidance. The local news came on with a story about a hometown Marine who had been killed in action near Fallujah. Bile rose in my throat and my heart pounded as I stood up from my recliner and sat next to her on the couch.

“I did something today.”

Katherine eyed me wearily.

“Fullerton needs machinists and drivers for a crew they’re sending for a government contract they just received,” I said.

She seemed to infer the rest, but said anyway, “Where?”

“The Middle East, starting in Saudi Arabia and then in Iraq.”

“When?” she said.

“I leave in a week,” I said. “It’s only for five months and the pay is close to forty thousand. We get a bonus if we finish—“

She turned her head away from me. I wondered if she was crying, but she simply got up and took the dishes into the kitchen.

“I’m going to bed,” she said.

I finished watching the news. As I was brushing my teeth, I thought about what the doctor had said at the end of our last appointment.

“Not that we need to be considering it just yet,” he said. “But at some point we should probably talk about other options like surrogacy or adoption.”

When I climbed in bed, Katherine was on her side and looked asleep. When I turned off the light, she rolled over and I felt her hands pull off my boxers. She gripped me tight and I shuddered. A few seconds later she was on top of me, I gasped as the force of her grinding bordered quickly on pain. Not to be outdone, I returned with all the thrust I could. Katherine dug her fingernails into my chest, drawing blood and a guttural yelp. She clawed at the cavity where my heart should be, as if she was trying to discover if there was anything there anymore. As I finished, my hands felt her face—it was covered in tears, yet she made no sound. Out of breath, our bodies a tangled mess, she rolled back over and went to sleep without a word.

“You know the first thing I’m going to do when we get home?” Chino said, as he pulled off his black work boots and emptied them of sand. “I’m going to go in my back yard, take off all my clothes and roll around naked in the grass.”

We were the only two of our crew still awake. Despite the sergeant’s warning, Hal and the others were in the distribution station sleeping.

“That’s what makes America great,” Chino said. “Our whole country isn’t covered in goddamned sand.”

Chino placed his boots near the wall and moved his body so he could use them as a pillow. He was asleep within a minute. I looked at my watch, 4:30 AM. The minutes crawled by, each tick of the clock mocking me. There was no way I was going to sleep.

I saw the sergeant come around the corner. He had been patrolling the rear of the station. He noticed I was awake, said something in his radio, and walked toward me.

“Still seems quiet,” he said. “We may get through this thing after all.”

“Don’t sound so enthused,” I said.

“I’m just a realist,” he said. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned over here is if something could possibly go to shit, it more than likely will.”

“Speaking of which,” I said. “What’s a man supposed to do to take care of his business out here?”

“I’d hold it if I were you,” he said. “Or just squat where you’re sitting. Like I said before, you don’t want to give those guys any free chances to take a potshot at you.”

Perfect.

“Funny how that works,” the sergeant said, smiling. “You’d be amazed at how many guys shit their pants or come real close the first time they’re in combat. Something about the adrenaline rush, I think.”

“Is that what you call this, combat?” I said.

“This is part of it,” he said. “The calm before the shit storm, so to speak.”

He crawled off after saying this, laughing.

I was amazed how quickly the week passed before I left. Katherine and I were genial to each other. Neither one wanting to relive the night I told her I was leaving. She came down with

a stomach bug the day I left, and was unable to see me off at the airport. I thought it was better that way.

When we arrived in Iraq we were quartered in a military camp in Baghdad inside what they called the Green Zone. The camp had everything you could possibly ask for, great food, an internet café, even a movie theater. I called Katherine twice a week and e-mailed her too. She seemed to have put the past behind her. Every phone conversation she would tell me what was happening at home, what distant relative or friend had gotten married or pregnant, or some other useless gossip. Every conversation ended the same, me telling her I missed her and her telling me to be careful.

The week before the hill incident she did not answer the phone. Two days passed and I started to get worried. I was on a computer e-mailing her mother, trying to track Katherine down, when Chino told me there was a package for me at the camp post office. I hardly ever received letters here. All my communication was by phone or email.

I went back to my bunk with the large envelope, unsure whether to open it or not. The return address was my own. Why would Katherine mail me something? The only reason was if something was too terrible to tell me over the phone. Maybe she was leaving me. Maybe she'd found someone else in the time I'd been gone.

Inside was a handwritten note. The note said that she didn't know any other way to tell me, that she was confused and scared. She said she didn't want me to worry, that the doctor said everything is okay and she would e-mail me in a few days.

A smaller envelope fell out of the package and on to the floor. Inside was a black and white copy of a blurry photo. I had seen examples at the fertility clinic.

Ten minutes after the sergeant walked off I couldn't stand the sound of Chino's snoring any longer. Saddam could come charging up the hill with the entire Iraqi army for all I cared, I was going to the bathroom. I made sure the sergeant was not within view and slipped around the corner of the station. The back side of the building was darker, but my eyes soon adjusted to the moonlight, the sky clear, stars shining. The mountains loomed in the shadows, difficult to make out details, but large enough to know there was something on the horizon. Something beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

I finally received an e-mail and then a phone call from Katherine last night. I was selfish and felt upset that she wasn't honest with me from the beginning, so we left things unresolved. Before the letter, I was coasting, living day to day—just like a lot of people here. If I made it back, great, if not, who knows? Maybe that wouldn't be so bad either. But now, being stuck on this godforsaken hill for the past fourteen hours, I *had* to get home.

A chain link fence enclosed the perimeter of the hilltop, and I noticed several tall shrubs near a Dumpster a few yards behind the distribution station. Luckily for me, Chino didn't go anywhere without a roll of Charmin stashed away, so I wouldn't be completely roughing it.

As I leaned against the Dumpster, I noticed the hill was much steeper on this side. I also noticed a small space between the Dumpster and the fence, completely hidden from view. About as private as I could find, I thought, and squeezed into the opening. As I started to undo my belt, I felt the sonogram in my pocket. Crouched against the Dumpster, I pulled the picture out and tried to angle it so it would be visible in the moonlight.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw movement from the brush on the other side of the fence about twenty feet away. I tried to calm down, telling myself it was delirium from lack of sleep, but my heart rate exploded when I heard voices whispering Arabic. My legs gave way, and I sank to the ground, my boots scraping on the gravel louder than I wanted them to. I could make

out the outline of five men, all climbing toward the fence and all armed. They stopped when I moved, glancing in my direction. I held my breath, praying they couldn't see me. A few seconds later, they moved on, darting in between the jagged rocks of the hillside, rocks that rose out of the earth like daggers, eager for blood.

I lost sight of the figures as they reached the fence and clouds moved over the moon, but I could hear from the snipping sound they were cutting their way through it. I had to do something. Snip. I had to find the sergeant and warn him. Snip. I had to find Chino. I started to stand up, but my legs wouldn't obey. My chest constricted and my mouth felt dry. Snip. I heard them whisper again and then nothing. Silence. Had they made their way through? The clouds moved away from the moon. I felt the picture in my hand, crumbled. I held it out in front of me and saw the blurry orb, surrounded in darkness. My son.

CHASING STRANGE

On I-40, halfway to Memphis, two empty bottles of bourbon, a dozen Vicodin, and the aspirin drip of cut cocaine in the back of their throats so their voices were hoarse, the band felt the van shudder.

Trey was in the front passenger seat, the only captain's chair in the cab that didn't have a spring jutting out. He felt comfortable in the chair, though he was coming down from the drugs and the booze and his teeth had been grinding for so long he felt like lockjaw was imminent.

The van shuddered again and Trey turned and said, "Pull over, man. Pull it over here. On the shoulder. Hurry."

Jackson, the drummer, was behind the wheel, driving because he was the only sober one, though he was visibly shaking—a side effect of smoking a joint the night before that had been dipped in embalming fluid. Some girl in the crowd in Little Rock had given it to him after the show. The whole band had crashed in this girl's little studio apartment and Jackson ended up pissing her couch. They decided to leave early, before the sun was up, before the girl realized what happened.

Jackson turned the wheel, on to the shoulder and the van rolled to a stop. Then there was a final shudder; this one Trey felt under his feet, and there was a loud pop, like a whip crack, and he saw out of his peripheral vision motion in the back. Franklin, one of the horn players, jumped up from the back of the van—it was a camper van, a conversion deal that had a sink, stove, toilet,

shower, though none of the extras worked because it had been parked at a storage facility for three years. Franklin moved quickly, rose to the cabinet above the sink and flipped it open.

Before Trey could really process what was happening, Franklin was up, a Glock .45 in hand, nylon holster falling to the floor of the van.

“Where are they?” Franklin said. “Who’s shooting at us? Tell them to fight like a man.”

“What the fuck?” Jackson said.

“Where the fuck did you get a gun?” Trey said.

“Fuck you,” Franklin said. “Where’s the bad guys?”

He was cradling the gun with both hands, like it was a football.

“You fucking lunatic,” Mason, the bass player, said.

“Fuck,” Jackson said.

Franklin threw the side door open and yelled, “Try and shoot me now, motherfuckers!”

“Get back in here, you stupid fuck,” Gerry, the other horn player, said.

“Bring it fuckers!” Franklin yelled.

Trey turned around in the passenger seat and said, “Somebody get up and go fucking get him.”

“Oh, fuck,” Jackson said. He was looking in the side mirror.

“A fucking cop,” Jackson said.

Trey saw Mason move to the bathroom. He saw Mason reach behind the broken toilet, pulling out a bag of weed.

“Somebody help me fucking eat this shit,” Mason said.

“Holy fuck,” Gerry said.

“What the fuck are we going to do?” Jackson said.

“He’s going to get fucking shot,” Gerry said.

Trey looked out the window and saw Franklin pacing around the embankment next to the shoulder of the interstate, chest-high grass and weeds slapping him in the face. He wasn't holding the gun anymore.

Trey turned to Jackson and said, "What the fuck happened?"

"We had a fucking blowout," Jackson said. "I saw the hubcap on my side go flying into the interstate."

Gerry was behind them, gathering up the empty bottles of booze, hiding them under his seat.

"How do you have a tire blowout when you're at a fucking standstill?" Trey said.

"How the fuck should I know?" Jackson said.

Two hours later, Trey, Jackson and Franklin were sitting outside the van, bitching about their headaches, their neck-aches, their foot-aches. The other guys were asleep in the van, but Trey had to get outside, the stale air inside the cab too much for him to handle. Franklin had never come back into the cab after the blowout. The cop didn't talk to Franklin, seemed to think they were all just stranded. He gave them a number for a wrecker service before taking off on another call. Trey was relieved, not only because of the gun and Franklin and the coke and booze, but because he thought that Mason might have had an outstanding warrant or something. It was hard to know that kind of thing when you hadn't talked to someone for so long. Musicians were nomadic anyway, but after the band broke up, and before someone had this grand idea of a reunion run of shows, Jackson was the only one Trey had even seen in the last three years.

"I feel awful," Franklin said. He had stopped pacing an hour ago, initially standing, then kneeling. Now he was lying down on a pile of gravel next to the van. "I can't believe I let you guys talk me into this. I'm thirty-seven. I've got a fiancée and a new mortgage."

"Not to mention a fucking gun," Jackson said.

“Leave me alone,” Franklin said. He rolled over on his side.

No one could find the gun. Trey searched by himself for half an hour and couldn’t find the thing.

“Do you two happen to know where the number for the club in Memphis is?” Trey said. “We better call soon if this tow truck doesn’t show up.”

No response. Trey felt annoyed, just like the old days. Some big fuck up and no one keeping an eye on the bottom line, on the business end. Trey acknowledged that initially, he had started booking the shows and handling the planning of tours because he liked feeling in control, liked being the guy everyone turned to. In the years since the band broke up he had not been able to feel that way, being a side-man, doing other people’s gigs and sessions, he was at the mercy of those in charge. But then he discovered that he liked that feeling, liked being a clock-puncher, the field hand. All of this other shit was too much pressure.

Trey saw Jackson take out a cigarette, so he asked for one. Jackson obliged. They sat in silence for a minute, the rush of traffic every few seconds sending gusts of wind. A semi here and there that wouldn’t change lanes would rock the van on its axles.

Jackson said, “I’m tired, man.”

Trey nodded.

“No,” Jackson said. “I mean I’m tired. Of this. I thought that we would have fun, you know get out and play, chase some strange, feel the way we used to feel. But it’s all so different now.”

Franklin started to snore.

“Look,” Trey said. “I know last night was a little rough. I mean you can’t expect to be able to keep the same pace we used to.”

“I’m not just talking about that,” Jackson said. “Even the music doesn’t do what it used to do, you know? I mean tell me you can’t tell there’s a difference.”

Trey didn't respond at first. He thought about telling Jackson that he agreed. That the last week had been a fun party, but the music wasn't where it had once been. Not just the chops and the level of improvisation, but the personal connection, the relationships and dynamics of the band on a human level, had changed. Trey considered this was to be expected, like any reunion. There was only so much talk of "old times" and stories about being fucked up that one could stomach. The problem was, being on the road, there was nowhere to go when the conversation dried up, when the people in the van realized they no longer had the bond they once had. Instead, and Trey was thankful, all of the guys could handle long periods of silence. Something about playing loud music for so long and spending so much time with the same people gave all of them, not just Trey, the ability to sit in comfortable silence with one another. But this trip felt different to Trey because on more than one occasion he found himself talking just to fill the space, the time. Before, he never would have felt that.

"You know," Jackson said. "I used to think that having all of this back would make me feel complete again. Especially lately, I've needed the distraction. But, you can't honestly tell me that this tour is doing for you what you thought it would."

Trey hesitated, then said, "I suppose not."

Trey considered how he felt in the middle of the gig last night in Little Rock and the one before that in Springfield. He was on stage, Jackson and Mason locked in a deep groove, Franklin and Gerry laying down some ambient horns. It was his turn to solo and he looked down at his fingers as he played. In the old days, if he really felt in the pocket, if he really felt like he was tapping into that place that made it all worthwhile, he would close his eyes. But the last few gigs, he had been watching his fingers, making sure he was technically sound, that the notes came in the right order and the sound would impress people.

He had to admit that he still enjoyed himself. That the meager crowds were still into the music and that he still enjoyed being on stage, especially since he was playing original music for the first time in years. But he couldn't help but feel like there was something missing, like the

way he always felt when he was in monogamous relationships, that feeling of having sex with the same person for a long period of time, though still enjoyable, it never got to the same place as something new. Chasing strange, as Jackson put it. The whole thing, no matter how pleasurable, would always be overshadowed by one sensation: feeling comfortable. Stagnant, reliable comfort.

“I mean, we’re only four shows into this thing,” Trey said. “I just think it’s a little premature to have this conversation. I mean we have New Orleans in three days. You know we always have great shows in New Orleans.”

Jackson didn’t respond. He was looking into the tall grass, smoking his cigarette.

“I mean,” Trey said. “You have to give me until New Orleans, Jackson. Please. I need this.”

Jackson turned toward him, nodded and threw his cigarette into the brush. Franklin was still snoring. The traffic on I-40 still passed in blurs.

THIS ISN'T AN AIRPORT STORY

I was at the airport, on a plane, taxiing down the runway and the lady next to me was a nervous talker.

Now, I know what you're thinking, and believe me, I don't want to write an airport story any more than you want to read one. So don't worry, this is isn't an airport story, it just starts on an airplane.

"The worst part is right before takeoff, when they cut the air conditioner," she said. "And remember back when you could smoke in these things?"

She was a bigger woman, a broad my friends would call meaty, or a muffintop, or a meaty muffintop. She sat in the seat to my right, and she had her hands clasped together in her lap, her elbows jutting out quite a bit. She bogarted the arm rest, which was something I liked to do on airplanes because it helped me focus on something other than the plane and its innumerable mechanical parts and the countless ways those parts could fail.

So I thought about working her elbow off the armrest, I mean really getting in there, but then I thought better, just in case this woman wanted to follow me to the bathroom later or maybe if she wanted to give me her number or hookup when we landed in Albuquerque. She seemed into me. Maybe.

"The worst part is how they only give you one bag of peanuts these days," she said. "If you're lucky it may be pretzels. In first class it's snack mix and you get as many as you ask for.

"Well, this airline doesn't have first class," she said. "But you know what I mean."

I wished she would just shut the fuck up already. Or not. I guess it didn't matter.

“How about you?” she said. “Is this his first time on a plane?” She pointed to my left.

In the seat to my left was my son, Brian. Did I forget to mention that? Sorry, my bad.

“He looks so peaceful,” she said.

Brian was already asleep. It helped that we were on such an early flight, and it helped that I had given him some Benadryl before we left. Now, don’t worry, I read the label and besides, I drank the rest of the bottle myself when we got to the airport, so if anything’s going to happen to anybody, it’s going to be me.

The plane turned once more, this time it felt like we were about to take off, and I could feel myself going into an old ritual, a habit that’s never gone away since I was a kid. See, when I was a kid I went to Catholic school and, no, I was never molested by a priest, if that’s what you’re thinking, but what did happen is that I got this great little gift that never leaves me, no matter what.

Guilt.

But the other thing I got from Catholic school was the beauty of confession, that good old get-out-of-jail-free card, and the strangest thing, though I don’t believe in any of that stuff anymore, I still can’t help myself on airplanes, or like on long road trips in the old days when I played music. Right at takeoff or whenever the old Econoline pulled out onto an interstate, I found myself saying a prayer, asking for forgiveness, not for anything specific really, more of a blanket protection policy. You know, just in case, because all those nuns made sure I left remembering that little tidbit: the better to be safe than sorry version of faith. And, don’t worry, I knew how ridiculous it sounds, to be afraid of something you don’t believe in, but that’s just how everything went with me.

Another motivation: my old man died when he was sixty one and today was my thirtieth-and-a-half birthday, so if genetics had anything to say, I was at the exact halfway point of my life. The thought felt comforting, really, the way I imagined a death row inmate must feel as he lumbers through that final walk, all the years of imprisonment and anxiety and the seeming

endless waiting for the switch to be flipped, or the syringe to be pushed, or the hangman to throw that lever thing on the gallows and the darkness or light or nothingness that surely follows. All that frenetic build up, hushed by the knowledge of the actual, real-life end. It seemed like one big relief, to my mind, knowing how much time you have left. Half of the equation, or more, has been solved. Now it was just a matter of what's next. And as everyone knows, there's no use in worrying about any of that.

Earlier, before the sun had risen, I pulled the car into a spot in the long term parking area of the Tulsa airport. As I took the keys out of the ignition, I realized that I had already lost the little time card you get when you pull in. No matter. It didn't really make a difference now, anyway.

Brian was awake in the backseat. He was four, almost five. His birthday was in a few weeks. On the ninth. Or the eighth. One of the two. I turned when he said, "Daddy, where are we going?"

He seemed apprehensive. I did my best to calm him, started measuring out the medicine.

I told him about Albuquerque, about the cousins he was going to meet for the first time, his uncle who hasn't seen him since he was born. How we're all going to be fine, be one big family, happy ever after and all that. He appeared to believe me; it was so hard to tell with a child—they had such unending trust, such short memories when it came to your shortcomings.

When I looked in the rearview mirror at my son, downing the Benadryl, I had the sense that we both had his mother on our minds, what she would say, what she would do.

"So," the woman said on the plane. "What about his mother?"

I looked over at Brian, had a strong memory, just seeing him there, asleep with one of those airplane pillows tucked between his head and the window. I remembered a time, not long ago at all really, where everything I'd done—all those debauched evenings spent away from home, those instant gratification choices—how all those mistakes caught up with me. That night, I held my son as he slept, as he was now.

“His mother's out of the picture,” I said.

“Well, that's got to be hard,” she said. “For both of you.”

She placed her hand, her slightly pudgy hand with large knuckles, on my knee. I could do this broad. This meaty muffintop. She'd take me in an instant, if I offered, if I really wanted to. I could do her. I kind of wanted to.

“She just up and left you two?” she said.

I made eye contact and could tell the woman wouldn't let me out of answering. So, I told her. I filled this lady in. I explained how Sarah lived a life meant for a single person, a single person who didn't really give a shit about anybody, not even herself. And I knew the story was working, like all those old road stories worked, the trump card, the lie that becomes a truth if you tell it enough.

There was a change you could see, the way the woman's shoulders lowered, the direction her head tilted, her eyelids half closed. Then the moment when the deal was sealed, the hand through the hair, the pout across the lips, the lean-in, and the too close whisper in the ear.

So I watched as she pulled the blanket off Brian and put it on my lap. I let her kiss my neck—a nuzzle, really—and I certainly let her hands, those pudgy, big-knuckled hands, go where they were going. I knew this would end any way I chose, any way I wanted.

IMPERSONATOR

The sensation that he had finally taken things too far came over Trey as he put handcuffs on the eleven-year-old boy. This kid, while a troublemaking little shit, had no idea the lead up to the events of this day, had no idea that he had picked the wrong adult to fuck with at Straitharn Park. So you want to throw walnuts like a wild man, no regard for other children, for Celia's child, for whom Trey was directly responsible?

Trey tried talking to the troublemaker, saying something like be careful, watch where you're throwing those things, etc. But then the boy said, mind your own business. Mind your own business? This kid had no idea who he was talking to.

"Just don't hit my kid," Trey said. My kid, the words rolling out so easy, without thought.

"I'm nowhere near your kid, mister."

"Just watch it," Trey said.

"I'm real scared."

"You should be," Trey said, turning to face the boy.

"I'm gonna hit you in the fucking head with one," the boy said.

"Where are your parents," Trey said.

"None of your business, asshole."

Then the boy acted, launching a walnut, missing Trey by an inch or less.

"That's it," Trey said.

Acting on instinct, the manufactured instinct he'd been developing for months, the instinct that made him walk around town sizing up everyone, profiling everyone as if they were all suspects.

Trey was on the boy, kicking out the boy's leg from under him, pulling his hands behind his back just like the movies, slapping the cuffs on with force.

Then, the inevitable, the boy's sorry excuse for a mother screaming and running up, other parents hurrying to grab their children, to shield them from something potentially harmful. Trey felt himself go into an automatic response, pulling his fake badge from his pocket, holding it above his head for all to see.

"Federal agent," Trey said. "It's ok. I'm a federal agent."

But the mother wouldn't stop with the crying, the yelling, the get-the-hell-off-my-kid. And for a moment, Trey was worried, almost frightened. Would this lady call the local cops? Would the whole charade come down because of this one lapse in judgment, this one moment of carelessness and anger?

Within moments, the other dozen or so parents with kids were gone, had packed their children up in SUVs, careful to grab diaper bags and toys and moist towelettes and Ziploc baggies filled with Goldfish crackers. But then Trey was relieved. He saw the troublemaker's mother, missing teeth with tattoos on her chest, matted hair and possible track marks on her arm. At first he thought, it figures, her having a little shit for a kid like that, but then he realized this woman wasn't going to call anybody, let alone the cops. To be sure, he flashed the badge again. Her reaction was enough to tell him he was safe for now.

"Your kid was endangering the other children," Trey said. "If I wanted to I could have him taken in."

"Please, officer," the lady said. "Please, we'll leave now. I'll take care of it myself. We'll leave now and you won't see us here again."

Trey stood silent for a moment, trying his best to look stern.

“You need to get a handle on him,” Trey said, bending over and unlocking the handcuffs on the boy. “If not, I’m sure I’ll be seeing your boy again. And it’s not ‘officer,’ it’s ‘special agent.’”

The boy was crying now, short, muffled sobs. The woman helped her son up and led him to an old, beat-up sedan. As he watched them leave, Trey realized he had completely forgotten about Emma, Celia’s daughter. Where was she?

Almost four months earlier, Trey had been on campus for a group meeting for one of the business classes he was taking. He had enrolled the year before at this large state university in Oklahoma, not far from Tulsa, where he had lived for quite some time. Tulsa had always been bittersweet for him, affording him opportunities that felt like city life, but always with an aftertaste, the lingering knowledge that no matter what those opportunities were, he was still stuck in Oklahoma.

It was the second week of April, near tax time, and he had just left the library from a group project meeting. The meeting had not gone well. Trey had one of those aforementioned tastes left in his mouth, a familiar sensation since he came back to college. Trey considered how difficult it was to come to college when he was thirty-nine-years-old. To endure the looks from the kids, to repeat the story of his life, how he ended up a middle-aged sophomore.

And it all led to this focus on the past, even though the whole exercise of going to college was supposed to be about the future, about a career. These kids Trey went to school with, a small but vocal minority talked incessantly about what they were going to do with their lives. Trey knew when you walked into class at his age and you were not the professor, the only thing about you those kids wanted to know was what you did before coming back to college. For Trey, when he told them about himself and his life experience, when he got so sick of those few kids asking him that he did not sugarcoat it anymore, that was when the kids stopped talking to him. When they asked Trey what he had done before, why he was just now in college, he would say, “I spent

the first twenty years of my adult life trying to make my dreams of being a professional musician come true, but I failed,” or something to that effect. Trey could only imagine what weight that had, saying some shit like that to a nineteen-year-old who had just finished talking to his buddy about the Peace Corps and law school.

He was leaving the library that night and it was cool outside. There was a light mist in the air, one of those early spring rains that just kind of hangs and spits. As he walked outside, Trey had this feeling—a hollowness, something beyond empty. Like he was alone, really alone. The good thing was the feeling was only a flash, like how Trey used to have these flash thoughts of really horrible things happening: falling off a cliff or dropping a baby. In the past, these little glimpses into real trauma would temporarily paralyze him, except now, the trauma was replaced with nothingness. And instead of being frozen in fear, Trey was stuck in the vacuum, the desolation.

This kind of moment struck Trey as he left the library that night and he would have more than likely stayed transfixed in this moment as he walked to the parking lot if he had not heard screaming. At first, the scream sounded like a woman and Trey acted on instinct. He ran toward the sound. When Trey came around the corner of the library, near the bike parking, he saw one person standing over another person on the ground. When he got closer, he noticed the person on the ground looked Asian, probably a student, and the person standing was Caucasian, also probably a student. It was here that another instinct kicked in. One that felt so natural.

“Freeze,” Trey yelled.

Almost in the same instant he pulled his wallet out from his back pocket and flipped it open, like a badge. Trey could not know if it was the way he pulled it out, with so much authority, or the way he yelled, or the fact that he was probably twice his age, but the white kid turned and saw him. The kid saw Trey running with such purpose, imaginary badge in hand, and the student just took off. Just ran away and like that, it was over. Trey ran up to the Asian kid and helped him up and the kid was crying and looking at Trey so expectantly, like he should say

something, or take a report, but all Trey did was brush him off and pat him on the head. Then, Trey turned around and walked away.

This, as it would turn out, was his first taste of something special, of something that had never happened to him before. This was a rush he had never felt in his previous life. A rush he would need more of.

Trey had spent two weeks after the incident at the library, a man obsessed. The emptiness that had been so common a feeling was replaced by something altogether different: purpose. Trey felt an awakening of a dream he had harbored as a child. He remembered his initial fascination with law enforcement. Growing up in the 1980s, there was no shortage of television heroes who exuded a certain machismo and daring aura that only a badge and a gun could provide. As a child, he spent an inordinate amount of time in front of the television, and perhaps as a result of being the younger of two boys, he was exposed to “grown up” shows much earlier than he should have been. Even at the age of five or six, *The Electric Company* and *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood* were replaced with *T.J. Hooker* and *CHIPS*. These shows featured William Shatner and Eric Estrada, respectively, and both actors portrayed uniformed cops as testosterone-driven action heroes who could not only patrol the streets but also solve cases like detectives. Both characters were also ladies’ men, full of charm and depicted as irresistible to the women around them. What boy wouldn’t want to emulate them?

As he got older he discovered television shows that delved into the world of plain-clothes police officers and detectives. Series like *Hunter* and *Twenty-One Jump Street*, gave Trey a sense of the excitement a life of undercover police work entailed—that secret satisfaction of walking around with a gun and a power that no one else was aware of until it was too late. The secrecy, the espionage of it all. Now that he had the experience outside of the library, that feeling was

manifest. He *knew* what undercover cops must feel like. He *knew* the palpable rush of being a hero.

The spring school semester was in its final push and Trey's motivation for college coursework had waned. Instead, he found all his attention put into imagining a life he had never lived. He knew from his childhood fascination and fantasies that if he had chosen a path in law enforcement, if he had been able to meet the incredibly stringent requirements, he would have wanted to be an FBI agent. A local beat cop wouldn't cut it. He had too many run-ins with small town cops as an adult to know that most of them were assholes and their jobs consisted mainly of writing tickets and working security. But, the FBI was different. The FBI had esteem.

It had not taken Trey long to determine the first step: procuring a real badge. He was surprised how easy it had been to find a realistic FBI badge on the Internet. It was not cheap, however. And he did spend a fair amount of time researching what a real badge looked like, as well as a real identification card—two details that took deep digging to discover, which made sense. The FBI probably had no desire to make it easy for the general public to copy real-life credentials, not to mention that doing so was a felony. Trey had thought about going the cheaper and easier route with the badge and ID, to just copy the first thing he found online, to buy the cheapest costume shop badge. But he realized that if he skimped on this most important of early steps, if he cut corners and was lazy, then the fantasy wouldn't be removed enough from reality. The role-playing would be imbibed with all the negativity of his real life: half-assed attempts at greatness, lackadaisical follow-through on great ideas. He felt the pull of getting this one thing right as if it were his last chance for anything of meaning in his life, his final opportunity to rid himself of regret.

He received the badge in the mail, cast bronze dipped in gold plating. It came in a discreet manila envelope. It was heavier than he expected. The photo ID was trickier. After carefully weighing his options, he realized the only way to make the ID convincing was to do it himself. So, he tapped into his savings, what was left of his student loan disbursement, and

bought the highest quality laser printer he could find. He taught himself Photoshop and created an exact replica of the ID badges he had seen online. After adding a fine leather holder for both, he felt ready.

Trey walked around campus every day and then around town with the badge. Sitting in class, shopping for groceries, leaving the drugstore, everywhere he went, he felt the weight of the badge in his pocket. He read everything he could on the Bureau's history, on the requirements of being an agent, books and articles and oral histories. Procedurals and protocols and Internet forums, if they were to be trusted, taught him more than he ever thought possible for a civilian to know. The amount of time he had spent studying the FBI had overtaken any studying he had done for his actual courses and Trey knew as finals approached he had pretty much shot any chances he had to make decent grades on his exams. But after the library incident, he felt that he had more important things to worry about.

Toward the end of April, the week before finals, Trey had woken early on a Thursday. He had checked his FBI message boards while he waited for a frozen breakfast burrito to heat up in the microwave. He was disappointed when he got up to make coffee and realized he had none. He would have to go to the store. The cool weather that had started the month off had long dissipated and was replaced with the type of humid heat that only Oklahoma could provide. It was early in the morning and though the heat had already set in, Trey decided to wear a sport coat with his jeans and T-shirt. He had found himself in this habit lately. He had read on some message boards that agents always wore coats to conceal their sidearms, handcuffs, and badges even when they were off duty. Though he hadn't acquired a gun yet, he had bought several pairs of handcuffs from an Army surplus and carried them in a leather case on his belt, the coat concealing them, the inside pocket a perfect place to carry his badge. He strapped on the cuffs and pocketed the badge before walking out his front door to get coffee.

The nearest convenience store was only a block and a half away from Trey's apartment. For time, he decided he would go get a cup of coffee at the convenience store and then make sure

he stocked up later when he went to get groceries. The convenience store near his place had mediocre coffee, but it was always fresh and hot, which was saying something for a gas station. He nodded at the clerk as he entered. Trey walked toward the back of the store where the coffee was located and poured a large cup. As he went to find a lid to fit the cup, he noticed movement in his peripheral vision. He turned and saw two young men, probably in their late teens. One had a shaved head, the other a baseball cap turned sideways. Since the library, Trey had become hyperaware of his surroundings, making note of anything out of the ordinary or anyone who appeared suspicious. Then, he observed the two young men split up. One headed toward the clerk at the counter, the other toward the east side of the store, near the beverage coolers. Trey decided to follow the second kid, walking by the counter on his way.

“I was wondering what type of Swisher Sweets you all had?” the young man at the counter said as Trey walked by.

Trey stopped short of the other young man when he noticed the kid was standing in front of the beer section of the cooler. Trey knew what would come next. His buddy would continue to distract the clerk while the other one would open the cooler door and grab two tall boys of Keystone Light and put them in his pockets. When this happened, Trey decided to circle back around to the corner, to cut off the young men’s escape. As he walked toward the counter, he felt the weight of the badge in his pocket and the handcuffs on his belt. Trey knew what would happen next, what he was obligated to do. His job.

As the kid who had stolen the beer walked by, Trey moved quickly, shoving him up against the counter, right next to his friend, who was still distracting the clerk with questions about cigarillos.

“Don’t you fucking move,” Trey heard himself say. He felt detached from his body, the rush overwhelming.

The young man began to struggle but, effortlessly, Trey was able to grab his badge from the inside pocket of his sport coat and flash it in the guy’s face.

“Federal agent, asshole,” Trey said. At that point, the young man’s friend bolted out the front door of the convenience store. Trey yelled at him to freeze, but he knew it was too late. For a moment Trey contemplated cuffing the other kid to the counter so he could run after the other one. The suspect he had apprehended had quit fighting and thrashing around so much and was standing rather docile, as if he had submitted to his fate. It was at that exact moment Trey looked at the clerk, the clerk standing there awestruck, the clerk motionless, the clerk positioned two feet shy of a video surveillance camera. The sight of the camera had an odd effect on Trey: he let go of the beer thief. He let go of the beer thief and, like the thief’s friend, ran as fast as he could out the door and down the street.

Trey sprinted the block and a half to his apartment building, the fastest he had run in years, the humid air burning his nostrils, lungs burning, the still rising sun warming his face. He ran all the way to his front door and it was only once he was secure in his living room that Trey took a deep breath. What had just happened? Why had he taken off like that? Why was he so easily spooked? Trey knew the answers to these questions, yes he had to know, had to be aware that now his face had been recorded, his face with his fake badge and him pretending to apprehend the suspect and the handcuffs on his belt and his bullshit chat room knowledge and his fantastical construct and on and on. He *knew* why he ran. But there was a feeling, a persistence, inside himself that wouldn’t let him fully acknowledge this truth, the truth that had sent him fleeing like a criminal. Instead, Trey found himself seated at his computer, back on the message boards, back on the Internet, searching for the make and model of an FBI agent’s standard issue sidearm. This was what he needed.

One of the benefits of being in Oklahoma, if not the only benefit, was easy access to firearms. In fact, Trey was pretty frightened just how easy it was to acquire a Glock 22 .40 caliber handgun, the standard issue for FBI agents. Sure he followed the law, went through the standard waiting period, but in less than a week, he had the pistol. He found himself doing what

most people would do: practice his quick draw in front of the mirror. He even worked on pulling his badge with one hand while the other drew out the gun. But the problem arose when he first went to fire the thing.

He had found no fewer than seven licensed firearm retailers in his small community and one of those had an indoor firing range. Trey had been around guns before, particularly as a child. While his father was by no means an avid outdoorsman, he would take Trey and his brother out for target practice from time to time. They never really went hunting. As an adult, however, his firearm experience was practically zero, so when he found himself at the range, he felt pretty nervous. The range master helped him get set up and offered a few pointers before moving on to the next paying customer. When Trey was left alone, the gun felt alien to him. It was too heavy in his hand, almost hurting his wrists as he held it and aimed at the target down range. When he squeezed the first round off, he felt like the gun may have flown out of his hands. Both arms felt numb, rattled, like when he was a kid playing baseball and the ball went off the end of the bat—you could feel it in your teeth. He tried four more times. That was all it took. As he pulled the target in to inspect his accuracy he already knew the truth: he would never be able to fire the weapon. It was too powerful. He was too weak. The whole situation was too fucked up.

Trey packed up his things. He slid the gun's small nylon holster on to his belt near his hip and secured the weapon in it. He glanced at the target before throwing it in the trash, along with all the ammunition he had purchased for the gun.

The third week of May, he finally tracked down a decent deal on lights and a siren on eBay. At this point, his savings account was empty and his checking account wasn't much better. Trey knew the only way to afford these final accoutrements was to sell the last of his guitars and music gear. In his old life, before all of this, before coming back to school, before meeting Celia, Trey had eked out a living as a musician. He had sold most of his gear when he moved to this

college town in order to get money for furniture, for necessities. Then, he discovered the magic of student loans. In hindsight, Trey realized he shouldn't have taken the maximum loan disbursement every semester, but as he had done most of his life, he couldn't resist the temptation of easy money, he couldn't see past the here and now of it all.

On that May afternoon, the weather was unseasonably pleasant, sunshine and low eighties, a downright cold front for this part of the country. Trey had calculated the final cost of outfitting his 1995 Ford Explorer with the light and siren rig, and though the equipment itself would only set him back a couple hundred dollars, it was the installation of the electronics that would prove more difficult. He had, by pure happenstance, met a mechanic at one of the local dive bars that was willing to do such work on the side, no questions asked, but it wouldn't be cheap. After some haggling, Trey had got the guy to agree to do the work for eight hundred cash, so all told, Trey needed a thousand dollars to outfit his vehicle and do it right.

So, when he walked into the pawn shop, Trey knew exactly what he wanted, what he needed.

He had heard of one particular place in town that was known to give a good deal, to offer the most money, which in pawn shop terms, was a rarity. Trey knew that, by and large, pawn shops preyed on the desperate and as such, had no incentive to offer anywhere near the true value an item might have. Trey respected this. Having worked in a few music stores over the years, he understood the necessity of making a profit. But what Trey had to offer on this day had real value: a 1959 Gibson ES-175. Trey had done his research. He knew that collectors of this instrument, in pristine and all original condition, were willing to shell out six, seven, even ten thousand dollars. His was not original, nor pristine. The tuning machines had all been replaced, as well as the electronics. The body had been refinished, which typically cut the overall value in half. But the sentimental value, the experiential value, the last sixteen years he had experienced with this instrument had no dollar amount. But, having been in the business so long himself, he knew that in this Oklahoma town, and especially a pawn shop, would come nowhere near the

amount he might get from a collector. He was also under a bit of a time crunch. He needed the money now, lest the whole thing come crashing down.

From the outside, the pawn shop looked like a typical retail establishment in a strip mall. Plain exterior with large windows and a blue, generic overhang sign. He was greeted promptly, surprised at the cleanliness of the shop. His previous experience with pawn shops had been of dank establishments, rundown displays and poor lighting. For its lack of merchandise, this place appeared more than it was. Well lit displays, staff in monogrammed oxford shirts, great signage.

“How can I assist you today, sir,” said the young man behind the counter. He appeared no older than twenty-five.

“I have a guitar I’d like to sell,” Trey said

“Let’s see what you’ve got,” the man said.

Trey placed the guitar, in its original Stone of Brooklyn case, gingerly on the counter and opened it. The clerk seemed underwhelmed. He obviously had no idea what he was looking at.

“How much would you like for it,” said the clerk.

Trey paused for a moment, considered telling this kid off, trying to explain to him the rarity of this instrument, the sheer happenstance that a guitar of this vintage even crossed his pathetic little existence.

Instead, he said, “Can I speak to your manager?”

The clerk appeared perturbed, but acquiesced. A few moments later a woman who appeared to be in her late forties appeared from a back room. She had a masculine haircut and was borderline obese.

“What I can do for you today, sir,” she said.

“I have a very old, very collectible guitar here that I’m looking to sell,” Trey said.

Almost immediately after saying this, Trey felt the presence of other customers behind him, lookie-loos provoked by the possibility of his language.

The fat woman lifted the latches of the case and Trey felt the first pangs of second-guessing, of anticipated regret. After opening the case, she reached her absurdly short, rotund arms toward the guitar and Trey felt a wave of nausea creep over him. As her fat hands gripped the guitar, Trey felt faint. But then he observed as she pulled the guitar out, awkwardness overwhelming. He saw her look the instrument over, inspecting it like it was a two by four and before she said it, Trey knew what was coming.

“How much would you like for it?”

“I’m not sure if you’re aware,” Trey said. “But that is a 1959 Gibson ES-175.”

“Yes, of course,” she said. “How much were you looking to get for it?”

Trey considered explaining the importance the instrument this woman was holding had. He considered saying, just think about what this fifty-two-year-old instrument has been through, to wind up in your fat fucking fingers? Instead, he explained to the manager what he had discovered in his research, that he wasn’t expecting anything near what the guitar was actually worth, he was just hoping for a fair deal.

“I’ll give you five hundred dollars for it,” she said. Trey felt short of breath. Had this woman really just offered him five hundred dollars for an instrument worth ten thousand?

“Perhaps you didn’t understand what I said,” Trey said. “Maybe I didn’t make it clear how collectible this guitar is.”

“Sir,” the manager said. “I’m sure there’s some credibility to what you’re saying, but in a town like ours, with the clientele we serve, I just can’t give you that much. This will be slow to move for us as it is.”

Slow to move? Slow to move? Like her gigantic ass? Trey considered flipping out his badge, telling this broad who she was dealing with. Instead, he felt himself reaching for the guitar, placing it back in the case and closing the latches. As he walked out the door and made it to his car, he heard a voice say,

“How much you take for it?”

Trey turned. He saw an older man on the sidewalk near the pawn shop entrance. He wore a black cowboy hat.

“What’s your bottom dollar?” the man said.

Trey thought for a moment and said he would take three thousand for the guitar. The man smiled and said,

“I used to have an early 60’s 335, so I know what you’re saying is reasonable and I also know those morons inside don’t know shit about anything.”

“But,” he said. “Nobody comes to a place like this unless they’re desperate. So I’ll ask you again: what’ll you take for it?”

Trey paused for another moment and realized that the old man was right. Trey said he would take two thousand. The old man countered and offered fifteen hundred. Trey told the man to show him the cash and when he did, Trey knew he had to take it. He had to stick to his plan. He had to outfit his car with the lights and siren. With the leftover cash he could buy a new suit or two.

Handing the guitar over to the old man wasn’t as difficult as he thought it would be. It was as if he were losing a friend after a long period of separation, like he had heard about a former band mate dying. He thought he would be sad, but his past seemed so far removed, his old life so distant now, the pain was dull. In fact, when he really thought about it, he hardly felt anything at all.

With a growing sense of unease about drawing attention to himself, Trey figured it best to stop searching message boards and the Internet at his apartment. Instead, he decided to go to the campus library, where hundreds of students made it more plausible for his online deeds to go on anonymously. If he had learned one thing online, the government would go to no end to track your activity if you ever gave them a reason.

The library was not as crowded as it was during the spring semester. It was summer intersession season so there were still a fair number of students occupying the computer workstations, but it was much easier to find an open one than Trey remembered. Last summer, after his freshmen year was complete, the last place he would have gone would have been the library. Trey came in the same entrance of the library that he had left at the end of last semester when he first pulled a fake badge. Only now, there was a construction crew hard at work in what had been the periodicals section. Trey saw a student at the reference desk and asked what was going on.

“They’re putting in a new coffee shop and deli,” the student said, disinterested.

Trey considered what the librarians thought about this project, having a bunch of eighteen and nineteen-year-old kids caffeinated and carrying club sandwiches around the microfiche department. Turning from the construction, Trey saw an open workstation and moved toward it. As he entered the computer area he noticed an attractive woman in the corner, walking back and forth between a workstation and a printer.

Having walked in the room and sat down, Trey was able to get a better look at this woman. She was slender, even slight in stature. In the old days, his musician buddies might have called her a spinner. She had dark brunette hair, gray roots showing in spots, as if she hadn’t had the time to color her hair properly for quite a while. She had the appearance of the start of crow’s feet, of slight frown lines across her forehead. Yet she also had a defined softness to her face, whereas Trey could just as easily imagine her looking stern as kindly, a certain elasticity to her demeanor. She wore cut-off shorts and strappy black shoes with a medium heel to them, enough to add definition to her calves and draw just enough attention to her legs. Her top was a casual black blouse that was neither too loose nor tight. As she walked around the library, she carried herself in such a way that she would have stood out to Trey even if she had been the same age as the young girls that he always saw around campus. The fact that she appeared closer to his age only made her that much more attractive to him. He contemplated how he could engineer a way

of talking to her, a way of making it official, so that he wouldn't have to explain to her later that he was an FBI agent. The veracity of an FBI agent just hanging out in a college library in the summer by himself left a little to be desired.

Trey wore his sport coat as had become habit, as well as his sidearm, badge, and handcuffs, so he knew that presenting physical evidence wouldn't be problematic. The trouble was how to break the ice. He imagined that once she knew he was FBI, the intrigue would be too much to resist, that she would have to go out with him to find out more. He finally settled on printing something on the same printer she was using. But, what to print? It had to look official, like something related to a case. So far, Trey had thought little of what actual circumstances could form a case that an FBI agent would be assigned to investigate in this small town. But it took only a quick glance around the room for him to formulate an idea. Near the entrance stood two Indonesian students and seated next to them, two Sikh students with turbans. This was his case.

He knew all too well how many Americans in this part of the country reacted to anyone wearing a turban, even if their religion couldn't be further removed from terrorism. It was the appearance that riled up the xenophobes. As if dark skin weren't enough, when you added something as foreign as a turban to the mix, logic need not apply. Further, Trey knew that, post 9/11, the FBI had in fact conducted many investigations on campuses across the country when it came to Islamic organizations and student groups, so explaining his presence to this woman, or anyone else for that matter, should not prove too difficult. He decided to print some Arabic website content for effect.

After waiting to time everything perfectly, when she was standing at the printer, he pressed the print button on his screen and stood up. He felt his sidearm on his hip holster and hoped no one would notice the bulge protruding underneath his coat. Trey walked quickly to the printer and stood directly behind the woman. She really had nice legs. She seemed to be

gathering large stacks of paper as they came out of the printer and then organizing piles and concluding with stapling the piles together. He leaned closer to see what it was she was printing.

“Sorry,” she said. “I just have a few more pages coming out.” She seemed to have noticed Trey’s curiosity.

“No problem,” Trey said. “I can wait.”

They both stood in silence for a moment.

“I just have all these journal articles I’m gathering for my dissertation,” she said. “I come in here and really take advantage of those library use fees we all pay.”

Trey thought for a moment and then said, “Oh, I’m not a student here.”

“Of course,” she said, her eyes seemed to light up. “Do you teach? Which department?”

“No, I don’t teach,” Trey said. “I’m just here for work, for my job.”

She appeared disappointed. The printer made a whirring sound as more paper spit out.

“What do you do?” she said.

Trey contemplated how to proceed.

“I’m in law enforcement,” he said. This seemed to pique her interest as she made real eye contact with him for the first time.

“Really,” she said. “And you’re in the library here? Do you work for the city or the state?”

“No,” Trey said. “A federal agency.”

He could tell he had her. Her body language changed ever so slightly. She turned and faced him for the first time since the conversation began. He couldn’t be sure if it was she or he that seemed to move closer but he was suddenly aware of how good she smelled. Was it her hair?

“Which agency?” she said.

“FBI,” Trey said. She appeared incredulous, so, haphazardly, Trey pulled out his badge and showed her his credentials. She examined his ID card closely.

“Special Agent William Robert Harris III,” she read. “My name is Celia.” She offered her hand.

Just then, the printer stopped and Celia let go of his hand as quickly as she had taken it. She turned and began gathering papers. The printer started back up and Celia grabbed the pages as they came out. She was about to add the papers to her own stack when she paused.

“Oh, these must be yours,” she said, inquisitive.

The papers were indeed the Arabic web pages he had printed. Celia appeared to be piecing things together.

“So, you’re here for your job,” she said, lowering her voice, moving closer to Trey.

“What is it exactly you’re working on? I mean, if I may be so bold to ask.”

Trey thought about what he should say for a moment. But she looked at him so expectantly.

“I can’t really talk about it,” he said. “Not here anyway. Let’s just say that things don’t always appear to be as they are.”

He motioned toward the table with the students with the turbans. Celia followed his motion but then looked confused.

“Wait, you’re investigating those Indian students?” she said. “The Sikhs? That doesn’t make any sense.”

Shit, Trey thought.

“Those papers you printed were in Arabic,” she said.

“I can’t really talk about it here,” Trey said. He explained that he hadn’t meant to motion to the table with the turbans; he thought there were different students seated at the table. Middle Eastern students, and besides, he really had said too much already.

“It was nice meeting you, Celia,” Trey said. He offered his hand this time and she took it. Her touch was soft and Trey registered a feeling when their eyes met that he hadn’t experienced in a long time. He turned and went back to his workstation. He sat and pretended to

work for another ten minutes or so, glancing in Celia's direction every so often, tracing the outlines of her smooth legs as she bent over and gathered her bag and purse. He was surprised when she walked toward him.

"Give me a call sometime," she said, handing him a slip of paper. "Special Agent Harris."

Trey liked the sound of that.

Celia was a graduate student in the biology department. She was forty-one, divorced and had a nine-year-old daughter named Emma. She came to the university to get her PhD, to research bacterial pathogens. Trey found this out the first night they went out for coffee. The date was cut short, fortunately, before Celia could dig deeper into Trey's story. She received a call from the babysitter that Emma had hurt her hand, slammed it in a door. She had to take care of her kid. The maternal responsibility made her more attractive. Though he had always thought he would one day have a family, the reality was he hadn't been in a long-term relationship in several years. Most of his friends and old band mates had wives and kids, but Trey did not. He always felt like he was waiting for something.

The next few times he saw Celia, Trey was careful to wear suits, to shave, to appear the clean cut federal agent he had said he was. Surprisingly, Celia had not pressed him for any further details about his "investigation." She seemed to be content with telling Trey about herself. This was not that off-putting. Trey understood that when it came down to it, most people would rather talk about themselves than hear about someone else. She wasn't conceited or self-involved, just normal. And normalcy was a welcome addition in his life. Ever since the day he had met Celia, the notion of conducting an investigation had taken hold in Trey's mind. He felt the act may give his impersonation some legitimacy, to help him feel less lame, less of a

pretender. So he began to research past cases that the FBI had conducted on college campuses. Most had to deal with surveiling Muslim student populations. Trey toyed with the idea himself.

One night, he parked his Explorer outside the local mosque. When he saw children playing in a fenced-in area next to the mosque, he felt a type of guilt he'd never experienced before, like the whole make believe construct could have real consequences. Not to mention his discomfort with the notion of sinking to the same level as the rednecks who feared turbans and dark skin. He left the mosque almost as soon as he got there.

But his gut feeling wouldn't leave. He returned to studying real FBI cases with a connection to college campuses and no matter where he turned, the focus always returned to Muslim students. Trey found himself looking at most wanted lists, at photos of confirmed terror suspects still at large. He began to search for patterns and though he really had no idea what he was doing, he began to feel like he did. What made it worse was the free time he had during the summer session. Though he was enrolled in nine hours, he had yet to attend a class after four weeks. He had received his loan disbursement though.

As the summer progressed, so did his relationship with Celia. By the end of July, she felt comfortable enough with him to introduce him to her daughter.

"Say hello to Special Agent William Robert Harris III," Celia said to her daughter, forcing the girl to shake his hand.

"All my friends call me Trey," Trey said. "I'm very glad that I'm getting to finally meet you, Emma."

The girl looked very much like her mother.

The fall school semester was set to start and Trey had a decision to make. Since he had not attended any classes, he failed all the hours he was enrolled in the summer. This put him on academic probation and jeopardized his ability to get more student loan money. If he did not attend classes in the fall, he would be out of money. The problem with attending classes was the

possibility of running in to Celia on campus. Over the summer, if he was on campus, he was always dressed like he was on duty. That way, if he did happen to bump into Celia, he could have a reason. But if he was taking eighteen or more hours and was on campus every day, things would be much more difficult to explain. What if he had one of her professors or fellow grad students as an instructor? What if she saw his name listed as a student somewhere. He couldn't afford the risk. He would have to figure out another way.

It was the week before classes started for the fall and Trey was on campus to meet Celia and Emma for a picnic. This was a weekly routine over the last month because Celia was stuck in lab most of the time. She had a brief window every Thursday so Trey would go pick up Emma from the babysitter and bring her to campus for lunch with her mom. What single mom wouldn't trust a federal agent?

They walked to the large lawn on the campus quad and Trey laid out the blanket he always brought. Celia picked up chicken salad sandwiches in the student union and the three of them sat down to eat. Celia had just started to discuss an exotic strain of bacteria when Trey happened to look across the quad at a group of students. There was a mix of ethnicities, all international students by the look of them. At that moment, Trey made eye contact with one of the students who was in the rear of the group. He looked Egyptian, almost familiar. There was a way the student reacted to Trey's glance that made no sense. As the entire group walked past Trey and Celia's picnic, almost all of the international students said hello or at least acknowledged their presence. This one student did not. After the group of students passed by, Trey noticed the group dissipated and the Egyptian student split off on his own, toward the student union. Then Trey remembered where he may have seen the student: in his research. Was it possible? Could this suspicious looking student be part of a real FBI investigation? For a moment, the pangs he felt outside the mosque returned.

Before he could think through his actions, Trey was up, dumping his chicken salad on the blanket, muttering to Celia that he would be right back. Soon, he was only a few yards behind the

student. At this point, the student turned around, and his reaction only supported Trey's suspicions. He sped up.

Within a matter of seconds, the student was speed walking, almost jogging, Trey right on his heels. Several other students on the sidewalks had to move quickly aside. When the student got near the union, he veered off and made his way to the large parking garage and the stairwell that fed into the basement. At this point, he was at a full out sprint and Trey could feel a cramp developing as he struggled to keep up. When Trey finally reached the stairwell he had lost sight of the student, but he heard footsteps. Trey rushed down the stairs and as he reached the bottom nearly ran over a female coming up the stairs.

"Out of the way, federal agent," Trey said.

The bottom of the stairs fed into the underground parking garage next to the student union and though it was the noon hour, there was little light in the garage. Trey stopped running and stood still as he allowed his eyes to adjust to darkness. He was breathing heavily and sweating. He heard the sound of footsteps to his east and instinctively went toward the sound. Also on instinct, he drew his sidearm, though it hadn't had bullets in it since that day at the gun range. Adrenaline and the moment had overridden any sense of logic. Almost as soon as he heard the footsteps they stopped. Trey went from car to car in the parking garage, his empty gun drawn, searching for the student, the suspect, just as he had seen so many times on television. After searching nearly half the garage, he heard the squeal of tires, the sound of a car coming down the ramp to enter the garage. Suddenly, the headlights illuminated the garage and there cowering in the corner was the student.

"Don't move," Trey yelled. Of course the student did the opposite and took off running, this time back toward the student union. He slipped into the basement entrance before Trey could reach him. The basement of the student union seemed labyrinthine to Trey as soon as he got inside. Narrow hallways scattered with dozens of doorways that led to narrower hallways with even more doorways. Trey knew within two minutes he would never find the student. He

holstered his sidearm and straightened his tie and made the long walk back to Celia and Emma, back to the picnic.

When he returned to the quad, Emma and Celia were folding up his blanket and throwing trash away.

“Everything all right?” Celia asked. She looked worried.

“Everything’s fine,” Trey said. “Just a work thing came up. It’s okay now.”

His explanation didn’t seem to help, but Trey walked over and hugged her anyway.

“Mommy, can we get ice cream?”

Emma had spotted an ice cream cart on the other side of the quad. Celia acquiesced and the three of them made their way to the cart. Emma chose chocolate chip, Celia vanilla frozen yogurt. The cart attendant asked Trey what he wanted, but ice cream was the furthest thing from his mind. He wondered where the student had gone, what had happened to him. Why had he run in the first place?

Trey said he wasn’t hungry. Celia found a bench nearby and she and Emma sat and began to eat their ice cream. It was then that Trey noticed in the corner of the quad two uniformed campus police officers walking in his direction. He saw campus cops all the time and never thought twice, but then he saw two more coming from the opposite corner and with them, the Egyptian student. He felt his midsection tense up, as if he were out of breath. The police seemed to notice his presence. Trey swore he saw the student pointing in his direction. He felt frozen in place; he didn’t know what to do.

But then he saw Celia and Emma on the park bench, eating ice cream and smiling at each other. Soon they were looking at him too, smiling, motioning for him to join them. Maybe he still could. Maybe his cover had not been blown. Maybe nothing was even going to happen to him.

VITA

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