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DRIVING TO HEAVEN AND OTHER STORIES

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

Driving to Heaven and Other Stories is a collection of short fiction and creative nonfiction focused on the themes of family, religion, addiction, and exile. These works were written, compiled, and collated between Fall 2020 and Spring 2022.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I want to thank my family for putting up with my storytelling for the past twenty-three years. You all have been my biggest fans and supporters for this entire journey. To my parents: thank you, Mom and Dad, for always inspiring me. To my grandparents: thank you, Nanny and Grandpa, for always encouraging me. And to my sister Catherine: thank you for always, always being there for me.

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To my parents, who never stopped encouraging me to pursue my financially precarious passion.

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To everyone I've loved, and to everyone I've lost. You'll all make great characters someday.

And to my friend and writing partner Getty Hesse—you created this monster.

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Critical Introduction

> "My writing workshop is about mixing it up, cross-pollinating, not only in genres but in occupations."
>
> —Sandra Cisneros qtd. in Behar

Throughout this master's thesis, I mix it up in terms of genre—the following pieces are fiction and nonfiction, realist and nonrealist—and in terms of occupation: in this collection, I am "occupied with" a variety of styles, voices, points of view, and other elements of craft (not to mention motifs and themes) as I experiment with my creative writing in an effort to improve as a storyteller and present my best possible work in this thesis.

Driving to Heaven and Other Stories is the culmination of my writing career at the University of Oklahoma—a career that spans five years of undergraduate and graduate coursework—and it is the fullest expression of my interests and ability as a writer of both fiction and nonfiction. While the following pieces contain a myriad of themes like family, religion, and addiction, each piece grapples with the particular malaise of exile, which recalls one of my favorite lines that I left on the cutting-room floor: "Anybody who says that you gotta put down roots to have a home somewhere ain't never seen a turtle slip in and out of water." It is this rootless loneliness, this haunted nomadism, that drives the examination of family, religion, and addiction in the pages that follow.

My influences—the loci of invention from which these stories rumble like earthquakes—are impossible to ignore. Kelly Link and George Saunders, my favorite authors, write short speculative fiction that is off-kilter, melancholy, and intentional. Their collections *Get in Trouble* and *CivilWarLand in Bad Decline*, respectively, merge the real and the unreal with

narrative ease; they situate their characters in magical and absurd circumstances; and they utilize the freedom of speculative fiction to navigate issues and themes that might have been unreachable had they used a simply realist mode of storytelling.

For example: in Link's story "Secret Identity," a fifteen-year-old girl searching for Paul Zell, an older man she met on an online game, explores a convention center populated with superheroes and dentists: "Billie uses Paul Zell's room key to get into the business center. There's a superhero at one of the PCs. The superhero is at least eight feet tall, and she's got frizzy red hair. You can tell she's a superhero and not just a tall dentist because a little electric sizzle runs along her outline every once in a while" (Link, 99). And in Saunders' story "Offloading for Mrs. Schwartz," the protagonist, who works in a personal interactive holography store, makes a mistake when showing a burglar how to use the fantastical equipment: "My God, I think, this is no Scan, this is a damn Offload. I check the console. Sure enough, via one incorrect switch setting, I've just irrevocably transferred a good third of his memories to my hard drive" (Saunders, 66). The speculative elements in these stories—my favorites in each collection—seamlessly integrate the unreal with the real, like crisscrossing streams whose waters bleed from current to current, and allow the writers to interrogate themes like loss, memory, power, and growing up.

In *Driving to Heaven and Other Stories*, I attempt similar moves with speculative fiction. For example, in "Blossom-End Rot," I introduce the speculative just as Link and Saunders do: as an understood, unchallenged part of the story-world. In the first sentence, I write: "Yob was a boy with his head on backwards" (13). By setting the nonrealist terms of the story immediately, I demand that the reader accept the speculative nature of the protagonist in order to proceed with the piece. Additionally, throughout the collection, I experiment with different, diverse narrative

voices, like that in Link's "Secret Identity." For example, in "If You Feed a Crow a Finger," I integrate the inner voice of the crotchety protagonist Marge into the narration: "She unleashed a torrent of curses—on God and Jesus and her parents and her stupid fucking hand, dammit, shit, fuck—but mostly, she cursed herself for being alone with a bottle of vodka and a wack-ass crow when all she wanted to do was die already" (52). Ultimately, Link and Saunders are the primary influences on me as a creative writer; their stories are exemplary of the genre-bending and cross-pollinating that I implement in *Driving to Heaven and Other Stories*. In these stories—these tales ordered in a downward spiral—the characters contend with family, religion, addiction, and the resulting malaise of exile, as hope wanes and certainty bubbles like poison in a cauldron.

I begin this collection with a farewell letter to a place to which I will never return: Cabool, Missouri, where my father's parents settled in retirement after long lives lived in New York City. In "Dear Cabool," as I remember detail after detail about the house there, I foreground remembering and characterize memory as an active, dynamic force in this brief piece of nonfiction. "Dear Cabool" weaves, inextricably, exile to memory, and it previews memory's integral thematic role in this collection at large. For example, after recounting anecdotes of the past, of family lost and memories faded, I conclude the letter by explicitly stating my self-exile from the place: "I haven't been to see you in a while, Cabool. I don't think I'll ever come back" (12). This chosen ostracism (in the sense of the ancient Greeks) prefigures similar situations in the following stories; however, as the collection progresses, the downward spiral involves agency: how much power do the characters have to choose their exile?

The story that follows is "Blossom-End Rot," a retelling of the Day of Atonement story from the Book of Leviticus in the Bible. The ancient, mythic roots of this piece anticipate the

fairy-tale style with which I wrote the tale of Yob, whose backwards head (and name) embodies both memory and exile. Always looking behind him, Yob symbolically gazes into the past as he roams away from his home at the manor house, first on his grand adventure and then on his Biblically-mandated journey into the wilderness. The Christian imagery and themes, so prevalent in the piece, reference the Biblical roots of the story while providing the first religious critique of the collection. Yob's innocence is juxtaposed with the expectations that Christian mythos thrusts upon him through Mr. Angel; though a fanatic, Mr. Angel embodies the violence that religion perpetrates on young minds, imbuing them with unearned guilt and toxic notions of culpability. Also, this story is influenced by two other authors whose work I revere: Neil Gaiman and Karen Russell. Borrowing from Gaiman's *The Ocean at the End of the Lane*, I incorporate a fablelike setting and a playful, naïve narrative voice; in fact, the description of the pond as "a shoreless ocean" in "Blossom-End Rot" is an homage to the titular, oceanlike pond in Gaiman's short novel. And, from Russell's *Swamplandia!*, I emulate the flowing, otherworldly description that evokes an always-burgeoning unease, and I incorporate one of Russell's grotesque, monstrous characters—the Bird Man—as the prototype for my antagonist Mr. Angel. These influences on "Blossom-End Rot" help me to convey the alienating effects of religion on a child through a fantastical, extra-natural lens.

Next, "Poppysmic Morphology" is heavily influenced by "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman. While there are notable similarities—both involve isolation in a room, descent into madness, and eventual death—the speculative nature of "Poppysmic Morphology" allows me to preview the main thematic content of the rest of the collection—addiction—which appears, if briefly, at the end of "Blossom-End Rot" with Yob's father and mother. The inescapable downward spiral of the narrator's lover in "Poppysmic Morphology," and the

simultaneous powerlessness of the narrator, explore the unfortunate reality of many addictions. This piece sets the table for the final three stories, which engage directly with alcoholism; this conceptual introduction of addiction dovetails with another important move in this piece. As implied by the word "lover," I experiment with nongendered characters in this piece (inspired by Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*). I isolate the story away from the constructs of gender in order to escape any assumptions of traditional masculinist, chauvinist America: that the woman would be the damsel, and that the man would be the savior. The gendered nature of addiction is inescapable, in fiction and in reality, and the characters that follow—myself, Marge, and Wayne—engage with the insidious "lover" of alcoholism that is prevalent in all genders.

In the nonfiction story "The Piecemeal Story of How Alcohol Became My Lover," I write a dialogue-driven narrative with sparse prose—a significant departure from the styles of the preceding pieces: "I slumped further into the couch and closed my eyes. My brain throbbed as though it were being beaten by mallets. They just propped me up and left me here, I thought. Assholes" (35). By far the most personal piece in the collection, "The Piecemeal Story of How Alcohol Became My Lover" investigates the origin and progression of alcoholism. And as I explore exile in terms of addiction, family, and religion—all of which figure to some degree in "The Piecemeal Story of How Alcohol Became My Lover"—I find myself grappling with the isolation that addiction brings, the loneliness that alcoholism swirls inside the addict like a whirlpool of inevitability. After writing this nonfiction piece, I felt compelled to find a way to represent the experience of alcoholism outside of normative modes of realist storytelling; the final two stories in this collection are a result of that effort and are a springboard to my future as a creative writer.

In the penultimate story "If You Feed a Crow a Finger," a vulgar, spunky, and rather deranged old woman decides to sit in her favorite armchair and drink herself to death; she has capitulated to her addiction. But when an injured crow crashes into her home—and when it bleeds neon blood—she is forced to nurse it back to health; she decides, grotesquely, to feed the crow her fingers. This self-harm—cutting off the pieces of herself that give her the most agency—is explicitly symbolic, as Marge isolates herself even further by depriving herself of her ability to interact with the world. This piece draws from *An Elderly Lady is Up to No Good* by Helene Tursten—the protagonist Marge shares a sort of namesake (and attitude) with Tursten's protagonist, Maud—and Marge's colorful vocabulary is reminiscent of Saunders and Junot Díaz, another influence of mine. And the crow, with its glowing blood, acts as a harbinger of impending doom; a monster in its most traditional sense, the crow is a warning to Marge: the Latin word *monstrum* comes, originally, from religious language and means "a divine omen indicating misfortune, an evil omen, portent" ("Monstrum"). The religious root of *monstrum* links the crow's glowing blood to the Christian (specifically Catholic) image of the Blood of Christ; this connection appears in the following and final story in this collection, in which the protagonist encounters a *monstrum* of his own and grapples with Christianity much more directly.

In the titular piece, "Driving to Heaven," Wayne is an alcoholic with a less-than-spotless history; at the outset of this piece, he leaves his sister and his hometown in an effort to drive to heaven—an early manifestation of his collapse under the weight of his alcoholism. As the story progresses, Wayne slowly acknowledges his powerlessness in the face of addiction with the help of his own supernatural companion: Eugene, the not-a-zombie chauffeur. Unlike the crow in the preceding story, Eugene is not a harbinger but a guide, a confidant, a reflection of Wayne's

anxieties about the encroaching finality of addiction. Where Marge fully surrenders, Wayne struggles. In the story, Wayne does not simply accept his fate; pieces of himself fall away until he arrives at the mesa-top, bloodied like Christ, a sacrifice at the altar of addiction—and he is alone as lightning strikes and his whiskey bottle shatters. Wayne is an alcoholic bound for destruction but still clinging to a mirage of control; he is a man on the brink, relinquishing his earthly possessions but still climbing the mesa, into exile, with the strength of feeble hope. The Christian theme of ascension appears here, overlaying the image of crucifixion, and the story concludes uncertain, uneasy: does Wayne die? It is this moment, this question of agency first introduced in "Dear Cabool," that encapsulates the effort of this thesis. Wayne struggles with family, religion, and addiction, and he finds himself in a liminal place between life and death, between addiction and its inevitable conclusion. This story—this piece that engages with nearly all of the themes and motifs of this collection—is the fullest representation of myself as a speculative storyteller who attempts to unearth truths about the lived experiences of alcoholics.

This final story leads me to the future, to the momentum that will carry me beyond this master's thesis. I hope to pursue a Ph.D. in creative writing, and while there, I want to push the still-new paradigm of "social fiction" (exemplified by Patricia Leavy in her novel *Low-Fat Love*) which combines fiction writing with arts-based research. I feel that there is a rich opportunity to push for speculative representations of alcoholism and other trauma through sometimes fantastical, sometimes absurd, but always unsettling and weird and non-realist narratives that do the necessary work of showcasing uncomfortable phenomena. This new project will be imperfect and raw, like this collection, but this thesis is just the first step of many. I plan to continue writing—continue cross-pollinating—continue experimenting and pushing myself to innovate as a writer of speculative fiction and creative nonfiction.

Dear Cabool

Dear Cabool,

I was a young boy who visited you once a year at Thanksgiving-time. Each time I visited you, Cabool, I felt a bit younger, a bit more helpless, a bit more aware of your strange and sedated magnetism.

You were a proud-of-the-Confederate-flag town whose breath tasted like cigarette smoke and peeling paint and empty churches. You crouched in the hills of Southeastern Missouri and provided lonely people a quaint, quiet place to die. Your latent malaise reached from the cracks in your aging asphalt and curled its fingers around my neck whenever I crossed your ghostly borders. Then that sluggish dread curdled in my stomach and climbed up my throat and my parents turned the minivan onto that crumbling street and we approached that house.

Cabool, you were always just that house to me. That dusty-white brick, that flaking-green trim, that long-winding driveway. That square, untrimmed hedge wrapping the house like a slumbering python. That looming doorway with flower pot sentinels. That gold doorknocker rubbed silver with time. That peculiar gravity which funneled me toward the door, which screamed at me not to take another step. That's all you ever were to me, Cabool. That house.

You were my grandparents' house then my grandfather's house then nowhere.

On the couch there were fish pillows. Two of them, one burnt orange and one juniper green. I don't remember what kind of fish they were, but my grandfather told me once, sometime. Funny, the things I remember and forget about you, Cabool.

I remember stepping into that house—the first thing I saw was the piano. A faded upright piano with dull-white keys and a bench whose cushion slumped, weathered by disuse. I used to sit there, at the piano. There was never any sheet music. I banged on the keys and flittered my fingers up and down discordant scales, until a gruff New York voice yelled at me from the kitchen. So I stopped. And when I started playing again, years later, I learned the right notes. But the piano was gone by then. I don't think beautiful music would have penetrated your desiccating heart, Cabool. You would have opened your maw wide and swallowed each note as you swallowed every other beautiful thing which dared enter your domain. I can hear the notes now—spiraling into silence—quieter and quieter and quieter and—gone. I'm glad I never played for you, Cabool. I'll keep that music for myself.

I remember the Raggedy Ann doll perched in the cubby-hole beside the boxy television. Its mop of red hair stuck up wildly, as though struck by lightning. Its round black eyes peered into the living room, where I sat with my mother and my father and my grandfather and my grandmother; then my mother and my father and my grandfather; then my father and my grandfather. Then no one. I wonder if Raggedy Ann is still there, still watching over you, Cabool. Surely you both heard the voices—two policemen in the room—a Kansas City sergeant and a retired New York lieutenant who would soon die before his son could outrank him—my grandfather lounging in that damned cracked-brown leather recliner with those plastic tubes reaching into his nostrils like living, searching tendrils, and my father sitting on the couch beside those fish pillows, those damned fish pillows. My grandfather sunk further into that recliner while he talked tough to his son who was by now fifty years old. He told my father to be harder on me, told him that I could use a smack upside the head once in a while. Then he turned to me and told me with the last words he ever spoke to my ears: "You need to eat more, Alex. And if

you're ever in a fight, step on the other guy's toes and punch him in the nose. The bleeding," he said. "The bleeding will distract him enough for you to take him out." I think he got this advice from you, Cabool. For this is what you did to people—you disoriented them; you grabbed ahold of them; you took them out—out to pasture, out of sight.

I remember that my grandfather left meat scraps out for your crows. He carved a shallow pit into your ground, Cabool, at the edge of your sparse forest which marked the end of that house's backyard. He dropped the undevoured fatty flesh into that pit ringed with rusty corrugated metal, that pit where the crows quickly descended to feast on those things which we did not ourselves consume. Sometimes I felt like the meat in that pit. How much of me, how much of my family, did you consume, Cabool?

I remember the dog but not its name—Jemima, maybe—I think it was Jemima—a nervous phantom who flitted around the house and yipped with mourning because Jemima outlived her, my grandmother; the dog was all that was left besides the lingering smell of cigarettes and the now-empty seat at the Thanksgiving table. Sometimes I think that my grandfather wanted to feed Jemima to the crows. Sometimes I think he did. Or did he feed Jemima to you, Cabool? Did he toss that dog down your gullet, into your down-home black hole which takes and takes and never gives but to feed the weedy cemetery? One visit, Jemima was gone. That's all I know for sure.

I remember the fragile, faery sound of the wind chimes on the covered porch; I remember the cold wind at the edge of your forest; I remember gathering your fallen branches with my father for his father. The oxygen tank inside that house scraped the wooden floor in discordant harmony with my grandfather's wheezing, labored breaths. My grandmother had long since passed. I remember asking, "Why don't we visit Grandpa very often?" and hearing in my

father's hushed response that undercurrent of fear which stung his voice whenever he spoke of his father—and—under that a regret—a sincere hope not to be like his father—not to become him—I recognize it, because I hear it in my voice too. Cabool, what did your voice sound like? Your Siren song lured so many away, away and away and away, into your tiny town and down that crumbing street and into that house until they became nowhere, too.

I remember the books—so many beautiful books—leather-bound and golden-lettered and packed into wooden shelves in that house—which I discovered in the infancy of my passion for literature. I wanted to take one, I remember. I wanted to take one away from you, Cabool. But my father told me not to touch them. He told me it was important for them to stay together. He looked at my mother, then. I think he did. Cabool, did you know how easily you rip and tear and separate? You were the first crack in an earthquake. You liked to begin and watch others end. You were not New York, not the land of my grandparents' birth, not the land of movement and light and rudeness and potential. You were a place to languish and perish and not make a sound. You were all quietness and faux-peace, just a façade for the creeping certainty that those who lived in Cabool never ever left.

I remember I remember I remember. What, Cabool, have I forgotten about you?

I have one of the fish pillows, now. It's in my closet and its name is Robert. That was my grandfather's name. Its eyes are glassy and dead and I don't think I want it in my closet anymore.

I haven't been to see you in a while, Cabool. I don't think I'll ever come back.

No longer yours,

Alex

Blossom-End Rot

Yob was a boy with his head on backwards. He grew up secluded in a manor at the end of a lane, so his parents never had to reveal him to anyone, so his parents never had to explain that they thought Yob was a curse from God for his father's accident years before. Yob's father had been drinking heavily and had driven his car into old Mrs. Simon, who had been out for a mid-afternoon walk into town, and who used to live at the cucumber farm a half-mile or so up the lane. She used to live there because she was dead now, because Yob's father killed her. He cleaned her blood off the hood of his car, and he weighted her body with rocks and dumped her corpse into the pond on the manor grounds. He helped the sheriff make a perfunctory and inconclusive investigation into the disappearance of the old widow. He was a very rich man, so he was a very respected man, so the sheriff listened to him. Later, when he told his then-pregnant wife—who believed in an Old Testament sort of God and who would come to conclude that He cursed them for their sins with a son with his head on backwards—she wailed and flung herself onto their four-poster bed, as women in manors are wont to do in stories like these.

As a child, Yob spent little time inside the manor house, little time with his reclusive and reticent parents. Every night, he read the books that crowded his bedroom shelves, and he dreamed of intrepid adventures. Every morning, he left the house—he walked backwards, as a boy with his head on backwards must certainly walk: his arms reached around his back like warped tree branches, and he shuffled heels-forward with a wobbly but self-assured gait—and he wandered the grounds of the manor, where he imagined that the ivies and flowers and tall grasses were a tangled jungle teeming with fairies, that the cypress trees reached their topmost branches up to Heaven, and that the murky pond was a shoreless ocean. He recited poems to the tomato

plants that his mother neglected, and he spoke in whispers to the spiders that wove sticky, translucent tapestries beneath the eaves of the manor house. Yob explored his fantastical world every day for hours and hours and years and years, until he had discovered every rock and pebble beside the creek, until he had conversed with every worm that dared peek its pointed face from the mud, until he had counted each of the stars in the night sky above the manor house and had given each star a secret, special name. Yob scoured and searched and loved the manor until there was nothing new to scour, nothing new to search, and nothing new to love.

So, one afternoon, when he was eleven years old, Yob decided that he would leave the manor and go on an adventure. He had just read a particularly exciting book that had told him that the world conspired to help boys who wanted to go on adventures—even boys with their heads on backwards, like Yob. He did not tell his fragile, repentant mother. He did not tell his skulking, angry father. He hopped across the stepping stones that rose from the creekbed and imagined them to be the scattered, fossilized vertebrae of an ancient sea-beast; he skipped across the field of violet and yellow wildflowers; he pushed through the copse of trees that marked the end of the manor property; and he began to walk up the lane, away.

It was autumn, and the leaves on the trees that lined the lane stained the blue sky with brilliant, burned mosaics. Yob imagined himself a parading conqueror, or an explorer setting out on a grand expedition into the unknown. As Yob marched, lifting and stamping his heels in what he imagined to be a proud and military manner, a rolling breeze carried to him the scent of undergrowth and upturned earth, of mist and water and freshness. Curious, Yob stepped off the lane and wandered onto the property that, unbeknownst to him, had belonged to Mrs. Simon, whose bones still lay in the silty mud at the bottom of the manor pond. And he advanced into a place that had been left to the wiles of nature and time.

Immediately, Yob thought the farm to be enchanted with an old and solemn magic. He approached the farmhouse, which squatted about a stone's throw from the lane—well, a stone's throw for an ordinary boy—and which teemed with wild life. The cucumber plants had overtaken the farmhouse; vines climbed its walls, reached into its windows, and painted a map of green veins on its weather-beaten white wood. As Yob got closer to the farmhouse, he walked around a broken trellis, which had collapsed under the weight of the cucumbers—huge, long, green things that seemed eager to trip Yob as he walked. He began to dart around them, jump over them, imagining them to be herbaceous adversaries bent on stopping his arrival to the farmhouse.

Soon he stood before the red door, whose paint peeled and curled like beckoning fingers. Yob pushed the door open with a long, resonant creaking noise, and he peered inside the house, which had grown in his imagination to be a temple, a museum, a cathedral. For Yob had never been inside another building besides the manor house, and the grand mystery of the farmhouse thrilled him with shivers of excitement.

The living room was dark and bare. The floor was a honeycomb of terracotta tiles interrupted by green and yellow weeds that had stubbornly reached into the room. A single framed picture hung against the stipple-patterned wallpaper: a photograph of a dour young man who would drink himself to death by forty and a shining young woman whose blood would coat the hood of Yob's father's car. The man sat stiffly beside his wife. His short hair, wrinkled trousers, and plain face belied his eyes, his black eyes—eyes sharp and deep with unrealized pain. She leaned her head against his shoulder and folded her hands in her lap, between the folds of her long purple dress, as though she were praying a hidden prayer. She wore a crown of

drooping asters. And she smiled widely, precariously, her lips pulled taut with that particular grin of desperate happiness, or desperation for it.

There were no windows. Empty bookcases stood against the walls like hollow sentinels, and Yob wondered what kinds of marvelous stories had once lived on those shelves; he imagined knights in gleaming armor and peg-legged pirates and fairies and elves and boys on adventures—even boys with their heads on backwards—all gathering in that big and empty room to laugh and tell tales about the magnificent things they had witnessed.

Instead, there, in the center of the room, a pale man with thin lips and eyes the color of thunderclouds crouched beside a ring of ashen rocks which guarded a dying fire. Long black hair like seaweed hung in a wavy curtain around his face, and a black beard sprouted in patches along his jawline. Above his head, a golden, tinsel-like halo drooped like a wilted flower, suspended from a metal wire attached to a dusty white headband. From his back rose two bent and dirty wings that, long ago, might have been porcelain-white; they were attached to leather straps that circled his shoulders. He wore a sweat-stained t-shirt and faded, ripped jeans.

The man prodded the fire with a long, burned stick, and he turned his head as Yob crossed the tiled floor.

“Are you an angel?” Yob asked. He shuffled backwards towards the pale and dark-eyed man without reservation, for the angel-dressed man was only the third person Yob had ever met. Why should Yob have believed him to be anything but divine?

The man replied, his voice soft and even and sharp like a glinting blade of moonlight: “I used to be.”

Yob sat, crossing his legs beneath him and turning his back—and therefore his face—toward the man. “What happened?”

“I was a guardian angel,” the man said, “but I failed to protect her.” He pointed at the photograph, at the face of young Mrs. Simon. “She always told me that I was her guardian angel. She said that I saved her life when I was born. But one day, I told her, ‘You should look after your health, mother. A walk into town will be good for your rheumatism.’ And then she never came home.” He paused for a moment, his face twisted with grief. “I know who killed her, but no one will believe me.” He breathed a shuddering breath. “I’m no angel, not anymore. I need atonement. I need to find it.”

“So if you’re not an angel,” Yob pondered, “what are you, then?”

The man stared into waning fire and reached out his hands for the faint wisps of smoke that curled up from the embers. “Lost. I have been lost for a very long time.”

“Oh,” Yob said. “Well, I’m lost too. But that’s okay! I left home today to go on an adventure. Lots of good adventures start by being lost.”

“That’s true,” the man said, but he did not raise his eyes from the coals.

“My name is Yob. I’m from the manor down the lane. Where are you from? Do you have a name?”

“The manor down the lane,” the man said, and he looked up from the fire. His words rolled slowly from his mouth, contemplative, as though he were chewing them and considering their sudden and shocking taste. “The manor down the lane. A most curious punishment.” He said this last word with a sneer, but Yob did not notice the derision, for Yob figured strange men had strange ways of speaking—why should he have thought otherwise?

The man continued: “I am from here. I have always been from here. And the name she gave me… no one has called me that for a very long time—twelve years, now. I feel like I no longer have a name.”

“I will call you Mr. Angel,” Yob said, matter-of-fact, for he felt that no one should ever go without a name.

“Mr. Angel,” the man repeated. “One foot on earth, one foot in heaven. Marked human, marked divine.” He smiled at Yob in the mysterious fashion of men whose secret heart has been fleetingly revealed. “I think that name is appropriate.”

Yob smiled a gap-toothed smile. “Would you like to go on an adventure?”

“Yes, I would like that very much.” Mr. Angel stood, stretching as though he had not stood in eons, as though his muscles were caked with rust and decay. And when he spoke again, his tone was cryptic and grinning: “I think I know of a perfect adventure for us.”

Yob pushed himself to his feet and gazed up at Mr. Angel. He imagined Mr. Angel leading him through rainforests, through deserts, over hills and mountains and across ravines. “What’s the adventure?” Yob asked, anticipation thick in his voice. “Where are we going?”

“Nearby,” Mr. Angel said, “there is a sacred place on this farm. A special place. A secret place. Would you like to visit it?”

Yob’s eyes widened and his imagination swelled with reverential awe, for he was a child to whom no secrets had been entrusted but his own. “The book was right,” Yob gasped. “The world conspired to help me. The world led me here!”

“It seems the world conspired to help both of us,” Mr. Angel added, and he began to move toward the back door. “Your arrival is fortuitous for us both.”

Mr. Angel stepped through the door and into the waning sunlight; Yob shuffled behind him. Their shadows stretched across the tangled cucumber plants, which covered the ground in a woven rug of snaking vines and star-shaped leaves. Yob imagined that the farm was a green and living nebula, that each of the starry leaves had a name, like the stars in the night sky.

Twilight descended on the cucumber farm and bathed the sky in a muted orange glow. Their shadows grew longer. As they walked further and further from the farmhouse, the vines grew thicker and more knotted until they became a living layer of vegetation that concealed the dirt, like ropy green flesh. Occasionally, they came upon a cucumber whose tip had decayed and festered, had become brown and black and pitted with rot. Mr. Angel picked these cucumbers and carried them in his arms until he could carry no more; he then ordered Yob to gather the rotting cucumbers, which Yob picked and cradled against his back until his arms were loaded with decay. The sharp, putrid scent burned Yob's nostrils.

"Why are we gathering the yucky ones, Mr. Angel?"

"We must cleanse the farm of blight and sin. It is a grand adventure." Mr. Angel sidestepped a patch of scarred and infected cucumbers, which were becoming more and more numerous. "I've been waiting for a helper like you, Yob. You are the most perfect, most special helper for this particular task." Then his voice fell to a whisper, and he mumbled to himself: "Everything is prepared. Atonement. Atonement. I have found it."

The pair continued to walk deeper into the farm. They passed beneath the sprawling and rusted irrigation system, which Yob imagined to be the spidery, metallic skeleton of an undiscovered dinosaur. The sun dipped lower in the sky. Soon, Yob noticed another smell which dominated the stinging scent of the cucumbers in his arms. It was a warm smell, a dank smell, a desiccated and heaving and death-soaked smell. Yob looked up at Mr. Angel, whose murmurings had quickened and whose stormy eyes now flashed with lightning, now glowed like the coals of the dying fire. "We are here," Mr. Angel breathed. Yob imagined this to be the challenging part of the adventure, the part where he wanted to turn around but needed to be brave. So he

continued to stride after Mr. Angel, carefully lifting his heels over the veiny undergrowth and ignoring the unease that bubbled in his stomach.

They stepped into a thicket, and the overwhelming smell of decay slammed into Yob like a wave crashing against a stony beach. The thicket opened into a small clearing, where an enormous pile of rotted cucumbers rose from the ground like a sagging and sulphuric mountain. The cucumbers were in various states of decay—those at the bottom of the pile were brown and black and flattened under the weight of the cucumbers above them, which were splotchy and shriveled as the rot seeped deeper beneath their skin. Beside the festering pile, there was a square fold-out table, and the top half of a goat's skull rested on the crimson-stained tabletop. Beneath, small bones littered the ground. Yob's bravery curdled and transmuted into leaden terror. He no longer imagined grand adventures; he did not think of daring escapes. His legs were rigid with fear, as though they had become part of the winding system of cucumber vines, which suddenly, to Yob, seemed to breathe and thrum with malevolent life.

Mr. Angel approached the reeking pile and dropped the cucumbers that he had been carrying at its base. He turned to Yob, and in his smooth, bladed intonation, Mr. Angel began to speak: "Do you wonder why I brought you here? It is not for a reason you suspect—it is not a reason anyone suspects—no one knows this certainty but me."

Mr. Angel began to take slow, halting steps toward Yob. "Your father killed my mother. Twelve years ago, I saw him drunkenly swerving in the lane—he drove that big, black, monstrous car that looked like a hearse—already like a hearse—and he was driving on the day I sent my mother to town. He hit her. He killed her. I knew it more certainly than I knew I still breathed. I told everyone, but no one believed me. The whole town laughed at me. 'Did you see it happen?' they said. 'Don't go crazy. Your mother was at death's door anyhow. Wherever she

is, it's probably a relief for the old bat.' But their snideness, their jeering looks—they were as much a pestilence as the blossom-end rot that gripped this farm in the wake of her death.

"But one day, one day, the rotting cucumbers began to rustle, to whisper, to speak to me and tell me the truth—to confirm what I had always known. Then, I knew the blight was the Voice of God. The cucumbers told me to build a monument on this spot, to prepare for the Day of Atonement. I carried the blighted cucumbers here and I built this mountain; I killed my mother's last goat and I tore its skull from its head; I prepared for the ritual and I waited for you. I waited so, so long. For you, Yob. Always for you."

Mr. Angel now loomed above Yob, and Yob could smell his sweat and feel his hot, angry breath. "You are to be the vehicle for atonement. For the farm. For me." Mr. Angel strode back to the rotted mountain. "Come. Make your offering."

Yob advanced, his legs moving mechanically, robotically, as though his petrified mind had no control—had never had control—of their movement. He found himself beside Mr. Angel, and he turned and dropped the cucumbers which he had carried tightly against his back. "I don't understand. What's going on?" he managed. "I didn't do anything, not this time. I know that I'm the good Lord's retribution on Daddy—that's what Momma always says—but is this my fault, too?" Tears streamed down Yob's face. Yob was so, so confused, and he was so afraid that he thought he would never again feel anything but fear.

"Atonement," Mr. Angel said, quiet triumph laced in his voice. "Finally."

Mr. Angel scooped the bones from beneath the table and handed them to Yob: "Carry these as you carried the cucumbers." Then he lifted the half-skull from the table, and he held it high above his head. For a long moment, he remained soundless and motionless, as though frozen into stone. Yob felt true panic—palpitating and fluttering and urgent and undeniable—and

thought he might try to run, might allow himself to imagine the daring, dangerous escape. But Mr. Angel looked back down at him, and Yob's thoughts were silenced by terror.

And Mr. Angel spoke: "Wear this and become the goat who roams the wilderness, saddled by the sin that grips this place. Become the goat of atonement, who carries sin away like a receding tide." He placed the broken goat's skull onto Yob's head, and then he closed his eyes and placed his hands on top of the bleached bone. The skull was sharp and rough in places, and it cut the skin on Yob's head. Tiny rivulets of blood ran down Yob's face, but he dared not move. Mr. Angel stood unmoving, his hands pressed against the goat skull, his mouth twitching with noiseless invocations. And the silence was the loudest and longest thing that Yob had ever heard.

Mr. Angel opened his eyes and shoved Yob and screamed. "Go!" he yelled. "Begone from this place! Never return!"

Yob staggered backwards, his legs still reluctant to move. He looked into Mr. Angel's dark eyes and saw an inferno of vicious, untamed hatred. Then Mr. Angel screamed again, long and howling and guttural as though his voice were rending his throat, and he charged toward Yob.

Yob careened out of the clearing and frantically lifted his heels over the innumerable cucumbers. He stumbled over outstretched vines, which seemed to curl around his ankles like serpents, but he did not fall. The goat skull was tight and heavy on his head. He clutched the bones to his back and he did not turn around. Mr. Angel crashed through the undergrowth behind him and he screamed more animal screams until his stomping faded and his shrieking ceased. Yob ran and ran and ran until he passed the farmhouse and the broken trellis and the first cucumbers that lolled on the ground like dismemberments attached to a foreign vine. That's what

Yob thought as he burst out into the lane; his imagination was rife with rot and decay and death, with images of things withered, of things lost forever.

He hurried back down the lane—back to the manor house, back to his mother who had believed in his curse—back to his father who had created it. The skull was so, so heavy on his head. When Yob arrived at the manor house, he did not go inside. Instead, he ran across the manor grounds, past the secret places which now seemed gray and desolate, until he arrived at the manor pond. He thought it looked small, now, and he wondered how he had ever compared it to an ocean. And then he jumped in, and he let the water flow over him, and he floated underwater for a moment and he relished the ringing quiet. He dropped the bones. He pulled the skull from his head and dropped it, too, and it sank to the bottom of the pond. And then he pulled himself through the water, though he had never been given a lesson, and he broke the surface, and he gasped. The air tasted heavier than ever before.

He went inside. His father sat at the round oaken table: his fingers curled white-knuckled around a short glass of whiskey; his lips frowned in a haughty grimace; and his eyes studied the hardwood floor where a pool of amber liquid spread slowly like blood. Yob's mother, shoulders hunched, rosary hanging around her throat, swept the broken glass that surrounded her bare feet. The room was silent. They did not glance up at him as he walked past. And so Yob retreated to his bedroom.

Yob tried to read his books, to go on fantastical journeys at the manor, to imagine that things were lonely and unchanged—he tried for months and months and months—but things were very much changed for Yob. They always are, in stories like these.

After many long and empty nights of restless slumber in the manor house, after many long and listless days of tired perambulation in the muted sunlight, Yob decided to leave the

manor, again. This time, it was not for an adventure. Every moment of every day, Yob felt the goat skull on his head, heavy and tight, like a ghostly helm. It was so, so heavy. He shuffled down the lane, in the opposite direction of his ill-fated and horrific adventure. Yob walked away from the manor house—away from his uncaring parents—away from the rotting cucumbers—away from Mr. Angel—away from everything. Eventually, the lane bled into a forest, like a river whose water had lost the will to flow. Yob entered the wilderness. He still carried the specter of the bony crown on his head. It was so, so, so heavy. And he faded into the shadows beneath the trees.

Poppysmic Morphology

You always were a logophile. You loved words—the way they sounded, the way they felt, the way they tasted like raspberries or chalk or lukewarm pancakes. You said that you would eat words for every meal if you could. Once, you told me that "exigency" and "kairotic" tasted the same, like a mouthful of fudge, like something to chew and savor. When I asked why such urgent words tasted like slow things, you said that there is nothing more urgent than slowness. I never understood that. Maybe I never will.

You are no longer here to bless my ears and spin my mind with eleven-syllable words like "floccinaucinihilipilificate" (because you thought "antidisestablishmentarianism" was an eleven-syllable word for "basic bitches"). You never told me what "floccinaucinihilipilificate" means, and now I am afraid to find out. You liked to trick me with words, to weave a verbal web around me and smile coyly when I became entrapped in your logophilic latticework. But I didn't mind. I loved your passionate whimsy, your vocabularic somersaults and twirlings that whipped words around me like the flashing ribbon of a rhythm gymnast, utterly tornadic. A "sesquipedalianist synesthete," you called yourself.

After a while, after a long while of loving you and your insatiable appetite for beautiful words, I noticed that you began to favor the taste of hard words, sharp words. These words crunched between your teeth and oozed the flavor of overripe grapes and crackled like television static. You devoured these words. You said these words over and over and over—"abluvion" and "reticence" and "caliginous" and "vivisection"—these words that hissed and snarled and clawed at my ears when you said them, like an oath to some dark lexical god. You spun these barbed words into knotted ropes; they wound through our terracotta-tiled home like thorny vines that

reached and pulled and scratched and scraped and bit. Your eyes, once so brilliantly green, faded to the color of swamp-water, stagnant and dim. When I asked you why your words had hardened and sharpened, why you recited litanies of words that spoke like snakes, you said, simply, that the hard words are the best words. You told me: I learn secrets from the hard words, lessons about how to be hard myself. "Transmutation," you said. "Calcification." And you told me that these words tasted grainy and fading, like sand dragged into the ocean by the receding tide.

Then you began to write the words on the wall, first in broad red strokes. You told me: the words taste so much better when I can see them. Your body shook with giggles as you dragged crimson paint across the gray wallpaper, drawing tall and stately letters. You told me: I must look crazy, painting words on the walls. You told me: I know I look crazy and that's why I'm not crazy at all. You wrote "lugubrious" and "detritus" and "ossification" and "eternity?" in big red letters, and then your letters began to shrink. You told me: so many words, so many. You filled the walls with tiny crimson slashes and said the words were termites in your brain, and you painted "gormandization" on the wall in huge, rushed, slanted letters—and you told me that "gormandization" tasted like the coppery sting of blood.

I took the paint away from you, afraid of the power that the words had over you. I brought you to a different room in our house and read you simple stories with simple words—fairy tales and children's picturebooks and those trashy romance novels whose effortless lexicon used to lull you to sleep—but you told me that these stories were bland, that their words tasted like oatmeal and wet cardboard. When I offered that it might be okay for words not to taste like much of anything, at least sometimes, you sat bolt-up and told me: do not take my words away from me. You told me: I know what you're doing.

You were right. I tried to keep you from going back to that room, where your mind swam endless circles with those painted words. But at night, you slid from our bed and returned to that room, silent and slinking like a cat made of shadow, and you picked the lock like a master thief. You told me: the words have unlocked so many things. You pointed at your head, then, and you smiled with a lunatic glint in your eyes, now tinged the mossy, lusterless color of decaying undergrowth. And I realized that your home was not our house; your home was not with me. Your home had become that room, had become those jagged and crooked words—and they had inhabited you, too.

You began to write smaller and smaller until you traded your brushstrokes for penknifings, for miniscule scribblings that curled and overlapped and formed branching lettered systems like roots spreading their inky veins across the wall in a virus-like "patulousity." You cut the words into the wall with that thin blade, and then you cackled and whispered and salivated and smacked your lips, heard only by you and the words scrawled on the wall. That's what you thought, then. You thought you were alone with your holy words. But I heard, too. I heard these words devour you.

Soon you ran out of space to carve on the wall, but the words demanded a new canvas, and your infernal desire to taste the words, to "masticate" and "chymify" and let the verbal flavor dribble from your tongue and down your chin—your insatiability demanded taste, taste, taste. You told me: I'm out of space on the walls of the word room. You told me: I have an idea where to carve my words next.

I hid every blade; I locked every drawer; I frantically combed the house for anything sharp, anything pronged or needled or serrated, anything that might be used to cut or slice or slash or gash. (You told me: my favorite cutting word is "lacerate.") And when I had done all of

this, when I had locked the many new locks on the door to that room and tossed away the keys, I allowed myself a short word, a brittle and uneasy word, a one-syllable word: “safe.”

But you snuck into that room—somehow you evaded the manifold bolts and latches and locks and clasps—and somehow you pulled a nail from the pine-wooden trim that wrapped around that room. You crept into that room and you pried and wrenched the nail from the wood just after I had drifted to sleep, blanketed in my faux security. You dragged the nail’s pointed tip across your soft flesh, which yielded like warm butter and wept in pulsing rivulets. You sliced your skin in lexical spirals and angles; you wrote your beautiful and hard words again in bloodred ink. This is what I imagine happened to you, my love. I don’t want to imagine it. But I can’t help it.

In the morning, I found you sprawled naked on the floor of that room—the red letters on the walls surrounded you as if keeping vigil—a crimson pool stained the burnt-brown tiles—your chest heaved and palpitated—your lips panted and gasped—every inch of your skin was tattooed with alphabetic lacerations that breathed blood. The letters were cursive and runic, stylized and ancient; the words sobbed like red rainfall, like a bloody torrent. And you told me, with your final, gasping exhalation: the words taste so much better when I can feel them.

The Piecemeal Story of How Alcohol Became My Lover

or, I'm Drinking Rum as I Write This

2012 - 2021

I was thirteen, and I stood by the bar at my uncle's wedding reception in Ireland. Above me, a massive white tent yawned and formed a ballroom-sized space where my family gathered to celebrate the sacred act of matrimony, Irish-Catholic style: lots and lots of alcohol.

Round tables draped in white fabric crowded around the dance floor behind me, where middle-aged wedding guests twirled and gyrated to the music pumping from the speakers on either side of the pop-up stage. The DJ bobbed his head and chatted with a bridesmaid. The room softly glowed purple with the lights surrounding the DJ's stage. I leaned against the lacquered bar and scanned the crowd for my parents. They sat at a table to the left of the dance floor, chatting with my grandparents, on the other side of the room. Far enough away, I thought. I turned to my cousin Madi, who leaned beside me. Her green eyes glinted like emeralds; her face brimmed with freckles; her hair fell like a burgundy waterfall onto the bar. She slid a cold bottle of cloudy white liquid to my waiting hand, and I read the label: Smirnoff Ice. I had no idea what that was.

"Rite of passage in this family to get drunk for the first time at thirteen." She grinned and turned to Ashley, her half sister, who had just approached the bar. Ashley had a man's necktie looped around her head like a headband, and her bare feet poked from beneath her long, sweeping bridesmaid's gown. She swayed against the bar and blinked her unfocused eyes at us.

Madi pulled at the drooping end of the necktie. “You did it for me, Ash, three years ago. Now it’s time for me to pass on the tradition.”

“For sure,” Ashley laughed. “But not too much, Madi. He can’t be hungover tomorrow. Aunt Theresa and Uncle Joe will kill us if they find out.” She winked at me and tottered back to the dance floor.

Madi nodded solemnly and twisted the cap from the bottle. “They won’t find out.” She waved to the bartender and requested a glass. She poured the Smirnoff Ice into the glass, and it looked to me like a fancy cup of Sprite. “We’ll just be careful. Right, cuz?”

I nodded and lifted the drink to my lips. The alcohol tasted like soda. I imagined it was Sprite, just better, and quickly downed the drink. After two more glasses, I loped to the dance floor with Madi, feeling light and giddy, like a bobber on the surface of a lake. I danced the tango with Ashley before spinning my little sister around and around until we both collapsed to the dance floor, our bodies wracked with giggles.

Later, I returned to the bar, wanting another Smirnoff Ice. Madi, already there, obliged and poured it into a new glass. Then she muttered something about needing a smoke, and she hurried out of the tent, leaving me at the bar by myself. I sipped on the Smirnoff Ice—I had requested a straw for my drink and felt incredibly sophisticated—and turning back toward the dance floor, I saw my parents approaching. I froze. My hand clamped tighter around the glass, still half-full, and I forced a smile onto my face when they sidled up to the bar on either side of me. My father had shed his jacket, and he wore a white button-down shirt that stretched around his rounded belly, with his green tie loosened from his collar. My mother, her hair characteristically poofed, looked up at me—at thirteen, I was already taller than she was.

"What've you got there?" she asked, a hint of suspicion in her voice. "We saw you over here with Madi."

I gulped. "Just a Sprite. I need the caffeine to keep up my energy for dancing." I felt like a rubber band stretched taut, or like a piece of glass. "And Madi left a minute ago. She went to have a smoke."

My mother cocked an eyebrow at me, but she seemed to trust my nonsensical claim about the Sprite, which I had never willingly requested before in my life. She knew that I hated Sprite—that I hated all soda, with its carbonated bubbles that burned my tongue like sparks from a firework—and that I had no idea that Sprite would not, in fact, help me dance long into the night, since it contained no caffeine.

She turned to my father and shook her head. "She shouldn't be smoking. She's only sixteen."

My father shrugged and sipped the froth from his new pint of Guinness. He glanced from my mother to me. "Want to try?" He offered me the glass of dark brown beer and winked. "Your first taste of alcohol, but don't tell your mother I let you have a taste."

She rolled her eyes. "Whatever, Joe." She chuckled and wandered away from the bar, calling after her newlywed brother.

My father handed me the glass, and I took a cautionary sip. "Ugh, this tastes like liquid bread!" I crinkled my nose and stuck my tongue out, and I almost spilled the beer in my rush to give it back to him.

"It's an acquired taste, son." He laughed and took a long swig. "But now you know—alcohol isn't made to taste good." He placed a hand on my shoulder and looked down at me, his eyes suddenly darkened with seriousness. "We have a lot of problems with alcohol on my

side of the family, Alex. Bad problems. Keep away from drinking if you can, at least until it's legal for you to buy a beer for yourself. He grinned tightly and squeezed my shoulder. "But hey," he said, exhaling a long breath, "I don't want to spoil the night with a lecture. Have fun tonight! Get back out on that dance floor, buddy!" And he set off in pursuit of my mother.

The glass of Smirnoff Ice in my hand felt as heavy as one of my father's dumbbells, which he kept tucked away in an unfinished room in our basement back in Kansas City. I stood at the bar for a while, slowly slurping my drink and wondering why I would ever want to acquire the taste for something like Guinness, until Madi returned from outside. She smelled like cigarettes, like my wrinkled grandmother who had died of lung cancer. Madi slumped against the bar and ordered two shots of Fireball before looking at me with a wicked gleam in her eyes. "The finale," she said. The bartender handed her two tiny glasses of amber liquid. "Shots."

We sat at the nearest table, and Madi was careful to position my back to the dance floor and the rest of the tables. "Ready?" she asked. "Do you know what to do?"

I thought of actors in movies, who always threw back shots quickly and unflinchingly. I nodded, and she counted us down. "Three… two… one!"

I lifted the tiny glass to my mouth and tilted my head all the way back, until I was looking straight up at the top of the tent. It glowed purple and hazy. I was shocked as the Fireball's swirling cinnamon sweetness slid easily down my throat, and I slammed my glass against the table like a movie star. One quick motion, I thought.

Madi gaped at me, her lips curling into a wide smile. "Shit, Alex, you took that like a pro!" I smiled back at her. I liked the sound of that.

I followed her back to the dance floor where I spun and swayed until most of the wedding guests had retired for the night. My parents had to drag me out of the tent and to the hotel, up to

bed. As I drifted to sleep, I felt as though I had been let in on a secret—a secret that seemed dangerous to my father and therefore seemed even more intoxicating to me. The lightness of the alcohol and the secret was like a bubble in my brain that tried to float up through my skull and into the sky.

Time until next drink: three years.

I was seventeen, and I woke up on a couch in my friend Tyler's basement. I blinked into the darkness and fumbled for my phone, pulling it from my pocket. I had no notifications—no unread texts, no missed calls—and a nearly drained battery. In the faint glow of the screen, I noticed two things: the clock on my phone told me that it was after four in the morning, so I had been passed out on the couch for almost five hours; and my favorite shirt was stained with vomit. I groaned. Fuck, I thought. What happened?

Tyler's parents had left the city for the weekend, and they had trusted Tyler to watch his brothers and the house. Soon after, Tyler had shepherded his younger brothers to their rooms upstairs, handing each of them a Nintendo DS and giving them a stern command not to leave their bedrooms. By nine o'clock, there were seven tipsy high schoolers lounged in Tyler's basement, sipping cheap beers and complaining about ACT scores.

Tommy and Bailey huddled together on the beige-carpeted floor. Tommy's dark, ragged hair hung around his face like a curtain of dried seaweed, and his bony arm circled Bailey's shoulders. Bailey wore ripped jeans fashionably spattered with green paint. Her face was round and happy. They leaned their heads together and ignored the rest of us, speaking only to each other in clandestine whispers and giggles.

In the armchair, Elsa sat in Tyler's lap. Tyler was short and rather generic looking, and his irises were almost as black as his pupils. He didn't speak much—ever—but occasionally shared a wry comment, and each time he did, Elsa erupted with laughter. She was blonde and pretty and smart and intimidating. The previous semester, my friends had tried to set me up with her for winter formal. Of course, I wildly overthought it—I demanded that I be more original than a Frozen-inspired proposal—but I never asked her. I chickened out, in the end. In high school, I had learned to hate dancing and large social gatherings, so winter formal sounded like a specially designed circle of Hell, just for me. Not to mention that I would have had to talk, one-on-one, with a girl. My all-boys high school had not prepared me for that. After my blunder, Elsa started dating Tyler, and they seemed happy. And I was glad for them, really.

Hunter and Curtis and I sat on the sunken leather couch, chatting about cross country and laughing at how Curtis got caught stealing vodka from his mother. He had taken half of the vodka, refilled the bottle with water, and put the bottle back into the freezer; when his mother found the half-frozen bottle the next day, Curtis had been grounded for two weeks.

Then Curtis pulled a glass bottle of Jack Daniel's from his drawstring bag and grinned mischievously at me. One of his front teeth was bigger than the other. He looked like an imp, his eyes always glittering with future shenanigans. We had been friends since kindergarten, when we had bonded over our shared love of Hot Wheels cars. "Hey, heavyweight," he said, bumping my shoulder. "I hear you've never blacked out before."

"Nope," I replied. "Still don't know my limits." I felt a swell of uneasy pride—my reputation as a heavy drinker had grown over the past year. As my friends bought fake IDs and brought beer and liquor to our weekend hangouts, I drank as much as my friends did, but I had never found myself heaving over a toilet. All of my friends had, at least once.

"Well, it's a blessing and a curse, right?" Curtis twisted the cap from the bottle and offered me the whiskey. An evil smile crept onto his face. "Let's find out which one it is."

Everyone's eyes turned to me, and Hunter nodded eagerly. His forehead was tall and square, and his brown eyes squatted underneath it. He spoke more matter-of-factly than a seventeen-year-old should; often, he sounded like a second grade teacher trying to give a college-level lecture. "Your turn, Alex. You have to drink as much as you can before you puke. You have to try. Then we'll all know."

Feeling grimly determined—I had a reputation to uphold—I had sighed and taken the bottle from Curtis, and I had lifted the whiskey to my lips and took a long pull. After that, all I remembered was a flashing image of a half-empty bottle and the feeling of bile gathering in my stomach and pushing up my throat.

I slumped further into the couch and closed my eyes. My brain throbbed as though it were being beaten by mallets. They just propped me up and left me here, I thought. Assholes.

After a moment of stewing contemplation, I forced myself to my feet and staggered up the stairs. The main floor was dark and quiet. I checked the couches in the living room for the dark sleeping shapes of my friends. None of them were there. I rubbed my bleary eyes, tramped up to the top floor, and knocked on Tyler's bedroom door. I leaned my forehead against the cool wood, and the headache abated, if only a little.

"Um, uh, hang on!" Tyler stammered. Behind the door, I heard hushed cursing—in two voices. Elsa was in there, too. I backed up from the door quickly, almost tripping. "Who is it?" he asked.

"Hey, it's Alex, um, so it seems like this is a bad time, but, uh, I just woke up, y'know, on the couch in the basement, and I just wanted to see if anyone else was still here."

"They left. You can go home, too."

"Okay, sounds good. Um, sorry for, uh, interrupting." I spun toward the stairs and hurried down. "Good thing I knocked," I said to myself as I crossed the front lawn, heading toward my car. "The last thing I needed tonight was to open the door on Tyler losing his virginity." I shook the sleepy, tipsy fog from my mind and drove myself home.

Time until next blackout: eight months.

I was eighteen, and I stumbled into my parents' house sometime between three and four. I had just fumblingly texted them an excuse for my late arrival: I had driven one of my friends home on the way back to our house. I dragged myself upstairs to my bedroom, and I collapsed, fully clothed, on top of my bedsheets. The lights were still on.

When my parents saw me that way in the morning—my mother had knocked, but I had still been deep in a sleepy stupor—they woke me gently and asked that I come sit with them in their room. I followed them groggily and with a growing certainty that I was in a lot of trouble. Oh, shit, I thought. I'm done for. I sat warily in a chair in the corner of their bedroom. They sat on the bed, closer together than I had seen them in years.

"You drove Katya home last night," my mother stated, her face blank and inscrutable. My father sat beside her, silent. He would not meet my eyes.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Her place is on my way home."

"She couldn't drive herself?"

"She doesn't have a car."

"And you could drive her?"

"I have a car."

"Maybe not for much longer," my father interjected.

I opened my mouth to respond but thought better of it, and I bit back a snide retort. I let out a long, slow gasp of breath.

"Alex," my mother said, "drinking and driving is one thing. And don't try to deny that you did; you were passed out like a frat boy this morning when we woke you up. But drinking and driving when someone else is counting on you for their safety?" She paused, and she looked at me, and she pressed her lips into a thin line.

"You have a curfew now," my father continued. "You'll be home by midnight. Any later and you'll lose the privilege of your car."

"But it's my car—"

"It's a privilege. And you have to earn privileges." His sharpened face softened for a moment, and he looked away from me, out the window beside my parents' bed, before returning his gaze to me. "Look, buddy. We know you drink. We know your friends drink. And as long as you're being reasonably safe—that means not drinking and driving, and especially not drinking and driving with other passengers in your car—your mother and I can't expect to keep you from being a high schooler. Drinking is part of that. And your mother and I would be hypocrites if we said we didn't drink and do some dumb things when we were your age."

"I never drank and drove," my mother grumbled.

"The point is," my father said, "we need to trust you. We need to trust you when you tell us that you're never going to do this again."

"I'll never drink and drive again," I said. The words felt like dry paste in my mouth.

"You should know what'll happen if you don't mean it," my mother said, her jaw still tense and her voice hard like tempered steel. "Last year, my office got a case about a drunk driver who hit and killed a woman walking at night. The driver was a twenty-three year old law student at UMKC. He had great grades; he was a good looking guy; he had everything going for him. And he decided to drive drunk one night and he killed somebody." She let those words hang thick in the air between us. My father nodded solemnly. "Now he's got a felony conviction and he'll never be able to practice law, let alone find a decent job. And who's going to marry a felon who killed someone because he was reckless and dumb?"

"Nobody," I answered, feeling very, very small. My voice could have been a whisper carried away by the slightest breeze.

"Never again," she stated. "You made it home safe this time. Next time—and there will not be a next time—you might not."

I looked then at my father, then back at my mother, but it was clear that the conversation was over. I stood and padded silently from their room, and I shut the door behind me. My thoughts swirled with guilt and fear and shame, and with the strained, unfounded resolve that I would keep my word.

Time until next drinking and driving: four months.

I was nineteen, and I shuffled into my dorm room in Walker Tower. After a long Tuesday of classes and braving the chilly November winds in Oklahoma, I was exhausted, and I felt the

now-familiar buzz behind my temples flicker and hum with desire. I pressed my eyes shut, just for a moment, and the ringing in my head crescendoed and faded, like the last resounding note of an orchestra. Vibrations lingered at the tips of my fingers.

I dropped my black backpack onto my unmade bed and pulled open my closet. Inside, a crumpled five-dollar bill lay on top of my long wooden trunk. Somebody must've started early tonight, I thought. Pocketing the bill, I leaned into the closet and pulled a plastic bottle of vodka from behind the trunk. It was empty. I cursed and wrapped it in a blanket before striding to the trash room and dropping the bottle down the chute.

In the dorms, my high school reputation as a heavy drinker had folded deeper into my identity. Booze flowed from my room like a torrent, or like blood from an open wound. Anyone on my floor who wanted alcohol knew to come to room 1013W. If both my roommate and I were out, they left payment for what they took from my stash, plus a little extra for the convenience of not having to buy the booze themselves. But they weren't supposed to leave an empty bottle. That's, like, the only rule. That and don't get caught by the RA. Though Erik would probably turn a blind eye to it, anyway, I mused.

Twenty minutes later, I pushed open the glass door to University Liquor. The store resembled an unfinished basement: its concrete walls and floor were hard and cold; bright white light bulbs glared from the cross-beamed ceiling; long cluttered shelves of multicolored bottles crowded the narrow aisles; and cases of beer were stacked haphazardly in the back. The only part of the store with any carpeting—which I figured to be the height of refinement for University Liquor—was the wine and craft beer section, where I never ventured, anyway. I always knew exactly where I was going in that store. Furthest aisle on the left, halfway down, bottom shelf. I

crouched and pulled a plastic bottle of 100-proof Heaven Hill from among the extensive selection of cheap vodkas.

The man at the register, who I assumed to be the owner—he was always working, no matter the time of day I visited the store—looked like a character from the original Mad Max. A faded baseball cap covered his bald head, and tattoos reached from underneath the collar of his stained t-shirt like sharp black fingers. The only hair on his head grew in triangles on his cheeks; his jawline was shaved and the points of the triangles stopped just short of his lips. It seemed to me like inverted mutton chops.

"This all for ya?" he drolled.

"Yeah, uh, that's it."

"Twelve eighty."

I handed him my debit card but kept my fake ID in my pocket. He fiddled with the register before handing me my card and receipt. "Have a nice night." I signed the receipt and walked out to my car, grinning to myself. The weird owner had not asked for my ID. "Officially a regular," I said to myself. "No more worrying about getting caught with the fake."

By the time I got back to my dorm room, the buzzing in my temples had returned, crashing into my thoughts like stampeding cavalry. Jack, my roommate, sat at his desk. He was skinny and muscled with tousled, tawny hair, and his work ethic rivaled only my penchant for laziness. He pored over a piece of looseleaf paper covered in penciled numbers and symbols. "Welcome home," he mumbled.

I grunted in reply as I set the Heaven Hill on my bed and pulled a single-serve Minute Maid orange juice from the minifridge. In a practiced move, I twisted the cap from the plastic bottle and quickly drank two gulps of orange juice. Then, I refilled the small bottle with the new

vodka and replaced the cap. I shook my homemade cocktail before twirling the lid off again and guzzling half of the drink. The buzzing in my brain subsided, like a ripple finally reaching the shore. I sighed loudly with relief.

Jack glanced up at me before returning to his calculus homework. “Screwdriver night?”

“Special occasion.”

“Yeah?” he swiveled his chair to face me and grinned. “What’s the occasion?”

I flopped onto my bed and opened my laptop. “It’s the first Tuesday we’ve had in a week. That calls for a celebration.” Jack chuckled and shook his head before engrossing himself again in schoolwork. I began to type my anthropology paper and sipped on my cheap cocktail. No more ripples disrupted my thoughts that night.

Time until next craving: two days.

I was twenty, and I closed my eyes as my girlfriend brushed mascara onto my eyelashes. It was Halloween, and my roommates and I were throwing a massive house party—costumes required. Good costumes. My roommates and I had agreed that anyone arriving in a basketball jersey would be turned away at the door.

“Hold still,” Susie commanded, carefully raking the tiny brush through my eyelash.

“I am.”

“Not when you’re talking. I’m almost done.”

I huffed in reply, but I stayed as still as I could.

When she was finished, I looked up into the mirror and saw myself and Susie: Prince Eric standing beside Princess Ariel. I wore a tight white shirt, rolled jeans, and black combat boots; red fabric wound around my waist like a belt; my hair, eyebrows, and now eyelashes were all

dyed black. Susie's blonde hair was now candy-red, and she wore a purple fabric seashell bikini and a long, flowing green skirt that fanned into waves near her feet.

"We look good," she said, smirking into the mirror. She laced her fingers with mine and squeezed my hand. "Thank you." And she looked up at me and smiled as though I had pulled the stars from the night sky and gifted her a constellation.

By the time we descended to the ground floor of the house—we had taken lots of pictures together, and then more with my roommate Katie and her boyfriend, who had dressed up as Peter Pan and Wendy—the party was in full swing. Music thrummed against the walls and seemed to rise from the floorboards. Red light bathed the sweaty mass of costumed partygoers in an ethereal, haunted glow. Susie and I waded through the crowd on the improvised dance floor—my roommates and I had shoved all the furniture against the living-room walls—and we pushed into the kitchen.

The kitchen was cluttered with booze and people. A quirky collection of multicolored shot glasses huddled at the base of a forest of liquor bottles, and a pair of orange five-gallon jugs—labeled Regular and Turbo—sat atop the faux-marble countertops beside three towers of red Solo cups. Reece, the tall and lanky stoner who had lived down the hall from me in the dorms, wore an inflatable unicorn around his waist and blundered around the kitchen, knocking into people and spilling drinks. Then he turned to me, blinked his bloodshot eyes, and a faraway grin eased onto his face.

"Hey, dude. Who and how are you?"

I looked at Susie, who had taken slow steps back toward the living room. Good luck, she mouthed, and disappeared into the other room. I glared at her before glancing back at Reece,

who still stared at me, his eyes glazed. I shoved my hands into my pockets. “I’m good, y’know. My party and all.”

Reece squinted his eyes at me before gasping with recognition. “Bro, I totally didn’t recognize you! You’re, like, incognito or something.”

“Yeah. Something like that.” I tried to step around the horn of the inflated unicorn, but Reece occupied the entire space between me and the jugs of punch.

“You have, like, eyebrows now. I didn’t know you had those.”

“Thanks,” I replied dryly. “I’m going to go around you now, so I can get a cup of punch.”

“Oh! Shit, my bad.” Reece stepped to the side and inadvertently squished a friend of mine between the wall and his inflated equine rump. He didn’t notice. “Alex, so sorry. You gotta turn up at your own party! It’s super nice that you can just crash here.”

My friend scowled at us as she wriggled free. I grimaced in apology before moving around Reece’s costume. “Yeah, so, actually, I’m taking it easy tonight. Susie was super excited about our couple’s costume, so I’m not going to ruin the night by getting trashed.”

“Ah,” Reece said, winking. “I feel you.”

“That’s not what I mean.” I grabbed a red Solo cup from the top of a stack and began to fill it with Turbo punch. “She was so pumped for tonight. Ariel and Eric. She grew up on the beach in Boca Ratón, so The Little Mermaid was, like, her hero.”

Reece stared at me absently and nodded his head as though he were fending off sleep in a lecture hall. “Totally.”

I opened my mouth, closed it, and shook my head. “You don’t care.”

“Honestly, man? Not at all.” He turned his eyes slowly toward the back door. “I’m gonna head to the shed and rip on the bong again.” He began to amble that way, straight into me.

I pushed past him, downing my cup of punch in the few steps I needed to cross the kitchen. The buzzing in my head returned suddenly with the bitter Everclear sting in the punch; the rumbling, cloudy impulse to turn and refill my cup crashed into my thoughts like a line of bristling spears. I shook my head, and I plunged into the crowd to look for Susie. And here, my memory flickered and faded to black emptiness.

The next morning, I woke up with my cheek pressed to a couch cushion and with a pounding hangover, as though a rain of bullets were buffeting my brain. The air smelled like stale vomit, and lifting my face from the couch, I saw my small bedroom trash can positioned beneath my head. I had thrown up during the night. A short stack of five red Solo cups leered at me from the floor; during my blacked-out time at the party, I had scrawled my name in jagged letters on the bottom-most cup. And then I saw Susie lying on the floor beside the trash can. Sometime during the night, she had pulled my Mr. Rogers t-shirt over her costume and swapped her skirt for a pair of my gray sweatpants. Her eyes were open, and they were red and swollen—from tears or lack of sleep, I did not know. I suspected both. She raised her head from the floor, and we stared at each other for a long moment, not speaking, as the horrific guilt of how I had ruined the night—how I had shattered her lifelong dream of being a mermaid princess with her handsome prince, and how I had replaced it with a sleepless night of caring for her drunk boyfriend—crashed upon me like a breaking wave, scattering my thoughts into a single word: sober.

Time until next drink: eight months.

I was twenty-two, and I lounged in the living room and played Spicy Guess Who with my roommate Austin. He was tall and kind; and his hair was blonde and curly and always unkempt; and he spoke often about his family farm and the inimitable pleasure of using a potato fork.

I sunk into the black leather armchair, placed my bowl of pasta on my stomach, and scooped a noodle into my mouth. I wore a white undershirt pockmarked with stains, black mesh athletic shorts, and blue slippers; my beard was long and bushy and red; and an open bottle of pinot grigio dangled from my left hand.

"Your turn," I said, looking down at the rows of names leaning up from the Guess Who board. The names on the cards had been changed, replaced with people we knew—exes, friends, hookups, and even ourselves. I took a long swig from the bottle.

"Alex, use a goddamn glass," Austin said, grinning across the coffee table.

"What?" I replied innocently. "I lost the cork. No need to get a glass dirty."

"If I look in the trash, will I find the cork on top?"

"Nope. Not if you don't look."

Austin rolled his eyes and concentrated again on the names still in play. Then he looked up at me. "Did you ever see a future with this person?"

I glanced down at my card, at the name of the person Austin was trying to guess. I nodded. Susie and I had broken up over a year before—my months-long sobriety had coincided with a months-long spell of passionless nights and incessant argument—and then I had dated Morgan, a short and bubbly sorority girl whose heart I had broken in the winter, whose favorite color was pink and favorite movie was Ratatouille, and whose plan for the future, I had learned, was to prioritize her professional career at the expense of my own—among other hidden disagreements. But I had loved them both.

The buzzing behind my ears roared into a humming, near-manic desire that flowed through my mind like a coursing river. It was snapping and crackling energy; it was familiar, intimate, and beating like a heart. I drank a long pull from the wine bottle. “Yes,” I said. “I did. Used to. Once.”

Austin flicked most of the names down; only three remained standing and in play. I lifted the bottle to my lips and drank until it was empty. I stood, paused to gather my balance, and shuffled to the fridge, to grab another bottle and to lose another cork. “You’re going down next round,” I called over my shoulder. “Don’t make me ask you the dreaded ‘Does this person like you?’ question. That’s always the worst to puzzle out.”

“Maybe for you,” Austin said, a chuckle on the edge of his voice. “Everyone likes me.”

“There’s an apartment of girls in Callaway that would say otherwise, my friend.”

“Eh, screw them. I’m still nice to them anyways. And get me a Mike’s while you’re up, would you?”

I returned to the table and handed him the cold bottle of hard lemonade. I plopped into the chair with my corkless bottle of wine, and I studied the ten remaining names on my board, trying to think of another question to ask. But the buzzing in my temples rumbled like an approaching locomotive, like a seismic vibration deep within the earth.

Later, after we had put the game away and after I had finished the second bottle of wine, Austin pulled me aside. He asked me quietly, “Hey, dude, you’re okay, right? Like, I don’t have to be worried about you?”

We stood in the kitchen on the white tile. A pot and colander leaned out of the sink, as though beckoning me to clean them. I looked him straight in the eyes, and I swallowed the truth

like lava, or like a shard of glass. “Of course not,” I said. “I’ve got everything under control. If there’s a problem, you’ll be able to tell.”

He smiled at me, and shook his head, and agreed; and for a moment, I believed myself, too. And then I poured myself another drink.

Time until next denial: two weeks.

I am twenty-three, and I sit on the couch and write this tale, this shambled recollection of memories and mishaps and truth. They are incomplete ramblings—so much has been left out! changed! forgotten! revoked! invented for narrative ease and to quell the rustlings of my conscience!—and I feel quite dissatisfied. My fingers hover over the keyboard, as though waiting for some signal that will never come. My dog sleeps beside me. All is quiet.

I stand. I walk outside and I lock the door to my house and I get into my car. Again, my thoughts have aligned to a singular purpose. I drive down Lindsey Street, to the crumbling and tagged brick building behind the Del Rancho, and I park in the overgrown lot. It is raining. I look out at the building, at the spray-painted letters curling along the brickwork, at the black mat beneath the black door whose black paint peels and reveals white wood beneath.

Supposedly, they hold Alcoholics Anonymous meetings here. I think about going inside. Maybe there is an AA meeting going on now. I haven’t checked the schedule, not in a long while. Maybe I should go inside anyway. Just to check. But I remember: Higher power bogus. I haven’t believed in God since I was sixteen, and I’m not about to start. I shake my head and stare intensely at the steering wheel.

I believe in responsibility to myself—ha!—some twisted responsibility that cannot be shuffled off to some celestial being or “higher power” to whom I must surrender my agency. I

believe I must not capitulate but conquer. And the battle is ongoing. To Ragnarok or salvation? I often wonder. Will the battle ever end?

I think about catharsis, about relief. I think about writing and about the impossibility of representing truth. Could I ever represent enough? Enough for it to be true? Enough for it to be true enough? I sit in my car and I look again at the black door and I pull out a napkin and a pen, and I write a few scattered words:

> the artifice slipped, cracked, crumbled—inevitability seeped, crept, gushed like a deluge in the shortest softest moment—it filled me up—there was no time to drown—and then it was—and so it is.

But I'm no poet. I know this. I shove the napkin into my pocket. I have tried for years to describe my long and winding and halting courtship with alcohol. I cannot. This piece is another failed attempt. Our love affair lies beyond my ability to capture in words; only can I see it in memory. Rain spatters my windshield like machine-gun fire, or like the growling, bellicose wail of that certain beast who spits thunder beneath my skin.

I drive home and I walk back into the house and I sit again beside my snoring dog, whose tail twitches as he dreams. But soon I stand, and I enter the kitchen and I pull the glass bottle of Bacardi from the drawer beneath the microwave. A rum and coke promises to quiet the stirrings in my mind—to silence the persistent buzzing that has pulsed inside my brain and vibrated deep within me for years—if only for a moment.

Time until next drink: five minutes.

If You Feed a Crow a Finger

When the crow careened through the open window, Marge was slumped into her creased leather armchair, sipping from a bottle of top-shelf vodka and minding her own goddamn business. That damn bird had the nerve to fly into her farewell party unannounced—and that was before it started to bleed like a neon sign.

The crow croaked shrilly as it crashed to the hardwood floor in front of Marge with a crunching thud. Marge winced with sudden empathy before gathering her face into a frown. “The fuck are you doing in my house?” she griped. The crow shuddered in response, flapping its wings feebly and dragging itself across the floor. A long red line of luminescent blood like a burning scar, or like a vein of magma, stained the hardwood in its wake. And she thought: Well, fuck. And she thought: Blood isn’t supposed to glow like that.

At first, Marge tried to ignore the crow. She curled her wrinkled, clawlike fingers around the arms of the leather chair and closed her eyes and counted to one hundred—maybe the creepy fucker was just a figment of her drunk imagination—but when she opened her eyes, the crow was still there. She drank more from the glass bottle of vodka, but that didn’t help, either. The crow still quivered and leaked incandescent blood onto the floor.

“You’re going to make me get up and help you,” she said. “Dammit. Today of all fucking days.” She grimaced as she pushed herself out of the chair, straining with her feeble arms, and she wobbled as she stood. “Whoa, let’s get vertical,” she said, steadying herself against the chair. “You can handle standing up, you drunk old bat.”

Marge shuffled over to the crow, and when she crouched beside it, she felt her arthritic knees grind like millstones. “Goddammit, shit,” she winced. “Fuck getting old.” She poked the

crow with the end of her vodka bottle. It cawed weakly and continued to shake and bleed. And she thought: Maybe it's here to kill me. And she thought: That would cure me of the suspense.

She set the bottle onto the hardwood and lifted the crow from the floor. Cradling it in her withered arms, she felt a surge of maternal feeling. She gagged audibly at the emotion. "You wouldn't want me as your mother," she told the crow. "I'd be a shit parent. Just ask my kids." Groaning, she forced herself to stand again. She carried the crow into the kitchen and laid it gently onto the cold granite counter, where it shivered as though it were full of tiny earthquakes.

She shuffled back to the living room to get her vodka. Lifting the glass bottle to her lips, she took a long, long drink—to stamp out that stupid fucking sentimentality—and then her silent, slippered footfalls brought her back to the kitchen. The crow's piteous wheezing and croaking were the only sounds in Marge's house; its shallow breathing echoed like whispers in a cave.

Marge had thrown out all of her clocks; she reasoned that there was no use telling the time when her time was almost up. The usual muted whir of the refrigerator was gone; she had emptied and unplugged it earlier that day. She'd eaten her final meal—chicken fingers and fries from her favorite local fast food restaurant, Chucky's Chicken & Wings—and she'd devoured the food as though she were eating for the first time, not the last. The fried chicken had been so fucking greasy and so fucking wonderful. She salivated at the memory, and she almost wished that she hadn't given up—almost. She looked back at the crow. And she thought: If I were bleeding freaky glowing blood, I'd want a goddamn snack. And she thought: Chicken fingers—there's an idea.

She crossed the kitchen to her old block of silvery steel carving knives. She slid a long, curved knife from the block; the knife hissed as it left its narrow alcove, and the metal glinted in the red glow of the crow's blood, like a sharp sliver of pain.

"This is going to hurt like a motherfucker," Marge grumbled. "But what the shit, I don't need my fingers anymore—not where I'm going." She chuckled sardonically as she padded over to the granite countertop where the crow lay, heaving and palpitating and leaking luminous blood. "Hope you're hungry," she said, drinking deeply from the vodka. "You're lucky I'm already shithead crazy. If I were any sort of sane, I'd keep these useful shitsticks—not that you'd know much about that." She waggled her fingers at the crow. "Say bye-bye." And then she thought: I really am going fucking nuts. And then she thought: Might as well have fun with it while it lasts. And then she thought: I hope that's not much longer.

She placed her left hand onto the kitchen counter and splayed her fingers against the granite; she leveled the gleaming knife above her smallest finger; and she chopped it from her hand as though it were a carrot, or the stem of a fresh, dewy bunch of broccoli. Warm blood spurted from her new finger-stump and drenched the counter, mixing with the crow's glowing blood. A heavy, coppery smell invaded the kitchen. And Marge screamed like a banshee, as though the sound had been ripped from her throat. But there was no one else in the house to hear her shrieks—and Marge was okay with that, thank you very fucking much.

She poured vodka onto her finger-stump and screamed again, quieter this time, the burning pain of the alcohol just an echo of the sharp agony that she had felt when the blade had bit into her skin and cleaved through bone. She unleashed a torrent of curses—on God and Jesus and her parents and her stupid fucking hand, dammit, shit, fuck—but mostly, she cursed herself for being alone with a bottle of vodka and a wack-ass crow when all she wanted to do was die already. And she thought: Please, soon. And she thought: Please.

Then, after the pain subsided to a muted ache, she lifted her severed finger to her face and pressed it to her lips. It was still warm. "Of course not," she mused. "Of course the finger can no

longer feel." She dropped it onto the counter and watched in morbid fascination as the crow pecked at her finger, lifted it with its pointed beak, and swallowed it whole as a snake swallows a mouse. After a few shuddering gulps, her little finger was gone. Marge felt an uncertain thrill race up her spine, down her arms, and into her remaining fingertips. "The things I do for others," she muttered. She took a long drink of vodka. "They should canonize me, goddammit. I'm a fucking saint over here."

Every hour, Marge guillotined another finger and fed it to the crow, until her hands shrunk into bony, insect-like mandibles caked with dried, crusted blood—only her thumbs and forefingers remained on each hand. As she chopped, she told the crow stories: of her many riotous nights of booze-fueled debauchery when she was in college; of her ex-husband's affair with her ex-best friend, Laura, that bitch; of her daughter's motorcycle accident in Warsaw; and of her eldest son's fucking disastrous eighth-grade graduation. "The only one I can remember," she said, "and it's not a fond memory. The little shit was so nervous that he pooped his pants in the car, and I had to clean it all up—revolting. Can you believe it?" She sipped vodka whenever her mind buzzed, agitated, like a swarm of bees trapped in a glass jar; the vodka made the bees less angry.

As the hours passed, the crow's bleeding slowed and slowed, until the glowing blood no longer oozed between its feathers, and the crow fluttered around the house, pecking at framed photographs of Marge—always with some fucker or another from one of the stories she had told. And she thought: Screw them. And she thought: Where the fuck are they all now?

Then the crow flew away, out the open window, as though it had never been there at all, as though it had never fallen into Marge's home and choked down six of her fingers. "Not even a goodbye," she said. "Ungrateful asshole."

Marge returned to the cracked leather armchair and slumped back into it. She pressed each of her bloodied finger-stumps to her dry, cracked lips; hot bolts of pain shot up her wrist and into her arm as she kissed each stub. Then, clutching the bottle of vodka with her remaining fingers, she lifted it and drank until the bottle was empty. She closed her eyes, and she did not open them again. And she thought: Fucking finally.

Driving to Heaven

A rusted red pickup truck waited alone outside the Desert Bar as the sun slipped behind the horizon in Wamsutter, Wyoming. The Desert Bar squatted beside one the few paved roads in Wamsutter; it was a short and narrow building with a corrugated tin roof and barred, hexagonal windows flanking the front door. Neon signs shone through the glass and into the waning light. Above the door, a plywood sign had been nailed to the flaking, sand-colored siding. The bar's name stood in tall black letters in the center of the sign, between two hand-painted images: on the left, a jolly man in a white hardhat and overalls held a beer; on the right, an oil rig rose proudly from the countryside. But the images were faded, now. The man looked translucent, like a ghost, and the oil rig had begun to disappear into the plywood.

A bearded man stepped out of the bar and stumbled into the darkening night. He wore stained jeans and a white t-shirt, and his hair was straw-colored and tousled as though it had been styled by the wind. A silver chain circled his throat; a cross pendant hung from the chain and lay against his chest. A half-drunk bottle of whiskey dangled from his left hand. He leaned against the pickup truck and lit a cigarette, whose red eye winked into the dusk as the man took a long, long drag. He smoked and watched the sun as it dipped lower and lower, until a short, muscular woman emerged from the bar and strode toward him, a pained and determined expression etched onto her face.

"Hey," she breathed, apprehension clouding her voice.

The man nodded, and his eyes remained fixed to the crimson horizon. He lifted the bottle to his lips and drank.

The woman stuffed her hands into her pockets. She studied the man's face; his sharp, bony features were an inscrutable, shadowy silhouette. "Where's your head at, Wayne?"

"Best place it could be, sis," Wayne said. "Full of whiskey."

She elbowed him with playful nervousness. "That's not what I meant. I know you." She looked out over Wamsutter, whose low rooftops jutted like jagged teeth into the red sunset. "You're restless again. You drink even more when you're thinking about running away."

"I'm not running away, Kyla. Running away means I'm liable to run back. It ain't like that this time." Wayne scuffed his bootheel against the dirty gravel ground. "This time, I got a place I'm going to. I ain't just running to run like usual."

"Really?" Kyla deadpanned. "You ain't never had a place to run to before. Nowhere except back home when you spent all your money."

"Really. I'm driving away and I ain't coming back. At least I don't plan to."

"And where are you headed to this time?"

"I'm driving to heaven," Wayne said, his voice laced with stubborn resolve. "That's where I'm running to."

Kyla snorted and frowned with worry. "You sound half-crazy. And you know Pop woulda tied you to the porch like a mean old dog if you started talking like that when he was alive."

"I ain't crazy."

"I said you were half crazy."

"That makes me half sane, then."

"Guess it does."

They stood for a moment in silence. She stared at the ground; he stared at the sky. The sun sank below the horizon, departing with an evanescent scarlet sigh. Then the darkness seemed

to thicken, as though God had spilled ink into the night. Wayne took another drag from his cigarette. “I’m driving to heaven. Tomorrow. Tomorrow I’m driving to heaven.” And Wayne smiled, wistful and hopeful and hesitant. He dropped his cigarette to the ground and stamped it into the gravel under the heel of his cowboy boot. “You can come with me.”

Kyla shook her head. “You know I’m not coming. You know I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Same reason you can’t stay.”

“Yeah? And what’s that?”

“You’re giving up, Wayne.” Kyla wrapped her arms around herself, as though she were afraid that she might crumble and fall apart. “You’re giving up on me.”

“No,” Wayne said, frustration bubbling in his voice. “No, I’m not. I’m not giving up. It ain’t like that. I don’t got no choice.”

“You always got a choice.”

“That ain’t how this works. You don’t understand.”

“Then help me understand, dammit!”

“I… I don’t know how.” Wayne raised the bottle and drank again, and his right hand absently clutched the cross pendant. “I want to, Kyla, but I don’t fully understand it myself. All I know is that it’s not my decision to make. That time passed a long while ago.”

Kyla opened her mouth to reply but said nothing. Her shoulders slumped forward slightly, as though the string of futile hope that had kept them aloft had finally been snipped. Then she said: “Do you remember when we were little, when we used to build gingerbread houses for Christmas? You’d always build a sloppy house real quick and then play Godzilla on

mine. I'd work for hours and hours to make my gingerbread house perfect, just for you to smash it. Every year."

"Why?" Wayne asked feebly. "Why'd you keep doing it?"

But she did not answer. Instead, she tramped silently away from Wayne and his truck. When she reached the road, she turned and called back to him: "I'm going home, Wayne. You best come home sometime, too."

Wayne watched her walk away, down the road, until she disappeared into the night like a phantom. He peered into the darkness after her, as though expecting her to return, to reemerge from the murky gloom; but she did not, and he clambered into the rusty truck. He slumped into the driver's seat, twirled the lid onto the whiskey bottle, and dropped it beside him. The glass bottle clunked heavily to the floor like a dead thing. He closed his eyes and slept. He dreamed of a hollow and cavernous church, of rough-hewn pews and an altar carved from bone; a towering crucifix loomed above the altar, and on the cross the Son of God smiled—gritted, twisted with the masochistic pleasure of defeat; and amber liquid flowed from beneath the altar like a coursing river of blood, and Wayne stumbled and crawled across the floor strewn with shards of broken bottles, and he scraped feet and his palms and his knees, and he lapped up the whiskey and swallowed the glass and felt it rend his throat.

Wayne awoke to a throbbing hangover and bright sun cutting through the windshield. He pressed his eyes shut and cursed and groped for the whiskey bottle. When his fingers found it, he spun the cap off the bottle and drank deeply, until the bottle was nearly drained; his pounding, symphonic headache subsided to a distant rumble of thunder in his skull. He groaned and squinted into the morning, out at the Desert Bar, whose beige paneling glowed white in the early

sunlight. The neon lights were off; dust whirled at the base of the front door. Leaning his head against the torn vinyl headrest, Wayne glanced at the passenger seat, and his bloodshot eyes widened in horror.

A desiccated, ghoulish man in a faded and moth-eaten top hat sat beside him. “Good morning, Wayne Byford. I understand that you intend to drive to heaven.”

Wayne yelped and dove out of the truck, sprawling onto the gravel and spilling what remained of his whiskey. He clawed and crawled away like an animal possessed. Then he scrambled to his feet and held the empty whiskey bottle in front of him like a sword. “Who are you?” Wayne demanded, his voice quavering with fear. “What do you want?”

The dapper apparition strolled around the front of the truck, a grim smile stretching against his taut, gray skin. He wore a torn-up suit and black loafers from which his bony toes sprouted like knobby weeds. His face was hairless; his eyes were milky-white and blank. He faced Wayne. “My name is Eugene,” the ghoulish man replied. His voice was deep and raspy, like sandpaper scrubbing against rusted metal. “I will be your driver.”

Wayne retreated a step, trembling as though he had been injected with an inescapable chill; the whiskey bottle shook in his hand. “Are you the Grim Reaper or something?”

“Nothing quite so exciting, unfortunately,” Eugene said. “I am not here to hurt you, Wayne. I am simply a guide. A chauffeur, if you will. Like Charon.”

“Karen?” Wayne took another step back. “I dumped her ass eight years ago.”

“And then you slept with her best friend. Less than two weeks after the breakup, I might add. She will never forgive you for that.”

Wayne stiffened. “How do you know that?”

"It is my business to know everything about you," Eugene said. He nodded toward the rusted red truck. "I am here to drive you to heaven."

Wayne lowered the bottle but remained tense and still, as though he were made of stone. "I don't need your help."

"Yes, you do. You do not know where you are going."

"I'll figure it out."

"You will not."

Wayne grimaced, frustration and wariness creasing his face. "How do I know I'm not just imagining you? How do I know I'm not just going batshit crazy right now?"

"You do not." Eugene turned, stepped briskly back around the front of the truck, and seated himself behind the wheel. He rolled down the window. "Get into the automobile. We are leaving now."

Wayne gawped for a moment, staring at his truck and at Eugene, who seemed to know his entire, unvarnished history. Then he unrooted his feet from the ground, pulling them from the gravel as though he were lifting them from a tar pit, and he took slow, leaden steps toward the truck. He heaved himself into the passenger seat, cursing and mumbling about "this creepy-ass know-it-all motherfucker," and slammed the door shut. He crossed his arms petulantly. "It's called a truck. This ain't no fucking automobile."

Eugene nodded. "Noted." He backed the truck out of the Desert Bar parking lot and onto the asphalt road that curled through Wamsutter like a sidewinder. They drove through town in silence. Wayne lowered his window and watched familiar places roll behind him as though carried on a passing wave: the brown-paneled post office; the jumbled collection of old cars and

long, blue-trimmed trailers on Gleason Drive; the Conoco gas station that stood like a red sentinel keeping watch over the town.

"Wait," Wayne said, spinning around and bewilderedly looking back through the rear windshield. "Where'd my house go? We shoulda just passed it. It should be right back there, at Gleason and Tierney. I shoulda seen it. How'd I miss it? It's there. It has to be back there."

Eugene sat motionless at the wheel. "Your home was back there," Eugene said. "Was. It is no longer your home, not anymore."

"But it should still be there! Houses don't just disappear."

"You are leaving. Is it not right that your things are leaving too?"

"But how's that even possible?"

"We are driving to heaven, Wayne. Do not ask me about what is possible."

Wayne was silent until they approached the highway: "If you're my chauffeur, then I get to tell you where we're going. Drive west down I-80 to Rock Springs. We're making a pit stop before we start driving to heaven." He threw the empty whiskey bottle out the window; it shattered against the side of a slate-colored trailer adorned with a thin black cross: St. Anthony of the Desert Catholic Church. Wayne scowled defiantly. "Never taught me about a zombie coming to drive me to heaven. Just a bunch of bullshit about sex and drugs and going to Hell," Wayne mused. "Take that, you holier-than-thou assholes."

Eugene spoke quietly: "I am not a zombie." And they pulled onto the asphalt beneath a cloudless, cavernous sky.

The truck rumbled off the highway and lurched into Rock Springs. Eugene guided it down a bumpy frontage road and into a parking space in front of Gateway Liquors. Wayne stepped out of

the truck, shut the door, and leaned through the window. “Stay in the truck, Eugene. People see a zombie in the parking lot, they might freak the fuck out.” He turned toward the store.

Eugene’s white eyes twitched, and his lips tightened into a sly grin. “I know that, Wayne. I will remain in the automobile.”

Wayne whipped around as though he had been punched. “It ain’t an automobile, Eugene. It’s a truck!”

“And I am not a zombie,” Eugene calmly replied. Wayne blinked, opened and shut his mouth; Eugene smiled at him congenially. “Run your little errand expeditiously, please.”

Grumbling, Wayne strode into the liquor store. Immediately he squinted against the harsh, fluorescent light that bathed the room in a flat and artificial glow. Shelves of multicolored bottles crowded the store like tight-packed, kaleidoscopic partitions. The store walls seemed to fade into the bright light, and the aisles seemed to stretch into eternity.

A podgy, pimpled man with hair like seaweed grunted at Wayne from behind the counter. Wayne stalked past him. His hangover had returned during the silent, hour-long drive from Wamsutter; the thunder behind his eyes crashed and boomed like a painful, pounding tempest. He pulled two bottles of whiskey from the bottom shelf and placed them onto the counter, in front of the cashier.

“The cheap shit, very nice. Cheap looks good on you,” the cashier snorted, “and on me.” His face was pink and round and fleshy, and he bobbed up and down as he spoke, as though he were fluttering and failing to fly. “ID?”

“No,” Wayne replied.

“Name and birthdate?”

“No.”

"Convenient and obvious lie?"

"No."

The cashier frowned. "You gotta gimme something, man."

Wayne pulled a ten-dollar bill from his pocket and dropped it onto the counter. "Buy yourself something nice." He picked up the whiskey bottles and walked toward the door. But at the threshold, he stopped, and he turned back to the counter. Wayne handed the cashier his cracked leather wallet. "This is all I got," Wayne said. The cashier dumped its contents onto the counter: three condoms, a dozen dimes, seven one-dollar bills, and a creased Polaroid faded bleach-white. "Buy yourself something nice," Wayne repeated. And he left the liquor store.

He returned to the rusty truck. He climbed into the passenger seat, twisted the cap from one of the bottles, and guzzled the whiskey with frantic, voracious fervor. His raging headache receded again, like mist dissipating above a lake.

Eugene tapped Wayne on the shoulder and nodded toward Gateway Liquors.

"That?" Wayne wiped his mouth and replaced the cap onto the bottle. He set it between his legs, beside the second bottle. "I don't need it no more. Not where we're going."

"I suppose not," Eugene said. "Are you ready to begin the journey to heaven, Wayne?"

"Sure. Why wouldn't I trust a creepy zombie who appeared out of nowhere to drive me to heaven?"

"I am not a zombie."

"A creepy gray dude, then."

"You trust me because you have no recourse. I know the way to heaven. You do not." Eugene paused, then continued: "And though I am a 'creepy gray dude,' I am not drunk right now. I am therefore a much more competent driver."

"Fair enough," Wayne said.

"Fair enough, then," Eugene replied. "Very well. We embark now."

They left the liquor store and drove back through Rock Springs, where they passed northbound Highway 191 and continued east toward Wamsutter on I-80. But soon the truck veered from the asphalt and headed north, advancing into the Red Desert.

Wayne turned to look at the receding highway. "You sure this is the way, creepy gray dude? The road's back there."

"This is the way to heaven." Eugene stared ahead, through the windshield; his face was stony with certainty.

"Whatever," Wayne said. He sipped from the bottle of whiskey and sunk deeper into the passenger seat. "Guess the route we take don't matter, anyway."

They drove in silence for a long while, jolting over uneven ground, trundling slowly through the desolate landscape. Short, wispy shrubs dotted the copper-stained earth; all were bleached the color of bone. Grass grew in sparse patches, like splotches of green paint on a bleak canvas. The horizon was vast and uninterrupted by trees or mountains or hills. The sun burned high in the sky, which yawned above them like a great blue chasm.

After hours of drinking and staring at the unchanging terrain, Wayne spoke: "Can we stop again real quick?" he asked. "Please."

"Another stop," Eugene sighed. "At this rate, we will never make it to heaven."

Glancing at Eugene and noticing his wry smirk, Wayne chuckled. "Hey, smartass, you're the one who drove us into the desert. This'll just take a second. I got one more thing I got to get rid of."

Eugene slowed the truck to a sputtering halt. Wayne stumbled out and paced tentatively into the desert; Eugene followed him with patient, measured steps. After a moment of roving, Wayne stopped. He lifted his necklace over his head and pulled the cross from the chain. He knelt and pressed the cross into the sandy ground, planting it like a half-buried seed, or like a marker for a lonely grave.

"Why are you leaving that here?" Eugene asked.

"Maybe something will grow from it. I've seen crazier things." Wayne looked up at Eugene; the ghoulish chauffeur stood behind him, stolid and reticent, his pale hands clasped.

"Perhaps," Eugene said. "Perhaps not."

Wayne stood. "Who the fuck knows what's gonna happen? Or when?" He kicked the sand, and a cloud of dust settled on the cross. "I mean, besides you."

"Many believe that the cross gives them this clarity, especially as they approach the doorstep of heaven."

"Yeah? Who says a cross has anything to do with getting to heaven?"

"I seem to remember you throwing a bottle at a church—"

"Besides them." Wayne scowled and stalked back to the truck. "They don't know a thing about heaven."

Wayne climbed into the truck and slammed the passenger door shut. He lifted the whiskey bottle from the floor, spun off the cap, and took a long swig. "Fuck them," he mumbled.

Eugene settled himself into the driver's seat and resumed driving without another word. The pair again sat silently and watched the barren, scarred land pass behind them.

"Maybe I am crazy."

Eugene glanced at Wayne before returning his white eyes to the desert. “You are worried that your sister might be right.”

“Is she?” His voice faltered, and he took another deep drink of whiskey. “She can’t be. I ain’t crazy. Right?”

“That is not a question I can answer for you,” Eugene replied. “All that I can say is that you left her when she earnestly desired that you stay. She is not ready for you to leave. Not yet.”

Wayne frowned, and his features hardened as though he had become a marble statue. “I leave everybody.”

“She cares very much about you.”

“That’s her damn fault.”

“She is your sister. Is that her fault, too?”

“Of course not!” Wayne laid his head in his hands and did not speak for a long moment, until he muttered: “Why didn’t she stop making her gingerbread houses?”

“Why did you keep smashing them?”

“I… goddammit, fuck.” Wayne pressed the whiskey bottle against his forehead. “Honest truth, I was afraid that she’d build a house so nice that she’d leave me to go find it.”

“Did she?”

“No.” Wayne lowered the bottle and fiddled with the loose bottlecap. “She shoulda.” He lifted the whiskey to his lips and drank until he began to cough. “Now I do the leaving. It’s easier for everybody that way, anyhow.” He turned away from Eugene, and in silence he watched the passing desert.

Soon, the sun began its creeping and melancholic descent beneath the edge of the world. The wide sky bled from blue to pink to deep crimson, and as the sun set, the whole desert

shimmered scarlet with the waning red light. Eugene stopped the truck and turned to Wayne. “It is time for us to rest.”

Wayne huffed. “We almost there?”

“Yes. We should arrive tomorrow. But you must sleep well tonight. You will require all your strength to complete the journey.” Then Eugene said, softer, “Arriving to heaven will be easy, Wayne. Getting in is the difficult part. You must be ready.”

Wayne looked to his left, toward Eugene and out the window to the West, where the dying sun met the wide horizon. Eugene’s face was haloed with the crimson twilight; the driver looked luminous and ancient and wretched, as though he were yoked to centuries of loss. The sunset behind him was nearly complete; darkness began to cover the land like a black blanket pockmarked with stars. Wayne took another swig of whiskey and asked, “Where do you think the sun goes at night?”

Eugene removed his top hat to reveal a pale and wrinkled scalp. He twisted his hat in his hands and was quiet for a long while. “The answer to that question is different for the living and the dead.”

“How?”

Eugene sighed. “The sun does not disappear for the dead as it does for the living; neither does the moon nor the stars nor anything in this world that seems ephemeral or fleeting to those who still have breath in their lungs. All is eternal for the dead, and all is vanished as well.”

Wayne puzzled for a moment, his eyebrows furrowed, before looking blankly at Eugene. “That makes no goddamn sense.”

Eugene sagged forward and braced himself against the steering wheel. “The dead do not experience newness, Wayne. That is the greatest loss there is.”

"Oh." Wayne tapped the glass whiskey bottle and searched the shadows outside with unfocused eyes. "I didn't know you were dead."

"Yes, I am. I have been dead for ninety-eight years." Eugene grinned at Wayne. "I suppose that makes me a zombie."

"Nah," Wayne said, smiling back at Eugene. "You're just a creepy gray dude."

"Thank you, Wayne. It has been a long time since someone understood me—or tried to."

"I know what that's like, feeling lonely as hell," Wayne said, quiet and slow, as though each word were a step onto thin and brittle ice. His smile disappeared, and his fingers tightened around the neck of the whiskey bottle. "It's like you ain't got a shadow no more, but you're always in the sun."

"Yes. Yes, it is just like that." Eugene leaned back in his seat and closed his white eyes. "You must gather your strength. The final leg of this journey will be the most arduous."

Wayne nodded in the darkness; a cool, black night had enveloped the desert. He closed his eyes and slept. He dreamed of eternity and emptiness sparking and glowing and swirling together in a giant black cauldron; Eugene stood above it and held his top hat and cried, his white eyes glistening and reflecting the flashing colors like prisms; and with an amber flash, Wayne felt a magnetic tug toward the cauldron, and he plunged into it, and he fell and fell and fell until he forgot that he was falling at all.

Eugene's raspy voice woke Wayne from his deep and fitful slumber: "We are here."

Wayne blinked into the mid-morning sunlight. His head pulsed and thundered with agony, as though a stampede of horses were trampling his brain. He lifted the first bottle of

whiskey and drank until it was empty; the pain subsided but did not disappear. And then he looked out the windshield and saw where they had arrived.

Eugene had stopped the truck at the base of a towering butte; it rose from the desert like a colossal castle spire, or like a primeval fortress built by ancient gods. Eugene alighted from the truck, and Wayne followed him into the desert on unsteady legs, stiff from the long hours sitting in the passenger seat. He clutched the whiskey bottles tightly, as though they were the only things keeping him upright.

"We have traveled as far as possible in your truck," Eugene said. "Now, you must ascend to heaven." And Eugene pointed up, at the top of the butte.

"You gotta be fucking kidding me," Wayne gasped. "How the hell am I gonna get all the way up there?"

"You climb."

Wayne opened his mouth to protest; but he did not speak. The pair stood still for a moment, hearing only the whispers of the desert breeze. Then Wayne removed his cowboy boots and his socks; he placed the empty whiskey bottle on the ground; and he tied the second bottle to his belt with a short and frayed rope. He felt Eugene watching him. "I don't need the empty," he said, "and I figure I'm better off climbing in my bare feet than in these big-ass boots."

"Wise." Eugene nodded. His white eyes lingered on the second bottle before he spoke again: "Are you sure you want to go to heaven, Wayne?"

"What?"

"Are you sure?" Eugene repeated. "Are you sure you want to go to heaven now?"

"What the fuck do you mean?"

"I mean exactly what I say."

“It ain’t up to me,” Wayne said, deflated, as though the words had crushed his lungs. He pulled at the rope securing the whiskey bottle to his belt, tightening it. “It don’t got nothing to do with what I want, only what’s coming and what’s always been coming down the line. You know that. You know it ain’t been up to me for a while now.”

Eugene stared at Wayne, unblinking, as though trying to communicate both hope and desperation in an unspoken language. But he looked away, glanced back up at the butte, and said in a voice full of inevitability: “Then it is time for you to begin.” And he started toward the looming stone monolith.

Following Eugene, Wayne strode to the base of the butte. Behind him, the rusted red pickup truck cast a shadow over the small heap of his abandoned belongings: his dirt-stained socks and boots, the empty whiskey bottle. A sharp breath of wind blew red sand onto the pile, and the items seemed to fade into the coppery ground, become translucent, disappear.

Wayne and Eugene began the climb in silence, toiling up the long and sloping base of the butte. As the grade steepened and their legs grew wearier, they mumbled breathless encouragement to each other, and they forged ahead like twin locomotives straining up a mountainside. Soon they reached the part of the butte where the slope turned sharply upward into a rock wall, and the climb became nearly vertical.

“See you at the top?” Wayne offered.

Eugene smiled a sanguine, knowing smile. “This is where I leave you. You must make the rest of the journey on your own.”

“Some chauffeur,” Wayne said, a pained grin on his face, “leaving me before we get to the destination.”

"This time, I will do the leaving." Eugene extended a pale, bony hand to Wayne. "Thank you."

Wayne grasped Eugene's hand. "What for?"

"For being my first friend in ninety-eight years."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Wayne smirked. "I'd say we're 'friendly' at best."

"I will take it."

Wayne laughed before sobering; again, his fingers curled around the neck of the whiskey bottle. He pointed at the top of the butte. "What's up there, Eugene?"

"That is the one thing I do not know. Only you can find the answer to that."

"Now?"

"If you are ready," Eugene said, "then it is time. You know better than most what it is like to prolong a journey like this one."

"Yeah," Wayne sighed. "Time's up. Time to go."

With a final glance at his mummy-like chauffeur, Wayne began to climb. He picked his way up the wall of the butte; he found footholds and handholds, outcroppings and crags, tiny cliffs to sit upon and rest. He looked down, searching the wide desert for Eugene, but his guide had disappeared. The rusted red truck sat alone in the sand.

As he clambered higher, the rough rock along the escarpment lacerated his hands and feet; soon they were slick with blood, and Wayne climbed more slowly. But he kept his eyes focused on the summit. Dark and heavy clouds gathered in the sky above him, as though they had been summoned to watch his ascent. And Wayne continued to climb, and climb, and climb.

Wayne dragged his aching body over the final ledge, onto the flat top of the butte. He scraped his side against the sharp ridge, but he did not notice; he collapsed as soon as he heaved

himself over the edge. He lay on the small mesa which capped the butte, and he trembled. “Is this it?” Wayne panted. His head thrummed with pain; his muscles quaked with exhaustion; his hands and feet were slippery and crimson with blood; his side bloomed red. He fumbled for the bottle; he untied it shakily and lifted it to his lips. Blood and whiskey mixed in his mouth. “Is this heaven?”

The clouds rumbled in response. Wayne lifted his head and looked around the top of the butte; it was the size of a football field and perfectly flat. Rocks pebbled the stone surface smoothed by wind and time. He stood, faint and wobbly, and he gazed out at the broad sands of the desert, which spread like oceans beneath him; they were a red canvas, a crimson wasteland.

“Eugene?” he called. “Eugene!”

And then a great many things happened all at once: thunder roared as though the sky had been rent in two; lightning flashed and struck the mesa beside Wayne with a booming crack; the whiskey bottle fell from Wayne’s hand and shattered against the stone; Wayne dropped to his knees; and rain poured onto the Red Desert and soaked Wayne to the bone.

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