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## Tin Hammock

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TIN HAMMOCK

By

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## ABSTRACT:

*Tin Hammock* features the first four chapters of a novel. The keystone setting is a trailer park called Oak Hammock, located on a developed pine forest reaching into the swamplands off U.S. 41. The subsidiary settings are predominantly written in Florida with occasional shifts elsewhere.

The literary project was written with nods to the Faulknerian Southern Gothic, borrowing from traditions of science fiction and horror, with an emphasis on expanding the forms of past hegemonic narratives. The stories explore trauma and redemption, answering how characters have arrived and live, often in poverty and violence, in this trailer park.

*Tin Hammock* is a character-driven book, presenting individuals living tumultuous lives in this underexplored region, both in literature and the nation's psyche. Through an inspection of these characters' struggles and triumphs, narrative of empathy-as-action emerges, while also providing a cautionary tale for the careless treatment of the natural land.

Overlapping in object, plot, and theme, these chapters unveil Florida's grit and levity, sorrow, and reflection.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## CHAPTER 1: AFTER THE STORM

Sydney Gongya's aluminum door shrieks open. Damp Florida air heaves into her single-wide trailer, and the first light since the hurricane began pours inside. The humidity feels cleaner as if the winds were minced to a stifled breeze to hang oppressively over Oak Hammock Trailers, Sydney's birthright. Back in '92, Jareth Gongya ceded the park to Sydney when she turned eighteen. Now, he's dying.

The storm had hovered west of the Keys, sustaining power, and displacing the Gulf waters for three days. Sydney wanted to check on Jareth but knew her old man would've scolded her for treating him like a sick child. He'd disguise his embarrassment. Tell her he worried over lightning strikes. So, Sydney shacked up like the tenants, confined to her single-wide, listening to *Kind of Blue* and *Monk's Dream*: warm, crackling jazz vinyl against the tantrum-rain on her metal roof. Jazz was another of her father's gifts. In her childhood, Jareth's record player filled their trailer with sounds that felt impossibly far from this littered park, now strewn with High Life cans and felled palms.

Sydney's trailer is in the park's northeast corner, tucked off the main road slicing through the crooked plots. After visiting Jareth, she'll have to inspect the properties—hear more complaints for issues outside of her control than reports of blown-away downspouts and shattered windows. That's fine, she thinks. Most gripes disappear once heard; anger searches for someone to listen.

On her raised porch, she scans the horizon as if emerging from a space capsule and steps down her algae-covered hardwood steps. Her hiking boots splash the uneven puddles over the

crushed-shell pathway where mosquitoes are spawning, eager for the blood under her pale skin. Walking the main road toward her father's rotting triple-wide, Sydney eyes Wayne Turner's trailer, the old misanthrope. Turner's mounted satellite still points skyward, untouched by the gales. Sydney's struck by how foreign the satellite looks against the rusted sidings, strewn with redwood and pine leaves, glued against the tin by the drying rain. She debates knocking, asking how he fared, but Turner always drains her sympathy reservoir. No matter how nice Sydney acted when she came to collect lot fees, he'd spit on the ground and scowl. She sometimes wondered where he came from and what had shaped his anger. Maybe his father had been like her own?

Growing up, Sydney was given sparse love. Jareth had never let her cry. He'd point out weeping children at the grocery store. "Bird feed," he'd call them. "Don't you wail like that, Sid. You cry like that, you'll be weak all your life." She was taught to eat her tears, and as a child, Sydney had practiced off her father's accent, not wanting to be like him. She shrugged when her teachers asked about her mother. When she brought the topic to Jareth, she was too young to understand. "I rolled over on a woman," he had told her. "Nine months later, you came out." When Sydney got older and understood, she stopped asking. She no longer wondered about a family she'd never met. The absence is a part of her. All Sydney knows, is her mother's name was Kathi with an *I*. Never even seen a picture.

When her father told her the truth, she wasn't surprised the family history was a bloody one. During Jareth's reign, he rode around in his chopped-down station wagon, wielding a wooden baseball bat, he called 'The Deadbeat.' A month without paying rent, he'd give tenants a nasty reproach; the second month, they'd pay a fine. A third, a pink eviction notice. After this,

Jareth came banging with The Deadbeat.

When Sydney deals with evictions renters lift their shirts and reveal pistols in their waistlines. Ben Carper, in lot number twelve, likes to wear denim overalls, nothing underneath. He turns sideways, forcing Sydney to catch a glimpse of his dick. There's Skoal in Carper's teeth when he smiles at her. Sydney handles them the way she's taught herself. I'll endure all these assholes, she believes, like the vinyl-and-aluminum shelters she owns, no storm can tear her down. She'd handle them in her own way: firm, and by the book. She doesn't need a bat.

She passes each lot, almost wishing a tenant would come outside with an attitude, heading for Jareth's. Each time Sydney visits, her father's a little more deteriorated. He sits inside with his box fan pointed at his face but beads of sweat still roll down, redolent of the pickled herring he washes down with Rakia. The television for company, he lives out his retirement in obstinance—curing his organs with sodium, alcohol, and inertia. Approaching ninety, his skin is the wrinkled leather of a lifetime under the sun. Swaths of liver spots blot his forehead and hands. When his rheumatism is at its worst, he develops blotchy red patches; fibromyalgia gnaws his knees and neck. Sydney notes the lines where his body folds in his cracked skin. Her father rarely wears a shirt—parading his shriveled pin-up tattoo: a woman in a striped bikini straddling an alligator. His belly folds send waves through the ink, making the pinup girl look as if she's melting down a staircase.

Sydney passes Madix Church's trailer, taped Xs over his shut, hand-crank windows. He wrestles alligators, though Madix's left arm ends at his elbow, born with the amputation. "When life hands you lemons," Madix would say. "Hey. Wrestle alligators." Tourists cheered, and he'd smile and wave his prosthetic—his good hand on the tail of 'Fat Sally,' the largest gator down the



road at Lizard's Paradise. When Sydney visited the gator farm, she thought the owner was barbaric for selling gator fillets. Her skin crawled at the claws fastened to sticks that tourists bought as back scratchers. We haven't changed since the caves, she sighed, but that was the way of this place: a place her father built.

Sydney's father bought the land in '81 for a wide-eyed steal. Then, the park was only a plot of land off the beaten path of U.S. 41, squeezed between the Everglades and Big Cypress. The cheap price tag came with a roaring electrical substation by the entrance, supplying power down US-1. Jareth had the tropical pineland hammock bulldozed. The land became a desert prairie. Shade, now a commodity. The years passed. More vagrants rented land. Jareth installed old aluminum airstreams and vinyl step-ups. His capricious building projects made the park a motley patch of different times and styles, laid out, seemingly at random.

Walking, Sydney studies the lots for storm damage. Most are raised on cinder blocks, where the lizards escape the heat—doing push-ups and flapping their dewlaps in the shade. Lot fourteen's kitschy, mermaid-decorated mailbox has been ripped from the ground. Others have waterlogged couches and gutted mini-fridges, wasting on the lawns. The sandbags piled against the wooden steps seem pointless now. Eighteen tons of aluminum had built Oak Hammock, but a Cat-3 couldn't beat it down. The last hurricane to leave true devastation was Andrew, the same year Sydney took over. God pressed a hand over the earth and the trailers fell to splinters and shrapnel. Winds peeled aluminum roofs. Rain poured like a heavy chorus of falling hammers. Baptized Sydney by storm, but *this one* was mild, she thinks. Her father's probably fine.

Usually, Sydney visits every day. Jareth's rheumatism flares during rain, and he'd just endured three days of downpours. Left to his own devices, he wouldn't bother attending to his

body. "Doctors only put words to the sick I already know," Jareth had told her. Sydney didn't even sigh, just gave him anti-inflammatory medicine and multivitamins. She knows the pills are hollow; the argument pointless; his condition had deeper wounds. Though she spent more than half her life with him in a triple-wide, he still feels like a stranger. Sydney's understanding of the Gongya heritage was in the few books Jareth owned with names like Vazov and Dvoryanova on the spines—hundreds of unread pages that daunted her. She gave up asking about a family he pretends doesn't exist—why he sees everything as a war, or someone trying to cheat him.

When she was five, Jareth left her on the side of the road. He'd run over a possum and Sydney's face grew wet. She still can't imagine any animal in pain.

Sydney tried forcing down her sob to a tremor. "You killed it."

"No sense crying," Jareth had said gripping the steering wheel. "Flatten somethin' like a pancake on the road, we'll scrape it off the concrete and grill it." Jareth's laugh turned to a wheezy cough. "Like hunting with your tires. Ask me," Jareth shook his head. "Dumb animal deserved it." Sydney wailed and Jareth pulled over. "Either shut that racket." or you can walk," he said.

Sydney tried but couldn't catch her breath. Her face was flushed, her cheeks hot. Jareth got out of the driver's side, forced her out, and gunned the station wagon away. A mile from the park, the road was dirt and felled twigs. Dead tree leaves crunched under her shoes as she walked, hating her father, past the looming thatch palm and live oaks with lion's manes of Spanish moss that led back to Oak Hammock.

Sydney came to understand some people thought letting the hurt out made them feel good, but as she grew, she learned in some ways, she felt better holding her tears inside,

hardening her stomach like a rock. Tears opened a door that let others see inside of her. Sydney wanted that door shut.

#

On the main road is a dead fish. A series of dark spots lead from the gills down the scales, flies buzzing and landing. The fish lays over the obliterated clamshell of the Siken trailer's walking path. Bobbi Siken and her son Ethan live here. Bobbi's a maid at a nearby hotel and also works a gift shop's register, ringing up tank tops and shot glasses. When Sydney runs into Bobbi, she looks ragged. Gaunt, dark circles eclipse Bobbi's face, still mustering a pained smile through her exhaustion. Sydney's seen Ethan with purple bruises and fears his welts will callous deeper than skin—the sweet boy wouldn't stay sweet for long—developing the mean streak many Oak Hammock children carry. She lets the boy help her in the office and overlooks when Bobbi's a few days late on lot fees. A compassion her father never had.

At the age Sydney first mastered shoelaces, Jareth kept his bat slung over his shoulders for when things got ugly. "This is for deadbeats," he had told her, admiring the dented grain where the Dead Beat collided with trailer sidings. "Keeps the tenants in line."

"But then you gotta fix the trailers?" Sydney remembers asking.

"When you're older, you'll get it," Jareth said. "Fixin' a few dents is cheap compared to chasing 'em all down for cash."

Sydney nodded, but even as a child, she felt this was only half true. Her father liked people to be scared of him. As she grew, she saw just how much Jareth was willing to pay for that fear. Back then, her father left her to wander the park alone as he headed to the admin trailer, his bat on the leather seat beside him. Sometimes she'd make friends, but they never stayed. Her

longest was a boy named Lorenzo, who had so many siblings crammed into his single-wide, that Sydney couldn't keep track through the teasing, shouted in frenetic Spanish. Lorenzo was quiet, content to climb trees with her. When he told her he was moving, he took Sydney's smile with him. School let out and she was alone again.

In the summer, Oak Hammock children held dominion over the pool. Although over-chlorinated, with a film of leaves and dead insects at the top, the pool was the only escape from the heat which held dominion everywhere: a place for rowdy boys, wrestling each other off the ledges. As a child, when Sydney tried swimming there, the boys called her "mosquito bites," when she unwrapped her towel. The only other place she could go was the park's jungle gym but the sun made the place unbearable. A trip down the slide left her legs blistered; the swing set branded depressions in her thighs from the hot rubber. Once, she saw a girl on the Merry-Go-Round wearing an oversized T-shirt as a dress. The girl approached her with a game.

"Think of as many gross words as you can," the girl had said.

"Poon," Sydney said, delighted to entertain another girl. She knew the word was nasty and would make the girl happy. "That's what my dad says the retention pond smells like."

They spent the afternoon reciting nasty words, but the friendship didn't last. Sydney had met so many transient children during this time, that she couldn't remember the little girl's name. Her parents must've been late on rent, something she knew Jareth handled with his bat and his rage. Then, Jareth's anger filled the shelves of their trailer: stained the walls; coated the wax Duke and Coltrane vinyl, and piled on the dinner table where Sydney finished her homework.

Sydney remembers watching the screen door bang against the frame, then going to the kitchen window to watch Jareth take off down the main road, his Deadbeat on his shoulder. She

set after him, hiding behind a fiddle bush and peeking through the dangled leaves. At lot fourteen, she watched her father whoop the bat over the metal-reinforced vinyl. Jareth swung against the trailer, denting the aluminum he'd later remove with a toilet plunger, popping the indentations out. Sweat bled through his shirt, dripped down his tattoo. Each time the bat hit; a thunderous clink echoed through the park. A signal. *Eviction.*

Jareth turned his attention to the door, swinging. His pounding rippled the trailer like a shiver. Finally, a scrawny man with curly hair came out in jeans and a once-white T-shirt, now the yellow of cigarettes. A patchy beard extended down his neck to a prominent Adam's apple.

"Look, we'll get your money," he pleaded. "We got nowhere to go. You can't just put us out. We're in the middle of nowhere."

"Like hell, I can't," Jareth yelled. "This is *my* park. Out! All of you. Don't pay, you don't stay."

Jareth swung; the ricocheted sounds of beaten metal thudded Sydney's ears from where she hid. Her father told the man to stand still, pushing him with the end of the bat. Jareth traced the bat along the arc where it would connect with the man's head. "You got three seconds."

"Put the bat down. I got my kid and wife in there. You're actin' like a fuckin' madman. We didn't sign up for this shit."

"No." Jareth prodded the man with the bat like a baton. "You signed up to pay rent. Out here...in this civilization, when deadbeats leave, a moving truck doesn't pull up. I do. Now tell them to get out of the trailer, or I start swingin'."

The man cocked his head, his spooked eyes on the then park's superintendent, and shouted over his shoulder. "Babe, let's go. It's over."

The little girl from the jungle gym and her mother emerged, hiding behind the father. The girl looked over to the fiddle bush and Sydney crouched lower, knowing the girl could still see her. Jareth followed the girl's gaze to Sydney and nodded. *Keeps them in line.*

Sydney watched Jareth hurl the family's belongings into a pile on the lawn. Clothes fell off hangers; a green, plush chair broke and splintered as the leg hit the ground. The refrigerator's contents—yellow mustard, tubed yogurt—piled in a heap. A bread loaf fell over one of the girl's doll heads. When Jareth finished, he padlocked the door and glanced at Sydney who made her way toward the pile. She gave him a look. *All you do is ruin.*

Jareth turned to the family now huddled over their possessions. "You still owe me," he told them, pushing the tip of The Deadbeat into one of the dents in the trailer. "Make good. Or I'll put a crater just like this in your skull."

#

On Sydney's right is The Parrothead's Fleetwood Bounder that Bama and Lil' Miss rent after living a loud life following Jimmy Buffet tours. The RV has a wood-carved shark fin mounted to the roof. In '05 they ran out of money, and settled in Oak Hammock, bringing their loudness with them. None in the park ever wondered what terms the couple stood on. If neighbors weren't complaining of their seething arguments, they'd complain of the raucous sex moans. She grimaces.

The lawn's a wreck. Neon shines through curtained windows on blown-over pastel chairs. Ruptured pool inflatables litter the crabgrass like landmines. She'll come with one of her maintenance guys later, groaning from the weariness of owning this place. She looks up, thinking about how stars twinkle, and planets don't. She's always loved the sky. Right now, she

thinks, there's nothing but gray up there.

#

When Sydney was nine, Jareth woke her in the middle of the night. They drove up an expanse of highway Sydney didn't know. The oaks on the other side of the window blurred hypnotically against her reflection like a film reel.

"We're going on an adventure," he said. Jareth handed her hot cocoa as he drank coffee.

"Where are we going?"

"Playin' hooky," Jareth said, his eyes on the road. "No school for you. No work for Daddy."

Jareth let his cryptic answer hang and needled eighty MPH, cranking the radio to classic rock. Springsteen's voice flooded the car. As her father sang, Sydney tapped her feet and twirled her empty mug. The night sky turned from a dark slate to a humming blue—the horizon edges glowed and Sydney thought about what she was missing. Mrs. Bendani, Sydney's teacher, made her love school, but this change of routine thrilled her.

"Almost there." Jareth pointed to a green sign that read, "Kennedy Space Center."

The two exchanged smiles, and the car roared onward.

In school, Sydney learned all about space exploration—how Sputnik was Russian, but the Apollo 11 was American. Some nights, Jareth would find Sydney on their trailer roof. She'd point out constellations, tell him that Orion never appeared in the same sky as Scorpio and that the slaves followed the Little Dipper North to freedom. At night, with the stars above, was when Sydney felt closest to her father. No heat. No tenant quarrels.

When they arrived at the Banana Creek viewing center, the sky had almost shed its

darkness; a tinge of night still domed the edges. Jareth drove to the bleachers where they'd watch the shuttle take off four miles east. The Challenger's climb would reflect in the creek.

"We'll see the shuttle rip up the sky," Jareth said. "When it gets so high you can't crank your neck no more, just look at the water. It'll be like a mirror."

As Jareth parked, Sydney's excitement coursed. Dozens of cars filled the parking lot. She hopped from the station wagon to the cool ground, and they found seats on the bleacher's highest rung. A large crowd had gathered, huddled in blankets, sleep in their eyes. Added to her jittery excitement, Sydney spotted a lighted sign that showed the countdown.

*17:04.* The milliseconds barreled down.

"They been tryin' to get this thing launched forever now," Jareth said. "Daddy got us special tickets just for this."

"Mrs. Bendani, my teacher," Sydney said. "She told us that she wanted to be *the* teacher that got to go to space." Sydney wiggled against the squish of her father's belly, contrasting his ropey arms. He smelled of dry sweat, but his warmth felt comforting in the October dawn. "We learned the Challenger will climb for eight minutes to get through the exosphere. You know that?"

"Course, I knew that." He smiled at Sydney. "I know everything."

"You didn't know that." She smiled back.

More viewers piled onto the bleachers with anxious chatter. Sydney noticed two boys a few aisles below playing with toy space shuttles. The toys above their heads, their tongues pushed forward, making the sounds of the rocket engine's crunching hiss. Sydney wanted a toy shuttle but was afraid to ask; she didn't want to spoil anything.



Across the creek in the distance, she watched the launch pad above the mangroves from the bleachers. Mrs. Bendani had told her about the booster rockets, spewing vapor and exhaust on the sides of the orange tank, that would fall off when the rocket made it through the Earth's atmosphere. She imagined what it'd be like in the cockpit—slung back, inverted by gravity, and glanced at the sign.

Ten seconds to launch.

Jareth took Sydney's hand. She grasped her father's palm and leaned against him. The engines released a surge of rocket fuel. A voice from a speaker announced, "T-Minus five seconds," and a shower of red sparks ignited the thrusters. A collective breath held before the bleachers filled with a crackling blare and the shuttle lifted. The sound was deafening. The crowd rose to their feet, cheering. Sydney was scooped onto Jareth's shoulders and her cheers joined the crowd's applause. Her thoughts went to her classmates practicing their timetables, while she was here, watching a space shuttle traverse the sky. She squinted against the sun, her eyes following the trail, struggling to see the shuttle's form; the safety-cone orange of the booster rockets, the red chevron NASA insignia; a blurry light followed by a wake of exhaust.

"Can I stay on your shoulders?"

Jareth patted Sydney's thighs. "You stay up there long as you like. That thing's gonna climb 'til we can't see it no more."

Jareth handed her his sunglasses to protect her eyes from the sun and Sydney felt like a rockstar. She expected to watch the shuttle turn into a white dot in the azure-blue sky. "Like a paper lantern," her teacher had told her. She cranked her neck, waiting for the boosters to fall.

They never did.

The sky turned fiery, then white. Sydney didn't know what was happening but she knew something was wrong. She huffed and Jareth let her down. He tried to hold her, but she shrugged him off, unable to keep her eyes off the puffy clouds burning into the shape of a caterpillar, antennae plumes above a rounded thunderhead where the shuttle was moments before; Sydney's eyes darted across the vaporous trails where it looked as if pieces were falling back to Earth. A scream grew inside of her, rising from her gut to her tear ducts, but the sound never came.

"C'mon," Jareth said, trying to hoist Sydney away from the bleachers. The parents of the boys with the space shuttles were holding them, jogging down the steps, their backs to the horizon. "Somethin' ain't right."

She clawed away from him. "Let go of me," she said. "We have to see."

"No." Jareth grabbed her tight by her upper arm. To Sydney, he looked the way he did when he evicted the tenants. "They're gone," he said, angrier.

Resisting Jareth's grip, Sydney's steered down the bleachers and into the parking lot. She thought maybe a parachute or a NASA rescue team might emerge in the sky filled with ash-colored trails, but as she struggled, she only saw white smoke raining down like the tendrils of a jellyfish from the round cloud where the shuttle had been. A thought ran through her mind. Mrs. Bendani could have been up there.

Inside the car, she was inconsolable. This wasn't supposed to happen, she thought, feeling a sense of betrayal. The scream in her gut swelled. This time, the sound broke. The only way to make sense of what had happened to the shuttle was to weep.

"Don't start that shit," Jareth said. Sydney knew he was angry he had to muscle her away from the viewing center. "Less you wanna walk home." He flew down the road from the Space

Center, his hood ornament pointed south.

Sydney stopped shaking and hiccupped, forcing herself quiet. She knew he'd make good on that threat. A small, growing part of her hardened when The Challenger never passed the exosphere as if those tears that she needed to let out had turned to gravel in her stomach.

#

Back on the shell road after the storm, Sydney's climbing boots step on the thick, waxy fire bush leaves, ripped from the stems by the wind. Takes more than a hurricane to kill a fire bush, she thinks; like herself, the plant is resilient. She knows in the spring, the bush will see a full bloom despite the storm's pruning. At the Clark trailer, she sees Stephen Clark tying rope knots on the porch, and doesn't wave. She keeps an eye on this trailer, protecting the park's children. Here fear for kids like Ethan Siken would be the only way she'd ever use her father's old bat.

Past the Clark's is David Perez's single-wide, painted a calming blue. Sydney feels her blood when she admires Perez running in the early morning char before the midday burn. He's enigmatic. Curt nods, pressed lips, obligatory waves. To Sydney, it seems David's mind is perpetually elsewhere. Whatever haunts him is locked away—tinkered with when Sydney sees the halogen light from his windows deep in the night.

Almost to her father's triple-wide, most properties look undamaged. Piles of downed branches sown with cigarette butts and burger wrappers she'll rake, then burn. In lot twenty-three, a pizza box is lodged where a window should've been. The words, "Trespassers will be shot. Survivors will be pistol-whipped," are written across the cardboard in Sharpie, a message Judson Jones Senior might write. Sydney takes note; she'll fix this. If not, mold would grow. The

cardboard was soaked, but Sydney wonders if the hurricane was what had really broken the window. Last she heard, Jones was still up at Raiford Prison, but the Junior was still around.

Past the Jones' Trailer is more evidence of the storm: a felled banyan near the park's entrance that had turned pale and died years before the land was developed. She remembers wishing she could climb that tree as a child with Lorenzo, her longest friend. Now, the ancient banyan's roots are exposed like a colossal skeleton ripped from the grave. Jareth had wanted the Banyan removed, but Sydney told him the park was lifeless enough.

"Dead trees still give shade," she'd told him, and won the argument until it was her decision to make.

#

On her eighteenth birthday, Jareth gave her the park: superintendent and owner. The Gongyas sat at their tiny kitchen table, eating birthday cake before Sydney could leave to be with the few friends she knew from school. Some were headed for college; others were finding whatever they could to escape Florida's lassitude, an escape she thought she still had that morning.

"Happy?" Jareth had asked, not waiting for an answer. "This place is running like a well-oiled machine, pullin' you in shitloads of money. Sure, we got some pain-in-the-asses livin' out here, but compared with what you could be doing, it ain't half bad."

Sydney ate her birthday cake and thought of this new weight.

In her reticence, Jareth retrieved a bottle of Rakia and poured two glasses. "I've never told you about your grandfather Nikolay," he said. "We called him 'Niko.' He was the first to the states from Bulgaria. He didn't like Americans. He was from a cold land—carried that coldness

with him. Settled in Brooklyn with your grandmother, waiting 'til he got the orders."

Jareth raised the shot glass and nodded his head for Sydney to do the same. This was the first he'd ever spoken of Sydney's grandparents.

"No," she said, though she was curious. "I'm not in the mood."

Jareth tilted his head back and opened his throat. After slamming the glass onto the chipped, wooden table, he slid Sydney's glass closer to him. "Story goes," he said. "Niko was sent to America to execute this Russian mobster who brought the Bratva—the mafia brotherhood—over to the states to expand. Back then, over in Russia, that was the way of life. Stalin had his labor-camp crooks fight the war. Those who didn't fight were cast out, but they rose in the Bratva. Against the Soviets, they organized a long-standing mafia, scamming people, breakin' fingers for protection money. You had the Bratva or the Soviets, and most people figured they were both mafia, but at least the Bratva were honest about it."

"Like the park," Sydney said with measured sharpness. Jareth gave her a look, saying he didn't understand. "You're the park's government," Sydney explained. "Are you the Bratva or a Soviet?"

"You know how I do 'em," Jareth smirked, cocking his head toward the bat leaned against the front door wall.

"Bratva, huh?" Sydney said. "That's how you think of yourself. Or maybe you're Stalin?" She glanced out the window where the trailers her father owned baked in the sun.

"Tell that to a Russian, it won't go well," Jareth said. "You wanna hear this story or not?"

"Yes," Sydney said, turning her head so Jareth wouldn't see her exasperation.

Jareth slurped the Rakia she didn't want. "Niko, your grandfather, he was hired as

‘muscle’ since he was a nobody—nothin’ to lose and could throw a Bulgarian bag all goddamn day—perfect man for the job.”

Sydney knew the booze was working on Jareth. The cold brandy made him point his finger at the table as if scolding. Most of what her father said was hard to believe, but at least this story gave her pieces to fill in the gaps of her family’s world. She scribbled smeared lines from her cake’s chocolate frosting on her plate and listened.

“Back then,” Jareth continued. “In Brooklyn, lots of people went missing. The Bratva would use their names on marriage licenses and in voting booths. Secured the Russian fist in America. Russkie’s needed firearms for enforcement and wide-hipped women to pump Sheepshead Bay full of more Russians.”

“Dad, I told you to lay off that sexist talk,” Sydney said

“That’s the way it was,” Jareth said. “I’m not condoning it, just telling you how it was.” He gave her a look and poured another. “When your grandfather started getting older, he started lettin’ his secrets out. Told me he landed in Brighton Beach with orders for a hit on a guy who had ‘pull’ in immigration services. A guy who made the right calls so that when you got to the consulate, they’d have your visa waitin’ for you. Called them F2s—issued with forged marriage documents.”

“A hit, like?” Sydney made a pistol with her fingers. Jareth smiled. “Bull shit,” she said. “You see this last night on *Oz*?” She was surprised when her father frowned.

“Believe what you want, but I’m not makin’ this up.”

A series of explosions erupted from somewhere in the park. Firecrackers, they both knew from the sound without saying so. “Go on,” Sydney knocked on the kitchen table as if a door.

“Niko’s people didn’t like that Bratva trafficked Bulgarian women—sold away to clean and whore while Russian women could come over and live the ‘American dream.’” Jareth finger-mimed quotations.

"So, they put a hit out on this guy in immigration services, and your grandfather was the one to do the job. Nothing for the history books. After the war, millions were coming to America, whackin' each other all over New York. Niko's man is making his rounds underneath the M train. He's about to cross the street. Your grandfather steps between him and his path with a 9mm pistol. Empties nine rounds. Fills him up. He's caught and cuts a deal with the feds. They placed him in witness protection since killin' this Russkie was a favor, the way J. Edgar Hoover saw it. And that's how the Gongyas got to Florida."

Across the table, Jareth smelled sweet and flammable. "Gongya isn't our real last name, is it?" she asked.

"That doesn't matter," he said. "You know who you are. We're Americans."

Sydney played with the Rakia bottle’s cork, pushing the cork in and out of the stem, wondering why this news didn’t hit her like a sledgehammer, as if somehow, she had always known the Bulgarian line that brought her family to the states weren’t strangers to a scrap. “What about Ellis Island?” she asked. “Could we find it?”

“Niko never told me," Jareth said. "Neither did your grandmother. Our name was lost when the government changed it.”

Sydney shoved the cork into the stem. “What were they like?” she asked. “My grandparents?”

Jareth folded his arms and leaned his elbows on the table. “Your grandfather was a

contract killer, but he had brains. Could've brought him places if he was *born* in the right country. Could've been an engineer. Made him angry and bein' poor didn't help." Jareth downed another Rakia. "Your grandma was scared of him."

Sydney heard the clink of a fruit fly caught in the kitchen light fixture. Jareth followed her gaze to the light bulb where a large fly was trapped.

"It'll die soon," he said. "We all do."

"Why couldn't I have met them?" She meant her grandparents.

"Both died long before you came," Jareth answered. "Your grandmother was quiet and Niko was mean as they come. The energy changed when he walked in," Jareth said. "Me and your grandma, we'd feel like things weren't all that bad. Then he'd walk in, start finding things wrong. Get to hittin'."

Sydney looks at her father and realized fists more than anything else had shaped his face.

"One day, he ties a rope around his leg, the other end to a cinder block, and jumped into the Gulf. Swam till he couldn't. Went at his own hands, in his own way. That's how you're grandma put it." Jareth wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "The man was a miserable shit, but I guess I respected that. When he took his own life, he took back what he could. I respected that too."

Sydney dug her nails into her palm. "Why haven't you told me this before? Why now?" She looks across the table. Not able to look into her father's eyes, she stared at the pin-up. The tattoo's smile grimaced from Jareth's belly. "I don't know what to do with this."

"I wanted to spare you knowin' our nasty history," he said. "Besides, Sid. You got a good future ahead of you out there." Jareth pointed at the view of the park in the kitchen window.



"What about all the tenants you've beaten? All the perverts and cutthroats you got living here?"

Jareth poured another Rakia and eyed the: 'I-still-don't-want-one' on Sydney's face. He took his time pouring. "Tell you the truth, Sid, I'm not going to go jump off a dock. I'm ready to sit here. Just sit. For so long I've run this park, day and night. Now it's yours. Take what's yours, what I built for you, and, when I'm gone, you do what you see fit. Sell it. Keep it. I don't care, but as long as I'm breathing, the park stays. It stays because it's my home, and I want to die in my own house."

Across the table her father was resolute. Nothing Sydney could've done would change his heart, and if she sold the place, she'd break it. She shouldn't care. Jareth's put her through hell. But, even then, she knew her father's hell had higher flames. Still, she wanted out of the whole inferno.

#

In the years Sydney's been superintendent, Jareth has let his mind pickle, turn sour, and corrode to froth. Dying, he refuses a doctor. The Deadbeat stays in his trailer, untouched, but the park's as feverish as ever. Slipping past the maintenance office to where her father lives, Sydney walks through a spiderweb trailing off a hemlock pine. Jareth's trailer is an old single-wide that's felt the years neglect throws at a home, anchored on moldy cinder blocks. Outside, the ravaged vinyl's collected dents from irate residents who've thrown bricks, payback for the dents he's swung. Black-dotted mildew spores climb up the white sidings. Jareth's lived here for decades, raised Sydney in its walls, and, as he wished, would probably die inside.

Sydney opens the door, and her father looks up through slit eyes.

"I'm sorry, Sid." Jareth winces, his lower lip making a corner. A dried urine stain flows down his pants, smelling of vinegar and ammonia, down to the wool carpet. He's shirtless in his green-tufted armchair. The pinup straddling an alligator disappears into his belly. When he takes Sydney's hand, she notices his fingers jut out in painful angles that make his hands look like a primate's, the knuckles had grown bulbous, and his ankles are swollen, fatter now than his calves.

"Come on, let's get you cleaned up," Sydney says, slinging her father's arm over her shoulder. He's limp, shuffling with her to the bathroom. She sits him on the toilet, pulling his pants down so he can let go of everything in his gut. Giving him privacy, she goes to retrieve fresh clothes. Jareth's bed sheets are decorated with bucolic palms, tucked without the crease of his weight, still made. She gathers clean clothes, then goes into the kitchen for the bucket. Before carrying it all into the bathroom she finds Duke's single, *Sophisticated Lady*, and lets the needle fall to the wax.

Sensing he's done, she carries the sponge and bucket into the bathroom and cleans her father with baby shampoo. She cleans his face, gently scrubbing his gray whiskers, unclogging gunk in the corners of his mouth. Mucus strings away in a glob on the sponge. She dips it again, cleans behind his ears, then his neck. As she works, she hums to the clarinet and alto sax drifting from the record player, believing these old tunes carry something medicinal. She runs the sponge over Jareth, turning his skin pink, dulling the red splotches of irritation as if washing chalk from a sidewalk.

With each sponge dip, more detritus clears—replaced with raw skin. Gradually the caustic smell of urine leaves as she sponges his legs, getting his privates with a nurse's care—not

showing effort to save her father the embarrassment. Sydney has him lean over and cleans his backside with diligent, even hands. There's purple bruising that wasn't there before.

"If you don't get up and move, these will turn into bedsores," she says without scolding.

"Hurts to move. I keep Rakia close by," Jareth's chuckle turns to a wet cough. When Sydney doesn't return the humor, he adds, "Sid, you're too good to me," then apologizes again.

When she's done cleaning him, Sydney lathers his skin in an anti-inflammatory ointment, letting the topical cream dry before helping him with his clothes—his smell now minty—and helps her father limp back into the living room, past the soaked armchair to the couch, placing a sheet over him.

Sydney turns the door handle, ready to step back into the storm's debris. "I'll be back tomorrow with groceries. I'll clean your chair then."

"How's the park?" She hears her father and goes back to him, looking into his faded eyes.

"It looks about as good as you did before I got here," she says.

He answers in wheezy laughter.

For a moment, Sydney sees herself in her father's eyes. The good, and the bad. But in her reflection, she sees something more: Jareth's mean ways he learned from Niko, everything her father was never capable of, and how, in his own way, Jareth's last gift to his daughter is shaping the love he was never afforded. Though it's muddled and scratched, it's still love. When Sydney walks back out into the park she owns, the sky is cloudless and blue, and she thinks that if she ever has a daughter, she'll give her a shape of love even deeper than the one *she* was afforded.

Outside, in the storm's aftermath, the tenants are waking up, walking amongst their litter.

###

## CHAPTER 2: CUT THE HEAD OFF THE SNAKE THE RATTLE GROWS SILENT

Oak Hammock residents driving home after a languorous workday, turned off US-4, squinting into a beam of apricot sunlight where Ethan Siken's Nike high-tops eclipsed the sun, drooping by looped shoelaces from a utility wire, knocking in the wind. Every kid in the park shivered at those Nikes. They knew what had happened for them to hang there.

"Kids in these parts fight all the time," Sydney told Bobbi Siken, Ethan's mother. They stood under the sterile fluorescents of an emergency room hallway. Ethan lay immobilized in a hospital bed out of earshot. "But this is something else," Sydney continued. "I'll find them."

"I filed a police report," Bobbi said. She'd always been grateful for the superintendent. Sydney not only watched Ethan, but she'd also excused more than a few months' fees on late rent. Bobbi reached for a tissue, rubbing her swollen nose. "I need *names* to press charges."

"I'll bet anything it's the Jones kid." Sydney held the mother's eyes. "Child Protection's been by that trailer more than a few times."

"I need evidence," Bobbi said. "Ethan will never feel safe. Not until the monster that did this to my son is locked up."

"I'll work on it," Sydney glanced at the clock hanging over the nurses' station. "He's a good kid—works so hard in my office." An alarm went off in a patient's room down the hall, startling both women. "You plan on staying in the park?"

"No," Bobbi answered. "We'll leave soon as I can afford it." Bobbi pulled her exhaustion up by the scruff and stood to hug Sydney. "Thank you for watching my boy. We've already lost everything and now this—" Bobbi shook her head. "This might be too much for one child to

bear.”

Bobbi entered Ethan’s room and appraised her boy. He was shirtless, tapped with an IV and tubing connected to monitors. His body had ripe abrasions: dark, purple bruises with edges of a sick yellow along the ribs. Welts on his cheek had bloomed a few different shades of eggplant. Blood pooled underneath his right eye. A stitched cut ran down his lip, leaving two chunks flailing. His jaw, knocked out of place, would make eating painful. Bobbi didn’t need a doctor to know, for months, her son would wince as he breathed.

Her son’s life had been cruel. After his father, Henry Siken, died when he was five, Bobbi had to move to the park, leaving him for long hours as a maid at the Hassi Inn or working the register at Wings, a tourist gift shop. Bobbi was what people called ‘the spiritual kind;’ she felt Henry long after he was gone. Especially when she wished she didn’t.

At Annitilaga Cemetery, she tried to endear her son with lessons on grief. They would stand by Henry Siken’s grave at the crest of the cemetery’s hill like foam at the tip of a wave. There, she showed her son that he could speak to his father as if Henry were just behind the pines and maples whose roots shared kinship with his coffin beneath. Afterward, the Sikens left orange roses and gladioli in the marble tombstone firefighter’s helmet, etched at the arc with a chiseled six, Henry’s station’s number. The rest of the bouquet honored the empty vases along the way back to the car, brightening the gray tombstones like plumage. If Bobbi’s words on grief ever failed, she would sing; her notes gave Ethan his confident view, his concord gaze of a world without his father.

Henry was a paramedic firefighter in Three Lakes where tract houses were built in cookie-cutter architecture. Three months after the first shovel struck the ground, the homes were

lanced in sunlight, rising in identical grids. Residents had issues with faulty wires. The Sikens lived in one of these tract houses where, before he'd leave for the station, Henry would slide down the staircase, the railing between his legs with one hand behind him like a rodeo cowboy. He'd told Ethan to give the railing a try and Bobbi kissed her teeth jokingly.

"He's in kindergarten," she said with an exasperated smile. "Still got his training wheels on. If he falls, he'll break his neck."

"He's a tough kid," Henry said. "Lower center of gravity—he'll bounce right off the floor." Henry winked at Ethan with a rascal smile twisting his round face and Bobbi shook her head. With his father's encouragement, Ethan tried thrusting his tiny leg over the railing.

His mother intervened. "No, Ethan. Time for school."

Henry would laugh, and give Bobbi a jubilant explanation of Ethan's future as a firefighter. The staircase railing was 'practice' before the fire pole. Bobbi admired the way Henry's beard dimpled in the cheeks when he smiled.

When Ethan left to learn cardinal directions and recite his ABCs, Henry and Bobbi's banter ended in a pile of clothes at the foot of their bed—relishing the time when he wasn't sleeping at the station. They'd finish and Henry would sing a sad folk song to her in hushed, solemn chords that carried the smoke he breathed in his work. Then, he'd sleep. Before leaving for work, Bobbi would glance back at her husband who drifted into a heavy sleep, probably tired from dousing the fires that crept into the placid nights.

The call came in at 4:08 am, a week after Ethan shed his training wheels. A family of four was trapped on the second floor. A circuit breaker had overheated, caught fire, and quickly spread through the cellulose insulation, engulfing the walls. When he saw the flames boiling the

doorway, Henry took out his axe. He chopped the door down and ran inside. Scrambling through the stifling inferno, a heap of plaster fell away from a ceiling joist, catching his head. His friends at the station recovered his helmet; the charred six was still visible through a blanket of ash.

After the funeral, Bobbi took down his pictures—tucking Henry's bearded smile inside a plastic bin, slid underneath the bed. The only memory of Henry was the blue Schwinn bike he'd bought Ethan the day their son mastered a 'big boy bike.' Ethan rode the Schwinn through the aisles and straight out into the store parking lot.

After the funeral, Bobbi realized that joy is a privilege. Henry's death whittled a wide sorrow inside of her but the devastation didn't last. It couldn't. She was imbued with a mother's resilience and got up each day for her son. Ethan was hollowed, but as he continued hearing legends of his father from Henry's fellow firefighters, who made a habit to visit the Sikens, the boy's spirit mended—soon, more cheerful days than gloomy.

When Bobbi delivered the news of moving to a trailer park, Ethan didn't complain. He helped pack their belongings, and what had belonged to his father: his photos, wallet, and leather belt. They left, headed for a new home with cheap rent that didn't hold memories of Ethan's father laughing as he slid down the staircase.

#

The first day Ethan arrived in Oak Hammock, he biked through the park, exploring the trailer grid with brazen curiosity as if the world had sent a handwritten invitation. Almost ten, Ethan had a small build and deep blue eyes. His Nikes gave him an inch. Later in life, a few growth spurts might make him the first choice for pickup games. For now, in Oak Hammock, he was prey. He pedaled toward the park's edge that held a tree grove—his eyes on a venerable oak



with limbs growing horizontally like a bridge from the tree's massive trunk. Without knowing, he passed the Jones' trailer.

Judson Jones' gang sat on the front porch, twisting loose tobacco from butts stubbed into a tin can, rolling the old tobacco into what they called a 'granddaddy cigarette.' The four boys watched Ethan.

"Looks like a punching bag," said Judson, licking the rolling paper's sugar gum. Judson had acne scars, fresh pimples rising over them. Later, Ethan would liken Judson's skin to a scabbed potato. The gang's leader was the inventor of 'Lizard Sticking:' a game of bored violence where the boys beat brown anoles with sticks like squashed raisins in the drying sun. Underneath the Jones' stairway landing was a minefield of battered lizards—a reminder for the ones hiding under the cinder blocks: venturing out was lethal.

Judson was the worst of them—insisted on mutilating the fish that the gang reeled in from the ponds. Not content to watch glass bottles explode, he shot squirrels and blasted away anhingas from their perch with his father's snake gun. Wherever Judson went, he left a trail of dead animals. He was a product of his father, Judson Sr., a frequent inmate in Raiford Prison, and when he wasn't, he made Judson watch him beat his mom, Lettie Jones, asking for input.

"What you think, Jud?" his father had asked. "Your old lady learn her lesson?"

Watching, Judson felt a nasty satisfaction. Any guilt and he reminded himself of his mother's rampage thrown at him when she couldn't score at The Palace. By the time Ethan rode past, Judson Sr. was gone on a weapons charge—leaving Judson Jr. to show everyone in the park why he was the best Lizard Sticker. He nudged his lieutenant, Gavan O'Riley, nodding his chin at Ethan.

"Saw a moving truck this mornin,'" Gavan said, a granddaddy drooped in the corner of his mouth. "New kid."

Gavan didn't share the tumultuous upbringing Judson bore. His parents never marched him out to the Florida Pines, plucking a branch for a 'switch' lashing. They held steady jobs. The father operated a porn arcade off US-27. Gavan's mother was a seasonal bartender who worked further south. Gavan's eerie looks—linebacker shoulders below a freckled, pale complexion with a backdrop of mustard and dark green veins—made him the inherent second. Judson liked his scheme, initiating Gavan after he passed around a Juggs Magazines to rent for \$5 a night in the park. Gavan wouldn't pass up chances for others to fear him, even if he had nothing to fear.

This wasn't true for Josh Carper, the third, whose mean streak derived from his father, Ben Carper, who learned the same from *his* father, Mason Carper. Using his overall's shoulder strap, Ben swatted Josh whenever the boy came close, amused at his son's flinching. Josh was prodded, slapped, and whipped before entering the second grade—taught how to lie to the teachers: "I fell, ma'am. Got this from football." For every lick Josh was dealt, he dolled them out tenfold in the park—still beating on the smallest of the crew, Owen Hicks, who was learning quickly to slug back twice as hard.

Owen was the longest to live in Oak Hammock. His stepmom was an addict, the same as Judson's mother. The boys never mentioned the commonality, but drew close nonetheless. Judson *knew* after he went to retrieve Owen to come fishing. Judson saw that Lowri Carper, hid her decayed teeth—a Palace frequenter. To Lowri, Owen was a blessing: the reason their trailer got an extra \$400 a month in welfare. Owen wasn't beaten regularly, but he got his fair share. In the Hicks trailer, touch was reserved for punishment.

The gang sized up Ethan as he rode past.

"Check him out," Judson ordered. "Keep a distance. If he's pussy, we'll know."

At the grove, Ethan left his bicycle against a tree's roots and headed for the grove's center where the ancient oak's limb hovered off the ground. In a trailer not far off from the trees, a man named Stephen Clark sat holding a rope, aware of the boy making his way through the oaks planted outside his window.

Ethan hoisted himself onto the center oak, careful not to peel the bark. At the limb, Ethan raised his arms on either side, walking across the branch like a balance beam. At the tree's base, Judson stood with his gang, startling Ethan who didn't realize he'd been followed and looked down at his new neighbors. They wore stained tank tops and oversized jeans, torn at the bottom where the denim dragged underneath their heels. Sharp Adam's apples and hair riddled with grease.

"Hey, bitch boy!" Judson yelled, over-accentuating his vowels. "What're you doing up there?"

"I'm climbing," Ethan said, noting the obviousness. He'd never been called a swear before, though both his diction and internal alarm system would evolve soon. "I just moved here, I'm seeing—"

Judson ignored him. Using his mulch-colored eyes, he told Gavan to grab Ethan's bike. The lieutenant lifted the bike with one hand by the blue metallic frame, placing it next to Judson, who lifted himself over the bike saddle and looked up at Ethan with an inciting smirk.

"Too damn small," Judson grunted, awkwardly pedaling, his knees hitting his chest. "I think this bike could take a little swim." He pedaled away from Ethan, stunned, and still standing

on the tree limb.

"Stop," Ethan yelled, sour panic rising in his sternum. The blue Schwinn was his father's gift. "Give it back!"

Scuffling down the tree, Ethan followed the gang heading for the swampy retention pond that drew rainwater from the electric substation. Owen glanced over his shoulder, and Ethan could hear Judson's cold laughter stinging the wind from ahead where the boys walked toward the thick algae.

"Come and get it, fucker." Judson wanted to watch Ethan swim for the bike. He'd get his show. Always did. Judson lifted the Schwinn, rotating for momentum, and tossed the bike into the mossy water. Ethan caught up, just in time to see his bike land in the pond's center. His face burned. A thorny lily pad clung to the handlebars.

Judson turned. "Now you can have it back."

The boys stared at Ethan, daring him. "You'll get in trouble for this," he said, then wished he hadn't when they laughed and his face burned. Reluctantly, Ethan took off his high-top Nikes, preparing to wade into the pond without getting his prized shoes dirty. His first step sunk into the warm mud. The boys called him foul words Ethan had never heard before. When he came within grasping distance of the bike, Owen grabbed the Nikes from where Ethan left them on the pond's edge. Swinging the shoes around his head by the strings, Owen yelled:

"Hey, shithead! What size you wear?" and took off running.

Terrified Owen would throw his shoes in too, Ethan sprung from the pond, heavy with mud, and chased him, the other three running after like a hyena cackle. They had Ethan right where they wanted him. Owen whooped and jeered as he ran, swinging the Nikes over his head

like a lasso. Ethan gained on him, his vision clouded with the blind rage of a child encountering the world's first inequities. Behind him, Gavan caught Ethan's back, shoving him down. Ethan felt the wind leave his chest, little bits of shell in his palms. He rolled onto his back to find Judson towering over him.

Judson bent over, leveling his face with Ethan's. Hawking phlegm in his throat, Judson released a yellow spittle that landed with a plop on Ethan's face. Snickering, the gang felt a twisted crackle of energy fill the air, wanting to see how far Judson would go.

A terrifying mixture of confused rage bubbled in Ethan's chest. He'd never been around kids like them: young, pained boys who returned their beatings. "Why're you doing this?" he asked. "I don't even know you."

Judson pulled him up by the collar. "To wipe that ugly look off your fuckin' prissy face. Gavan, give me those shoes." Judson tried to shove the Nikes on. "What we got here, a size three? I bet you got a tiny dick, boy! I can't fit these." Judson went back to Ethan. "Look, dickhead, if I see you in this park, it's an ass whoopin,' — you try and hide, I'm gonna find you. Owen, how we treat little pussy boys around here?"

"Pulp Fiction."

"That's right, Pulp Fiction," Judson said, a glint in his eyes that reminded Ethan of littered soda cans; he didn't know what the words meant, but he knew they were a threat. With the sole of one of the Nikes, Judson slapped the shoe across Ethan's face—sending a sting he'd become familiar with ricocheting across his cheek. The older boy threw both shoes overhead for Ethan to retrieve. Tears welled as he walked after his shoes. Ethan forced them down. If he cried now, they'd won. Though soon, this gang would make him feel like an old beat-up toy.

#

Weeks later, Ethan biked home from school along Oak Hammock's fence, his Schwinn now rusty after a few days in the pond before he could safely rescue his bike. He pictured his book report: painted skyscrapers in the background of a shoebox, his toy Spiderman slinging a web. Maybe even glue the Green Goblin trapped there? When he arrived at the eastern chain-link fence, his mind returned to getting home.

He approached a hole Sydney, his neighbor, had overlooked. She knew he slipped through it after he came home from school. The hole led to her office, a safe place where she'd let him shred papers, waiting out Judson for his mother. When Ethan saw that her golf cart wasn't parked by the office, he sighed. He'd have to dodge the gang's hangouts, hidden in the shadows cast by the ragged trailers.

Ethan had made the hole after borrowing wire cutters from the park's handyman, Eddie Grobe. Grobe was hesitant but relented when Ethan told him the cutters were for a science project. Borrowing the cutters, Ethan fought the urge to ask him about the rumors he'd heard, that the man had built something inside his laboratory-looking trailer. Grobe wished him luck—even gave him the metal clamps Ethan had used to pin up the fencing so the metal barbs wouldn't snag him when he wiggled through.

Ethan's heart raced, throbbing in his ears. The Siken trailer was a half-mile improvised route from the fence. He'd have to cross the main road, then dodge Owen and Gavan's trailers on the eastern side, a few rows down from Judson's. The Carper trailer was on the west. Somedays, there was nowhere to hide. The gang rode around on Gavan's go-kart, hurling dirty underwear at the girls they passed.

"This one got a skid mark on it," he'd heard Josh yell. The girls would swear and the boys sped off; the gang's laughter billowed like rattling knives.

Ethan knew regardless of the route, each had hot spots where he'd be exposed—easily spotted without a friendly adult nearby. Taking a deep breath, he pushed his bike through the fence, then his backpack, and crawled through the chain links. On his left, was the admin trailer. Beyond that, was old man Jareth's. On the main road, Ethan heard the crackle of electricity humming from the utility pole's thick wires, leading from the electrical substation into the park. The gang wouldn't try anything near Sydney's office, but the thudding continued against Ethan's temples. He felt like a field mouse darting for cover from a hawk. He pedaled slow, staying in the main office's sight. After that, he'd have two options: ride past the oak grove or take his chances on the western side.

Ahead was the retention pond where Ethan had seen the gang do something even he couldn't understand. Ethan went to retrieve his Schwinn from the pond the day after he first met the gang. He hid behind a trailer, thinking they'd changed their mind about dumping his bike and peeked from behind the aluminum frame. Maybe they'd steal it after all?

Judson stood at the pond's bank, waiting. The other three were positioned around the perimeter, knees bent, arms out like soccer goalies—waiting for some animal swimming to the embankment. Ethan realized it was a cat, exhausted and drenched, trying to drag itself from the water. The cat was too tired to escape Judson, who scooped the limp animal, hurling it back into the water. They're waiting for the cat to drown, Ethan thought, horrified, after the third time the cat tried paddling back to land. These kids are crazy, he decided, but they'll let it go after they get bored. They didn't. The cat disappeared beneath the surface. The scene nearly scared Ethan

enough to forget his bike, but he thought of his dad and waited long after the gang had left to retrieve his Schwinn. Terrified he'd step on a furry corpse, he pried his bike free.

After that, Ethan never went near the pond. Hunched over his handlebars, he biked through the park, into the wind rattling the palms, the oppressing sun on his back. A half-mile from the fence, on the right of his home, was Grobe's trailer: satellite dishes and geodesic domes. To Ethan, it looked like architecture plucked from one of the Bradbury stories in the book Sydney had given him. With no signs of the gang, he calmed, sliding off his bike through the Bermuda grass, and into his single-wide's hallway. His anxiety washed away; he'd survived another ride home. Other days, he wasn't so lucky. Sometimes the gang chased him down, yanked his underwear over his head so hard, the elastic broke, then kick him into a fetal position. Judson always spat in his face.

Ethan sat at the kitchen table, opened his Spiderman novel, and fell into the story. He soared thousands of miles from his trailer to the skyscrapers of a city whose heart was being fought over by a villain and one meek kid, bitten by a radioactive spider that had turned him mighty. As Ethan read, he knocked his smudged high-top Nikes together.

#

Weeks later, in the dim of his single-wide, Ethan heard the relentless chime of his mother's alarm, piercing the dark, early silence. Ethan's bed was the kitchen table, which folded against the window. Past the kitchen, Bobbi slept in the only room. Ethan was usually asleep in the late hours when his mother came home after work. She would grope around in the dark, making her way past her sleeping boy. The same was true for waking. Ethan stirred before the sun to his mother's alarm clock, but she was always gone by the time he fully woke for school.



Sometimes, when Ethan fell asleep alone, he thought about how he lived in a park, chock full of people, but still felt like the only human on Earth.

Why isn't she waking up? Ethan thought, going to shut his mom's alarm off. As his eyes adjusted, he walked over to where Bobbi lay in her bed, unmoving. He shook her shoulder, repeating his question. Her stringy hair was tied back from her weathered face, her side layers escaping, wilting down in little wisps along her neck. Like Ethan, Bobbi's pallid skin was so cream-colored, it had a tinge of blue. She couldn't get food to stick to her ribs if she sewed a slab of meat on her side.

Bobbi's eyelids twitched and Ethan shook her again. This time, Bobbi sat up, and regarded her son's face—searching him for any changes, then silenced her alarm. She didn't see the pink welt across Ethan's right cheekbone in the darkness and knuckled her eyes.

"Sorry, son," she said. "Thanks for waking me. I can't be late."

Ethan saw her blink sleep away. Her cheeks hugged the bone in the shadows dug under her eyes, shadows that had been there long before the Sikens moved to Oak Hammock. She kissed Ethan on the forehead and headed for the bathroom.

Bobbi fixed her hair in the small bathroom mirror, deciding she'd have to apply makeup in the mirror of the first hotel room she cleaned. A few strokes of concealer to mask her exhaustion. Since Henry, Bobbi drank so much caffeine, she thought her sweat smelled like a coffee roaster. Worked to the bone, and when the bones splintered, she clocked in on the marrow. A sixty-hour workweek. Ethan never went hungry.

"What's that on your face?" Bobbi asked. "How'd you get that?"

"It's nothing," Ethan said. "My bike hit a log. I fell."

#

"You'll be pissing blood tonight!" Judson was a few paces behind Ethan, chasing him through a row of trailers a few days before Halloween. The gang had been wearing masks for the past week.

Earlier, Ethan had helped Sydney file paperwork, and he knew his mom would almost be home. On his way to the trailer, Ethan had stopped in his tracks like a deer about to be battered; the gang spotted him passing the Carper's where they sat on the porch railing smoking granddaddy cigs.

Ethan ran with seared lungs. He wished his Nikes really could give him wings like Jordan. He needed more speed than his slight muscle could rally, barreling between Ryan Gilmore's metal shack and The Palace. Ethan saw a boat parked out front and thought of ducking underneath, hiding until he heard the footsteps pass, but he could hear Judson's yelling behind him. Gavan O'Riley was closest, wearing a ghastly rosy-cheeked, spiral-eyed mask. By The Palace, Gavan ran past a despondent man named Calvin Bookwright sitting out front. Seconds later, when the other three boys ran past, Calvin lit a cigarette.

Hearing a crashing in the shrubs, Ethan thought they might be three paces behind, maybe four. Behind Gilmore's shack, Ethan jumped over a pile of crab traps. Not seeing them, Gavan fell—tripping over the steel wire, angrily kicking one of the traps as he got back to his feet. The trap flew over the left side of Ethan's head.

"He's gettin' away!" Gavan yelled at Josh Carper while the other boy swerved around the crab traps, pulling ahead of Owen Hicks who fell back alongside Judson. A plague mask was strapped to Josh's head, pushed up from his face so he could see—the long plastic nose on top of

his head like a horn.

Ahead of Ethan was a group of men packing camping supplies into plastic tubs. Ethan risked a glance behind. He couldn't see the other four boys but kept sprinting. The men glanced up. "Run! Forest, run!" Ethan heard mockery in the man's voice and hated him. No one besides Sydney had ever helped him. To get home, he had to pass three more trailers before the shale road. He was close. He couldn't hear the gang behind him. Thinking they were probably heaving from their smoker's conditioning, he turned at the next trailer, pushing off the tin siding with his left hand like a stiff arm, pivoting around the metal.

He swung left, then crumpled—tripped by Owen who had waited with Judson on the trailer's far side. Judson's mask was a macabre clown, blood pooling from razor teeth to a powder-white neck.

"Whew, boy! We are going to beat the living shit out of you," Judson said. His drawl over-pronounced the last word with an extra set of vowels. He faced Josh, who wore a slasher's mask with a goofy red tongue drooped to the side. "Should we lick him up here?"

"We could take him down by the electrical station? Hook him up to one of the lines?"

Judson laughed. "Fry his ass. Good call." He flipped out a half-smoked Newport, lipping the cigarette through a slit in his mask. "Let's have a butt while we wait for Gavan and Owen. If he moves," Judson nodded to Ethan, "we'll put 'em out on his face."

Ethan lay still, vainly hoping they'd kick him around a few times, get bored, and leave him alone. He knew better. He'd embarrassed the gang by almost outrunning them, but since he couldn't fight, he'd had to run.

"You find him?" Ethan heard Gavan's throaty voice. "I almost had him but this fucker's

getting fast."

"Hurry up," Judson said. "Grab his legs, we're dragging him down to the substation." Ethan tried to stand but Judson slapped him back to his knees. "You'll never learn, bitch. Don't squirm, now."

Ethan was hauled by his limbs like a pig roast. Facing downward, his nose came within inches of the ground. He watched patches of ragweeds bursting through the crevices in the shells as the gang toted him away from the trailers toward the substation near the park's entrance.

"Stretch him out," Gavan said, pulling hard on Ethan's legs. "Pull him like a pirate rack." There was laughter. Each boy weighed in on their favorite torture. Judson went on about keelhauling. Owen talked about a video he'd seen on something called scaphism. Josh said he preferred the Viking Blood Eagle. Ethan, who was still being dragged through the park, wondered if they were only talking like this to scare him, or if the gang would really kill him, really wanted more than blood.

Crushed shells, giving way to thick patches of crabgrass, were all he could see. They dragged him further from his trailer where he hoped his mom was getting home from work. He'd managed to hide the gang's beatings from her but knew this one would be worse. Like the cats in the retention pond.

"Let's just toss this shit here," Gavan said, huffing. "How we gonna throw him over the substation, then jump ourselves? He'll run! I'm not chasin' this asshole no more."

Ethan didn't hear the boy's decision but knew their plan when he was dropped to the ground—landing on his forearms, his face in the dirt. Not far off to his right was the substation; the power lines sounded like bacon being fried. The fear in his chest was gone, replaced with an

empty feeling, the way his mother must've felt when she got back to their dark trailer. He looked toward the trailers, imagining his walk home. He'd probably be bleeding from his mouth, clutching his ribs. Ethan held a firm suspicion that's how his life would turn out. When you're beaten to the shade of lavender, no one offered help. Just turned away so they wouldn't get hit themselves.

Hands on Ethan's shoulders twisted him around to face the gang standing over him, Halloween masks hiding their faces. Thick saliva hit his face, running down the left side of his nose. Fingers gripped his collar, lifting him into alternating knuckles that splintered his cheek, unhinged his jaw. The boys took their turns. Ethan felt a popping in his eye. Later he'd know why: ruptured blood vessels.

"Kick the shit out of him!" Judson seethed. Above Ethan, he clenched his jaw so tight veins popped on his neck from under the clown mask.

Ethan's arms instinctively covered his head as he felt the hard rubber apex of size-four shoes collide with his body. The back of his head. Between his legs. His ears rang, a squeeze in his chest as fresh coats of pain washed over him. Iron filled his mouth. His breath was quartered; the boys kicked field goals in his ribs. Soon, Judson was on Ethan's side, jumping and bleating like a sheep. Like he was trying to flatten Ethan into the dirt.

All Ethan felt was pain, the only sensation he'd ever felt, and would ever feel—his body seemed to recede into the background. Maybe he was dying? Across the field where the gang had dumped him, he saw a shimmering light come off a trailer wall maybe a hundred feet away. He took in the shining metal, focused on the glint that flickered as a cloud passed overhead, then returned, more brilliant than before like a wink. Ethan watched that little beam of light come in-

and-out focus.

As he watched, he became aware that the blows against his body had stopped. His Nikes were ripped off. Trying to groan, he found he could separate chunks from a split lip, wide enough that his tongue could fit through. His chest rose, and the boys ran off. Ethan lay there, feeling the throbs settle to welts. In his socks, he tried limping back to his trailer. The first person to see him called Sydney Gongya, who took him straight to the hospital. On the car ride there, Ethan saw his Nikes drooping from the electric pole wire.

#

Bobbi knew her son had squabbles, a few scrapes, nothing to rouse serious alarm. She never believed ten-year-olds were capable of doing *this*. She felt blinded, absent in Ethan's life. She'd only seen him in the pale early mornings or the dark nights when she returned home to find him reading with a single lamp over his book. To Bobbi, the boys who did this were psychopaths. A pack of feral hogs.

She'd never let her boy face another savagery like the one dealt that afternoon. She had a plan. When Ethan was discharged, the Sikens headed back to Oak Hammock and Bobbi helped Ethan limp into their home. He was quiet. His left eye was shut, his breath a tremulous wheeze. Folding over the kitchen table, Bobbi made Ethan's bed with fresh sheets, smelling of eucalyptus, and helped her son crawl in, tucking the sheet under his body like a chrysalis.

"It hurts to be on my side," he said. "I can't hug my pillow."

"Stay on your back," she answered. "Breathe. You'll heal soon." Bobbi knew she had to be the one constant in her son's life. Everything else had shifted. If she wasn't there for him now, after Henry, she feared he'd see the ugly in the world *first*. Bobbi rubbed her son's back,

imagining that with each pass of her hand, a little healing went from her to him, that soon his wounds would disappear.

When Bobbi was Ethan's age, she'd felt energies around her: the trace of a hand on her shoulder, a whisper in the breeze. If her son wanted and believed, this could be a grisly memory that he could erase. She needed to say something to make that happen. But words felt like empty mason jars. So Bobbi sang to her son, who she thought was falling into a listless sleep. She sang the lyrics to a sad folk song Henry had once sung to her. As she sang, it was as if a seraph appeared, plucking a banjo just beyond what she could see; as if the musician sat on the stove-top, white linen dripping with the Suwanee, a beard like Spanish Moss from years of hermitting. Bobbi imagined her voice stirring the air, folding Ethan's clothes, straightening piles of his textbooks, wafting over him as she rubbed his back in one boundless pass. For all the times I couldn't be here, she thought.

Ethan, with a feverish pounding where the blows had fallen, felt humiliated. Now, he couldn't hide Judson from his mother. Below the warm timbre of his mother's song, he thought about how much his mother's face had changed, how stricken she looked with those black circles under her eyelids, her alarm every morning. He thought about how she never forgot that he liked blueberries, that his favorite candy was butterscotch toffee like his father's. Or that he needed a shoebox for his book report, which remained bare on the kitchen table except for the lonely Spiderman figure waiting to capture the book's villain. Ethan thought about how she worked every day before the sun rose, and finished long after it made its way across the sky.

Ethan thought about all the things he could've done differently. Starting then, he'd fight back. He'd scrape and bite and claw until the gang limped away shoeless through the park. Ethan

thought about the electric pole. After his Nikes, he'd make it so that Judson could never do this to him, ever again.

#

In the Siken trailer, most of their belongings were boxed, taken from cabinets and closets, lined up in the hallway, and waiting to be taped closed. Some were labeled 'Henry.' Ethan laid out his father's leather belt, a red broom, and a pair of yellow rubber gloves. He paused, evaluating his father's old items, the photographs. Four years had passed since his mother had taken the photos down. Ethan admired his father's sturdy look, his beard and stance, recognizing the brown of his own eyes. Not waiting for sadness, he placed the photo back in the box and pushed it against the wall.

The boy hadn't stepped a foot outside his trailer since returning from the hospital a month ago. Mr. Motyka had excused him from school to heal, as long as his mom returned his work packets. He'd read the Spiderman novel, but the book report remained unfinished. Ethan ached to leave the trailer, though his sternum still rattled when he breathed. Bobbi told him they'd be leaving the next day, the gang was at school, and the late afternoon heat would drive the neighbors inside. The time was now. Ethan gathered the items, trying for bravery, but his heart made other plans. When his hospital slippers hit the shelled walkway, anxiety thumped his temple and chest, and he set out toward the utility pole.

On the path, he saw a red finch peck at a hamburger bun, spilled from a pair of overflowing garbage cans. The finch chirped, its talons hooked on a crescent of nibbled bread. A hostile argument grappled inside Ethan. He felt a peculiar urge to kick the bird, watch its red spotted cheek twist around its neck, rip the wings from its back, leave the finch wounded. Dead.



As if sensing the boy's hostility, the bird quit pecking and studied him with beady eyes as if glaring—brows, woven along red feathers, seemed to narrow. The scowl reminded Ethan of the toy villain from his Spiderman novel. When Ethan had arrived at the book's end, he learned about sad endings, something that didn't happen in children's books. Spiderman killed his friend's father, then his friend turned evil. In the last pages, Ethan read a 'grown up' ending. No promise the hero wins. A 'disconsolate close,' Mr. Motyka would have said. Ethan believed this was how life ended too. The finch went back to plucking the bread.

Ethan yelled, scaring the bird into flight.

When he neared the electric pole, Ethan saw his Nikes, the heels knocking together, hanging from the utility wire. The pole buzzed, but that night, the electric crackle would intensify as the trailers lit up. Ethan had read the wire carried 12,000 volts, enough to cook him. The pole had a wood grain surface, swiveled in tree rings and lichen patches. Ethan imagined a trail of green moss running down his shirt after climbing down.

He threaded the broomstick into a loop in his waistband and buckled the leather belt snug around the pole and his midsection—an inch margin between his waist and the wooden pole; the rubber gloves were huge on his child's hands. Undeterred, he leaned back against the belt like a makeshift belay harness. The belt's metal prong dug against the notch but held.

His legs bent outward like a tree frog, his feet twisted, and he began the slow ascent—scaling the pole in increments and humming his mother's folk song over the pain in his ribs. With each lift, there was a point where he'd slide back down as he adjusted his father's belt to a higher anchoring point for counterbalance. Finding a rhythm, the shimmying pattern brought him ten feet off the ground. Sweat ran his forehead, down his eyes and wounds. He blinked back the salt;

the broomstick wobbled in his waistband. Biting down, he ignored the pangs shooting through his small body and grunted with each lift, pretending he could exhale the hurt. In another twenty feet, he'd reach the top. His mother's song lifted him. Two stories above, he paused; he was higher now than he'd ever climbed in his life. To his right, Oak Hammock sat in a dusky, early afternoon glow, ugly as the first day he rode his Schwinn through the park. The katydids chirped. Ten vertical feet stood between him and the summit. A height where falling would kill him. Without looking down, he climbed another three. Scrambling on the third push, he lost traction and slid. His heart raced. Quickly, Ethan pushed his knees against the pole, keeping the belt taut. He'd lost inches but hitched his feet back into position, careful not to lose his grip again. The buckle prong stretched into the belt, tearing the leather. Inside his oversized rubber gloves was cold sweat like the slime at the bottom of the retention pond. At the last push, he leaned back, cradled in the belt, and looked to his left where the shoes hung at an even level. The ground looked impossibly far away. His mother's song felt as far as the ground below. Gooseflesh jolted up his neck. He gripped the wood next to the gray, garbage can-looking cylinder with wires attached and withdrew the broomstick. The bristles tickled his side as he lifted it from the belt loop and locked his ankles into place, leaving room to miss the electric fuses when he swung. The broom's tip was an excruciating yard from where his Nikes hung. Balancing his hold, Ethan panted, batting the broom against the wire, trying to knock the shoes over. Vertigo dizzied him. In the blur, were demons. Wrathful sounds. A twangy howl, a gale of vowels, laughter that smelled like sulfur. The sounds overloaded Ethan's ears, drowned his mother's song—wilting any meaning behind Bobbi Siken's plaintive folk lullaby. Instead, Judson's mocking face plastered Ethan's mind; the clown mask was gone, leaving only those terrifying, mulchy eyes. Hatred

burrowed deep inside a once-lighted cave, now dark and ominous, where Ethan discovered he could silence Judson's howling. He saw a rag. He saw gasoline. He saw Gavan O'Riley's go-kart. Ethan saw himself waiting around a trailer wall with a screwdriver. He imagined Judson bound and gagged, forced to watch Ethan leave Oak Hammock, his Nike high-tops back on his feet. He imagined envy, the rancorous kind, would be the last thing Judson Jones would ever feel.

Ethan batted the electrical wire as if beating a garden hose; the broom sent ripples through the line. His high-tops bounced without enough force to send one of the shoes over the thick wire. He kept swinging, not pausing to wonder what would happen if he knocked the wire out of place where the volts coursed. Ethan swung until his bones ached.

The Nikes swayed, teetered.

And Ethan raged.

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### CHAPTER 3: WOOLLY MESSIAH

On a computer monitor in the green haze of night vision, the outline of a hairy silhouette hovers by a cypress tree in a dark shadow on one of Richard "Osceola" Armitage's several dual monitors. To Osceola's exasperation, the silhouette appears in the frame's obscured right edge. In the center, a brightly lit forest is unmoving, except for a few small tremors in the water, rippled by the movement of some large animal beyond the camera's lens. In the dark pocket along the screen's right-hand corner, a shrouded limb slips into frame, most of the animal's body masked in infuriating darkness. Hunched forward, his forehead grazes the screen.

'Roll it back,' Osceola tells himself. He's gone by this moniker for six years; his followers christened him after the Seminole Chief, and he's stopped arguing against the name. He pauses the footage, zooming in on the shadow retreating beyond the camera trap's lens. He dials up the resolution, adds lux.

Osceola's sitting alone in his triple-wide trailer, the headquarters of The Big Cypress Anthropoid Coalition (BCAC), reviewing footage captured by motion-activated cameras rigged to tree branches in the wildlife preserve north of Oak Hammock Trailers. BCAC cameras roll the moment something walks past. Osceola stores every pixel: six years of data cataloged on a large server tower next to his desk. The Coalition has caught footage of myriad life crawling up from the swamp but never what they're searching for.

To Osceola's right, along a table next to the server tower, are desktops, each with three monitors, and a charging station for dozens of walkie-talkies, sound-amplifying devices, and night-vision headsets. In a casing along the wall are footprint molds next to a six-foot replica of a

woolly cryptid. The statue's glass eyes watch from the corner like a deity; the body is covered in orange-matted hair. Hours ago, the trailer was a hive. Now, the headquarters is still.

Osceola began the Coalition, after his wife, Althea, died. He scrolled Internet forums, rehashing a childhood obsession and soon found Kito, who was also a widower. Painful memories made them kindred. In the early days, before the Coalition, the search was a hobby—Osceola and Kito venturing into Big Cypress with Osceola's son, Rueben.

"I was ten," Osceola had said. The three sat on camping chairs outside a marsh, circling a campfire. Through the thick oak canopies, the stars shined. "I was kayaking. Got separated from your grandparents." Osceola nodded at Rueben who was then only five. "I remember my kayak cutting through the algae film speckled over the marsh. The sun was out. The crickets were chirping. Then, I heard this howling. A screeching noise so loud, I felt it in my chest cavity, vibrating my skin."

Osceola watched Rueben eye the dense trees at the edge of their campsite. The boy might've thought this was a ghost story. Osceola squinted his eyes against the glare cast from the campfire and the fire's shadows danced across his face.

"I heard the screech before I smelled him," he said. "Never heard anything like that—growling like a gorilla with a cymbal in his throat—but he's also got this wolf howl. A high-pitched wail with a low-range bass roar. Raised my hair." Osceola wiggled his fingers over his forearms and Kito nodded. "I'm still kayaking, hearing this sound echo through the trees, and I swear on your dead mother's grave in Immokalee, I see ripples in the water like a propeller had turned on. Then, I smell him—rotted, mossy smell—grew riper by the second."

Rueben sniffed the air and Kito landed a hand on his small shoulder. "If he was around,"

Kito said. "You'd have already smelled him. Ain't that right, Richard?"

"That's right," Osceola leaned toward the fire. "I've only had one sighting, but I smell him every season. That first time, he went silent. His smell was growing stronger, coming toward me. *That smell* stung my nostrils, and I couldn't tell how far behind me he was, and now, I'm paddling—trying to get away. The same growling screech whipped through the trees like whatever animal making the sound was all around me. Then, behind me, I hear splashes. Big ones." Osceola waved the smoke out of his face and crossed his arms. "It was a bright day, but I started panicking—paddled faster."

"He ran past my kayak on two legs. Had to be over six feet tall because the water only came up to his shins. He was covered in this dark, orange hair. Moss had grown into his back—rotted into his hair." For the first time since he began his story, Osceola looked away from the fire. "I'll never forget this so long as I'm alive. When he passed me, I saw directly into his eyes. White eyes with black pupils. Like a man's."

A set of wispy clouds passed under yellow moonlight. Osceola could tell the story had spooked Reuben, who busied himself with a S'more. "You think he's still alive?" his son asked.

"I've heard his screech." Kito's eyes flared in the campfire. "Plenty of times huntin' out here. Never saw anything, but I know my animal calls. No damn bobcat makes that sound. Scientists don't know nothin' that makes noises like that."

"Scientists are all deniers," Osceola said. "He's out there. A whole unknown species." He gestured to the wetland trees beyond their campsite. "Maybe we'll see him this weekend."

Before that camping trip, Osceola and Kito had shared sighting stories. Talks became plans, and they decided to find him. They traveled with Reuben across Florida's wetland parks,

then up to the bayous of Mississippi, the Carolina woodlands. Soon, members of the cryptid community joined after reading their posts on online forums.

Many also claimed to have seen him, and the Coalition began.

#

The footage Osceola is reviewing was gathered in a record temperature drop in Big Cypress, in the Corn Dance Unit, ten years into the new millennium. Spring heat brought precipitation—dripped water from the needled leaves, filling the marshes. As the water moved, so did the animals. Dryer land to hunt and forage. The Coalition followed. As always, they'd set up cameras along the migratory paths, filming creatures across the habitat.

Tedious job. Still, Osceola believes that with enough sifting, lighting would strike—the animal he'd devoted his life to finding would stride across the camera frame, suspending the world's disbelief and complicating modern science. Again, he pauses the video, zooms in, and amplifies the image's brightness. Sharpens it. Adds resolution. He leans forward again, blinking, as if scrunching his eyes will rinse the dark obscurity hiding whatever animal had crept into the frame. The footage plays and Osceola's heart twitches.

“Is that him?” he asks. “Is that our guy?”

The Coalition leader stares at what appears to be his Ark of the Covenant. Don't get hasty, his judgment says. Jump the gun, and it'll do nothing but rile them up. He only had one ally in the scientific community, Eliza Dufour, and enough scientists had laughed in his face for him to wait for empirical evidence. Once, he'd been asked to share the Coalition's search by one of the local Audubon societies. He thought his talk went well but the smirks came during the Q&A. A man stood up and asked, “If you're lacing the trees with ape pheromones, wouldn't that

make Bigfoot horny for a date?" The room laughed. Osceola bristled. "Not Bigfoot," he answered. "A bipedal primate."

That bipedal is what he thinks he's now caught on camera. He replays the footage; something *is* gripping the tree and he continues tinkering with the filters. Finally satisfied with the footage's clarity—after washing out the image except for the dark corner in the night vision green—there was no denying what was now vivid: present in the screen's corner, resting against the bald cypress tree, is a hand. Woolly fur runs down the forearm, stopping abruptly where leathered, black skin begins. The hand, now clearly defined, grips the tree trunk, the bark's tussock brown wood contrasted against outlined fingers—the rest of the animal's body out of view, past where the frame ends. Osceola dials Kito on his landline.

"Call the team out," he says. "We got him."

#

Years before the Coalition, when Osceola's sighting was only a frightening childhood memory, Althea, Osceola's wife, told him she was carrying the child they'd go on to name Reuben. Before she began showing, they had planned for a midwife and a natural birth, but in the Florida backwoods, there were too many complications, too long of travels down state roads with primeval oaks and bromeliads stretched across the miles. No midwife would make the journey.

When Althea's water broke, Osceola, then called Richard, carried his wife to his truck and headed for the hospital, his engine growling under the hood. Osceola watched his wife breathe as if a knife had slipped, nicking her flesh. She rolled down the window and warm air filled the cabin. His hand on the wheel, Osceola eyed the wind whipping Althea's hair, her hand on her stomach. He thought back to their first morning after sharing a bed.



They had sipped coffee on Osceola's back porch, laughing at a deer that hadn't noticed them as he grazed on the sparse grass. When the deer finally realized he wasn't alone, the young stag bolted clumsily back into the pines. Althea couldn't stop laughing, a deep, guttural laugh like weeping. Two years later, she emerged from the bathroom with a pregnancy test. They held each other, foreheads together. Osceola ran his fingers through her hair and the word *family* stepped into his mind.

When the time came to deliver Rueben, Althea was ushered onto a hospital bed and pushed into a sterile maternity ward. Osceola paced, searching for ways to carry the load: the life ferried in Althea's stomach, but found he could only clutch her hand. A doctor who looked too young to be practicing medicine stepped into the room, examined her, and turned to Osceola to deliver the news that Althea would need a cesarean.

"He's dangerously small for her gestational age. If you came in for examinations," the doctor said with lowered brows at Osceola, "we could've caught this sooner."

"We wanted a natural birth," Althea said, visibly annoyed. Osceola could tell she was angry that plans for her body were being made as if she weren't a foot away on the examination bed. The doctor nodded curtly.

"She'll need anesthesia before she becomes any more dilated."

"There's no way she can deliver without anesthesia?" Osceola asked.

"No." The doctor clicked his pen twice. "That would be unwise, and we really don't have time to deliberate. I need to get the surgical team prepped."

Osceola met Althea's gaze; conversations replayed without speaking, and he was whisked from the room. In the lobby, he was given paperwork that turned to mush as his eyes passed the

letters. Nurses gossiped. Scrubs walked with purpose through the hallways. Osceola leaned forward in his chair, his thumbs orbiting the clipboard. He glanced toward the clock that hung on the cardamom-colored wall and sighed, eager to return to Althea.

Osceola held her hand through the surgery. The room smelled ammoniac: a sterile scent mixed with a spritz of iron, blood coalescing the air conditioning ducts. When he heard the first cries, he felt relief. A faint smile came over Althea like a fishing line disturbing a pond's surface. The doctor told them the nurses would have to rush their baby into incubation. Because of his dangerous size, he wouldn't be able to regulate his temperature outside of the womb. Althea held Rueben for a few seconds before a nurse took him away. After she was stitched up, the doctor returned, taking out his ballpoint pen.

"We'll monitor his progress," he said. "Get you home soon."

"When can we see him?" Althea asked.

"In a few hours. Get some rest. Press the pager if you have an emergency." Finished, the doctor placed his pen resolutely in his lab coat, his initials stitched over the pocket, and strode off. Althea looked like she had so many mornings in the last year, rushing to the toilet, Osceola getting water, and rubbing her back.

"Did you hear him cry?" he asked.

"Yes." She touched her stomach, grimacing. The bump she'd regarded over the last nine months, now flattened.

"So much for natural," Osceola said. "But at least it's over. You're okay. He's okay. Now we're a family."

"We've always been a family, Richard."

Hours later, Osceola sat by Althea's bedside, his head collapsed on the sheets, but his exhausted mind couldn't sleep. He had to see his son. Quietly, he stepped away from his wife, her chest rising and falling in deep heaves. In the fluorescent hallway, he found the charge nurse.

"You can peek through the NICU window tonight," she said. "Tomorrow, ya'll can wheel the incubator into the room."

In the nursery, his son lay in a transparent dome, dressed in a blue beanie and cotton one-piece. A tube protruded from his mouth. 'Reuben' was written in blue across a whiteboard hung beneath his incubator. Osceola's forehead grazed the window, his hands on either side, fogging the glass with his breath. His son was less than three feet away. He wished he could hold him, take him to Althea, wanting to inspect every inch of his body, find new, exciting evidence of his life. Osceola had so much to tell him. He watched his boy, pink and tiny, wander through his first dream.

The next morning, Althea complained of a headache. Osceola helped her drink glass after glass of water, then reluctantly, she requested pain relievers, but the pain persisted. Her symptoms worsened before the doctor said she'd need a CT scan.

She never made it to radiology.

What was first a minor nuisance, an obvious sign of dehydration turned malignant—beyond Osceola's understanding. When the doctors told him later, he reeled. *Subdural hematoma*. Althea's brain had bled. By noon the same day, she fell into a coma. Again, Osceola found himself taking frustrated laps from his wife's intensive care room to the nursery, back to her room where she was stabilized, on life support. He looked over the tubes and machinery planted in her body. Intravenous drip. Ventilator. A green blip rose and fell. The coma lasted

three days. Then suddenly, the precipitous lines that stooped and climbed like little green mountains drooped flat. Osceola was once again pushed from the room. A flood of attendants rushed in, trying to resuscitate her.

Later, the new father held his son over his wife's deathbed, hugging him against his chest, holding his head like a baseball in a glove, the same way he held him at Althea's funeral two weeks later.

#

Years after burying his wife, the century turned over, and Osceola sits in The BCAC headquarters reading an email with the subject line: *Everglades Foundation Grant*, sent by Eliza Dufour, his one ally. Reuben's in the kitchen, eating cereal before beginning his homeschooling. Osceola doesn't let his son play in the park. He's heard rumors of kids playing rough. A dusky sunbeam squeezes through the blinds, spilling tiny rectangles of light onto Osceola's keyboard. Finding his landline, he dials Kito.

"We got it," Osceola says. "The committee decided to give it to us."

"The state grant? The whole \$20,000? You sent the hand footage? I told you that'd get 'em to roll over. That footage is our bread and butter."

"No," Osceola said, snapping his fingers at Reuben to wash his bowl. "Like I said, we're not releasing that until we've got more substantial evidence. Dufour, the one from the state committee, likes our tactics, our no-trace missions, but what I *really* think she's after is panther footage. She works for Ecology Magazine. Probably needs her own grants."

"How you figure?"

"Panther's as elusive as our guy. They'll exchange the state grant for Florida Panther

footage. That's Eliza Dufour's big mission. The state's been breeding them with Texas cats, but they're still having trouble tagging the offspring."

"Well, this keeps us afloat," Kito says. "But we need to strategize."

Osceola hears the gears churning in his partner's head. "What're you thinking?"

"More sound amplifiers and thermal detectors," Kito says. "Then we need to invest in getting more numbers. We go out there with an army, he can't hide forever. We get more followers, and we can start charging membership fees, maybe even open a shop?"

"A shop? We don't sell anything."

"Yeah, but Dave Parson's raking it in with his gift shop. People say he's the Jane Goodall of cryptid researchers."

"Listen," Osceola said, fighting back a rebuff. "Dave's a good guy but he stopped helping the cause the moment he went on TV. He's not on there talking about land stewardship or humane methods of bringing *him* in. Those shows portray him as a redneck crackpot." Osceola runs his hand down his chin. "We monetize and we look like crackpots too, scientists get a good chuckle, then more tourists come down and damage the land."

"We need the money," Kito says. "This thing can't live forever on Althea's life insurance—"

"Sound amplifiers and thermal detectors," Osceola barks. "No gift shop." He watches his son raise his eyebrows. Osceola waves him off and Reuben flinches.

"You wanna find him?" Kito fades in the phone's speaker, probably pacing. "At this rate, we'll chase him for years, gettin' no evidence. If the Everglades Society can't even get a proper shot of the Florida panther, how we gonna get one of our guy? They've been tracking those cats

since '95. Now they're desperate enough to plug *us*—some redneck crackpots. If they're that desperate, I don't know what that makes us. I say, take the hand footage public. Advertise that we're state-funded now."

"Kito, we're not a business. Our members are locals. They're dedicated because they've seen him. They don't need—"

"Save your preaching."

"I'm not budging on this. You've seen Parson's footage. That's not science. It's a man in a gorilla suit. *That's* desperation. I won't let the Coalition sink to that level. Most scientists are already scoffing at us. They think we're like children out playing in the swamp. We squander a grant into a gift shop, we go down for fraud. We'll be a roadside attraction. Plus— "

"No one's lookin' over our books," Kito says. "Just don't make me say I told you so, Richard."

"You calling me that now because you're pissed off? You're the one who told me to go by Osceola' since you're — *were* 'Native by 'marriage.'" Osceola's never reproached Kito on this fact; he's let the transgression slide. "I'm sure the rez will agree with me. Marriage doesn't count. Doesn't make you native." Osceola imagines gritted teeth in the receiver.

"Creek's dead, man." Kito says. "My wife's dead. I got nothin' left of her except my ties to the rez."

Osceola's glad this conversation is over the phone when he rolls his eyes. Kito's been his second since the beginning, but Osceola never wanted money or fame. He didn't pack pistols or make false claims. Backwoods born but he'll always control how the world looks at him. Keeps him from the laughingstock.

“You there?” Kito says. “I need somethin' to show for the last six years. I can barely afford shells for my Winchester.”

Osceola looks at the trailers outside his window. “Give it time, when we unveil, we need to do it with proof. Then, we’ll show him to the world.”

#

The Supercenter's parking lot concrete shimmers as Osceola and Reuben step from the F-150. Father and son make their way over the manicured grass in the row dividers. Approaching the store entrance, a frigid blast hits them at the automated doors. They grab shopping carts—repeating the same experience they've made dozens of times—straight to the camping aisle. Osceola's cart squeaks. He kicks the wheel, maneuvering through a bombardment of shoppers. In the aisles, supplies pile up in both carts. Osceola's generous with his followers, providing anything they need in Big Cypress's languishing elements.

"They don't make anything like they used to," he tells Reuben. "Plastic is a reckoning."

"Yes, sir," Reuben says with a shade of combativeness that makes Osceola pause. "You think about the rifle?" his son asks. "Kito said he'll train me."

“Go to the food section. We've got eighteen on this trip. We'll need enough for four days."

"Haynes or the Claytons doing a run?" Reuben puts his foot on the cart's chassis to use it as a skateboard.

"Stop that," Osceola says. "If we find him, we'll stay longer, so stock up."

"I'll meet you in the groceries," Reuben says. "Then, maybe the rifle?"

“We’ll see.” Osceola regrets buying Reuben that hunting bow last year when he turned

ten. The bow was supposed to teach responsibility: how to maintain a tool that most only see as a weapon. Of course, now Reuben wanted a gun. Osceola isn't a hunter, but many of his members maintain the practice. He wishes they wouldn't bring them on the expeditions, but around the 'Glades, gun-toting brings respect. Earns mutual deference, a claim of sovereignty. Separating them from their guns would be like separating them from their pants.

Osceola rounds his cart for the ammunition counter. He buys two boxes of Winchester shells for Kito. His eyes scan the Remington 783, the youth model, and he rolls the dark plastic bag around the ammunition boxes, hiding them from his son, and steers his cart away. The left wheel lashes back and forth, leaving streaks on the floor. Osceola kicks the wheel.

Passing the automotive aisle, he watches a couple comparing windshield wipers, each holding a child's hand. The toddler's bouncing frenetically on his feet. To Osceola, the family looks indistinguishable from other shoppers; their details vague and distorted like crudely drawn animations meant to stand in the background. A Miami Dolphins hat. Russet-colored hair. Tiny plastic sandals. He can tell these people don't know which windshield wiper belongs on their sedan and Osceola folds the family away from his head like a rosary.

He moves toward the groceries. The wheel spins defiantly. Ahead, he sees Reuben in the electronic section. Bright flashes of color play across his son's face from a television monitor. Reuben's holding a controller, his thumbs swiveling the joysticks, mashing the buttons. Osceola kicks the cart's wheel. He'd ordered Reuben to the grocery section. Why was he wasting time?

Osceola's face appears in the glass casing's reflection in front of Reuben. His son tenses and looks at his shoes.

"Dad, sorry. I just saw it. It was only a second." Behind him, the screen fills up with an



animated monsoon.

"Look me in the eyes."

A few shoppers perk their heads toward them, but Reuben's eyes stay lowered. Osceola grabs his son's cheeks, pinching his face, and jerks the boy's head up.

"I just wanted to see how to play," Reuben mumbled through his father's grip. "I'm sorry, I—"

Osceola slaps him. The contact sends a shudder around the aisles and the gawking shoppers go back to their carts, whispering. An employee asks them if everything is okay.

"We're fine ma'am. My son is forbidden to play video games." Osceola looks back at Reuben. "You know better. We have huge stakes out there and you're fooling around?" Osceola steps back, lamenting Reuben's sullen look. "Please, son. Don't jeopardize our mission. We're so close."

#

Outside Osceola's trailer, the last midmorning wind is blowing before the air's stifled by the sun's arc. As Osceola and Reuben pull up, they see the most ardent Coalition members, dressed in camouflage, working in legion, loading the trucks in front of the Coalition Headquarters. Nine trucks. Eighteen followers. Some are with their kids, the youngest of which is Terry Ham's boy, Teddie, an eight-year-old who helps with the camp cooking. There's a buzz in the air, a final push. Osceola figures many share their leader's feeling that this is *the* weekend. He speaks with his members, assessing issues—thanking them for their duty with a wide smile that tugs the creases of his face's usual sternness.

The Coalition loads out and Osceola imagines they're sharing his fantasy, rehearsing the

story in their heads, ready for apologies from a family who've told them the search was delusional, the scientists who think a labcoat makes them more intelligent. He thinks of the thick swamp as a kind of baptism. There, they'll find what they've spent their lives chasing. The final duffel bags are tucked under seats. Ratchet straps are secured over a mountain of equipment: bionic listening devices, tents, and rifles. Osceola stands on top of his F-150, gazing over his followers with the steadfast poise of a preacher. He raises his hands, calling their attention. His followers grow silent.

"Friends," he looks over his congregants with eyes that could slice men down. "For six years we've searched under the allegiance of The Big Cypress Anthropoid Coalition. The search has led us into the places least touched by man, and therefore, the most beautiful."

The Coalition cheers. Kito has his Winchester slung across his shoulders. Reuben's sitting on a plastic bin filled with canned food next to him.

Osceola bows his head. "This weekend, we find the most important scientific discovery of the century. But we all know, you can't bring memory into a lab. You can't bring your sighting with you to show the people who doubt you, but this weekend we *can* bring back something for the rest of the world to see for the first time."

Silence falls over the BCAC. Osceola watches them consider his words. He sees the same craving in them. Recognizing the shared obsession, he smiles. Kito breaks the stillness by holding up his rifle. "He's right, ya'll! It's our time."

Cheers break out and Osceola hops down from his makeshift pulpit. He looks over the crowd, finding Reuben staring at the ground. I need to get that kid under control, he thinks, and commands the followers to start the brigade of HEMIs, hitched with UTVs and flatbottom boats,

blaring down the shell gravel: a procession heading into the swamp's heart. The sun's still above the horizon, braising the pine leaves rustling as the trucks drive past.

The caravan hurtles down US-41, flying past saw palmettos and wax myrtle, tall pines further back in the thicket. Sabal palm blades wave as the Coalition's wake rattles the tree crowns. Quiet, Osceola stares ahead at the blinding concrete reflecting the sun, the road cutting through the national park like a gash. Every few miles, a break in the tree line reveals decrepit little shacks where none visit. The radio reports on 'El Nino.'

The followers take thirty minutes to build a makeshift headquarters. Underneath a giant tarpaulin canopy, are charging stations and five monitors, broadcasting live feeds from the fifty game trail cameras and head mounts each member wears. Every second is recorded. But a dead battery means a blind spot. Concrete molding kits, ape pheromone spritzers, and parabolic sound amplifiers lie in organized rows on fold-out tables.

With Osceola, the first wave stands underneath the canopy—devotees like Shane Hawkins, Andre and Chassidy Clayton, Kevin Haynes—all studying a map of the preserve and waiting for instructions. Kito's loading his Winchester. The internal magazine clicks, swallowing each bullet.

"We've got 720,000 acres to cover and only fifty pockets of sight," Osceola says. "Use your tracking and judgment. He's not far from human." He points to the Windmill Prairie. "UTVs can't reach the strands here. Andre, you'll have to take your team by kayak. The shorter trees are better—the taller the cypress, the deeper the water. Stick to the domes where he can still manage to wade."

"Set those cameras up where you'd forage," Kito says. "At least a mile between traps."

Those going by water take the long shift. Priorities on the Corn Dance Unit where we got our hand footage—the northeastern sector three point five miles west of the Miccosukee Reservation."

"Right," Osceola says, eyeing his lieutenant. "Runners along the dry north ridge have first shift on sound amp tomorrow. We'll be relieved in stages. Night teams take sound and thermal. Keep your radios on but chatter low after you log your coordinates."

"Kayaks takin' concrete?" Kevin Haynes asks, holding up a molding kit.

"Don't overburden yourselves," Osceola says. "If the females are in estrus, the males will be marking the territory. You see bark scratches, and of course, the smell—"

"Make sure you're moving downwind," Kito says. "Ya'll should smell him. Not the other way around."

A few laughs break out and Osceola feels a shift in the circle around the map. He wishes his men luck, and the teams break out, moving across Big Cypress. Reuben's aboard Osceola's UTV, like old times, following GPS coordinates over a dirt trail heading into the Corn Dance Unit.

#

Osceola stops every few kilometers, sniffs the air, and has Rueben set up a camera rig where the land is dry. He cuts the UTV's engine at the site of the hand footage, an enormous cypress with sturdy roots that split from the trunk to form a buttress. He walks up and places his hand where the animal's hand touched the tree. He feels a charge in the place where laughter comes from and the doubt in his mind quiets. The importance of this search creeps over any sorrow or embarrassment like the shadows over the creature in the hand footage that he's erased.

“Your turn,” Osceola nods at his son. Reuben gives him a look that Osceola interprets as asking whether this is a request or a command. “Go on. Put your hand where his has been.”

“I can’t reach.”

Osceola cups his hands the same way he does when he lifts Reuben into the trees to secure a camera, and Reuben steps up. “Do you feel him?” Osceola asks. “His energy?”

Osceola watches his son flatten his palm against the bark. “Yes, sir,” Reuben says quickly. “I feel it.”

He doesn’t feel it, Osceola thinks, sensing Reuben still hasn’t forgiven him for the slap. “Climb up to that next branch,” he says, pushing the soles of Reuben’s hiking boots. “I’ll hand you a camera trap.”

Reuben does as he’s told, securing the camera, lens pointed down for a wide shot of the foliage below. Osceola squeezes his son's shoulder as he lowers him back to the ground. “Call in the coordinates,” he says. “Maybe you’ll have your first sighting. You’re overdue for one.”

“I think we’re all overdue,” Reuben says, walking back to the UTV to retrieve the radio.

Stay patient, boy, Osceola thinks to himself. Be faithful. He would’ve dragged out an argument but figures any time not spent searching would be a waste. The sun shifts lower. The swamp hums. Father and son continue setting up rigs, ending up at a hunting tower, listening to their sound amplifiers until the blue of the sky bleeds into a darkening orange. Osceola’s been told Reuben hates this part—waiting and listening for endless hours. Cicadas and katydids. Every so often, the crackle of gunfire plays in the headphones. Hunters.

. The hours pass and Osceola waves his sound amplifier toward the horizon. The noseems and mosquitoes come out. Osceola sits in practiced stillness like a monk. He’s got

only twenty minutes of radio battery. Maybe a half hour. A meadow vole ambles through the leaves. A good sign. They're quiet enough for mammals to move about, blind to their presence. Rueben takes out his bow, plucking the string, and the hours drift until the radio stirs quietly by Osceola's shoulder

"Got eyes on *him*," whispers Kito's voice, down in the southwest Deep Water. "Repeat, eyes on him—30 meters southwest 26°52'N 80°54'56"W."

Osceola punches the coordinates into his GPS. They're six miles from Kito's position. "Have you gotten clear footage?" he asks the radio in a low voice.

"Negative. Head mounts are dead. He's nowhere near a rig. He's crouched now. Burst through the trees smashing somethin' against the ground. Think he's feeding on a snake."

"I'm less than a klick north of them," Osceola hears Chassidy Clayton's quiet voice on his radio. "Downwind and green batteries."

There's still hope, Osceola thinks, but he knows it's slim. He glances at Rueben who's still fiddling with his bow but doesn't have time to scold him. "Move in on foot," Osceola whispers sharply into his shoulder. "Roll cameras now. Film everything! Kito, report. Eyes?"

"Eyes on him," Kito says, even more faintly than before. "Hurry."

The radios go silent. Even so, Osceola feels jitters across the park, ears pressed to radios, breaths being held.

"We're point-two klicks from your position, Kito," Chassidy says. "Report."

Radio silence.

When Osceola can't take the shrill buzz of silence in his ear, he orders Kito to report.

"He's on the move." By the way Kito's breathing, Osceola can tell so is he. "I've got no

way of authenticating, but I can take a shot.”

“Do it,” comes Chassidy’s decision.

Osceola imagines the other devotees feel the same. The followers are restless; they need to go home with something. "Don't shoot him," Osceola says into his mouthpiece. Taking a specimen inhumanely was not The BCAC’s way. "Hold your position and report movement.” He wants to strangle Kito for not having a battery. Agonizing minutes roll by and Osceola debates hopping onto his UTV, trying to be the first to see the footage. He jerks his head toward his neck where his speakers clipped when Kito’s radio crackles.

“He’s on the move. Fast. Osceola, report. I can take him now?”

Osceola holds his hand over the radio's click-button, his neck pulses, and he feels the variegated canopies closing around the tower. “No. I’m en route,” he says finally.

No response. His radio is dying. Painful minutes drag by and Osceola keeps expecting to hear a gunshot rip through the swamp. A side of him he won’t acknowledge hopes for one.

More radio silence.

“Reuben,” he turns toward his son. “We’re heading out.”

“Why?” Rueben asks him. “He’s gone, now.”

His son’s right, even a child can see it’s pointless. Osceola takes a breath and settles back against the hunting tower’s wooden post. He rubs his neck, the knots clenching his muscle tissues where his radio is clipped to his backpack’s shoulder strap.

“You should’ve let him take the shot,” Rueben says. “That would’ve ended all of this.”

Rueben nods to the marshes around the tower.

Osceola scratches the tower’s wooden grain and green algae comes off under his

fingernail. "I thought I taught you better," he says to Rueben, who's pulling the bow's string back, his eye near the front sight. "Put that away. Without an arrow, the force will absorb into the bow and you'll break it."

Rueben slowly moves the string back to the arrow shelf. "Yes, sir." The sun lowers on their west, streaking gold across the swamp. "Will we be here long?"

Osceola doesn't answer. He thinks back to the Supercenter visit that morning and broods. The radio's red light fades, dead. Fine, he tells himself. We'll pan for sounds for a few more hours, then call it. Just in case. He's about to put headphones on when a gunshot echoes through the fern and spikerush. He watches an egret leave his perch in the cypress canopies.

#

"Dinner's almost ready," Clint Guzman, the camp's cook, says handing Osceola a coffee when he returns to camp in the dark with his son hours later. He gives Clint a thankful nod. Reuben heads straight to his tent, upset they'd had to stay at the hunting tower so long. Osceola's unsure of the morale and guesses the followers will side against him. 'Gladesmen don't count fishing stories without a trophy or a picture to prove it. By the campfire, spirits seem high. There's laughter and beers. Maybe that shot landed? Osceola buries the guilt that he feels hopeful.

He walks toward the fire where his followers sit. The discussion stops with a stiff pause. Kito's drinking a beer, holding the can against his head as if nursing a headache. Osceola nods at him, asking if he's dragged a specimen to camp. Kito shakes his head; he must've shot at the air in frustration, Osceola thinks—Kito's done that before. His followers' gazes fall on the logs, and he looks around before speaking.



"We came very close today." None look up. Osceola finds his voice. "This is another blessing. I smelled him on my route. How many of you felt evidence out there?"

"Got a few photographs of scratch marks in the bark, Dennis Vargas, a small bald man with a slight frame tells the group. "Definitely animal, not a kayak bump."

"Beautiful," Osceola says, encouraged. "Anyone else?"

"I smelled him," Kellie McCarty says. "They're marking territory. I remember the same aroma spikes last summer."

"Yeah, well I fucking saw him," Kito says. "I watched him a solid five minutes in my scope. Saw his face. It was human." Hearing this, the others perk up—raised eyebrows, quizzical leers in Kito's direction. Osceola watches Kito's jaw pivot annoyingly. "Not three hours ago," Kito says. "He was thirty yards out, chewin' on a snake in my rifle scope."

"If you were close enough to see him," Osceola says. "You're close enough to get footage. Shooting will only scare more of them off."

"My team was overdue on relief. That's why our head mounts were dead. We'd been waitin' for hours! Even snapping stills, you're not getting more than six hours total with a backup battery."

"Natalie was supposed to relieve you," Osceola says.

"Well, she's out there now," Kito snaps. "Most she'll see tonight is a fuckin' fox squirrel." Kito looks around the fire. "We could be standing over a specimen right now, examining him. So, I'll ask again." Kito turns to Osceola. "Are we still not taking shots?"

Every eye, which moments ago, was studying the glowing embers, looks at their leader. There's nothing he can say to appease them. Minus Clint, there are eight around the fire, waiting

for him to make a call.

"We'll put it to a vote," he says. "Half of us are here," he says. "I'll radio the others. The rest of you, pistols out if you want to go inhumane—kill one to prove the rest exist. Pistols holstered if we do the hard work. Remember, we're among believers. You have a sighting, the people beside you know you're telling the truth."

Kito slaps his revolver onto his lap and eight other pistols brandish, Glocks models and Springfields. The same for the radio. The vote's 17-1.

"It's settled," Osceola sighs. Inevitable, he thinks. His leadership is slipping away, and he burrows into himself to appear strong. "But drawing should be a last-case scenario." He looks his followers in the eyes as he speaks, weighing their loyalty. "Keep your batteries charged. This species can't afford even a single killing."

After the vote, Kito tells his sighting story to the campfire. Not one of them thinks for a moment that he could be lying. Not even Osceola, who privately wishes Kito would've pulled the trigger—longing to see the creature again with his own eyes. Even dead.

#

The Big Cypress Anthropoid Coalition spends another three days wading through the swamps—on hunting towers or standing at the base camp's monitors—willing an anthropoid to appear. There are no more sightings. Most are eager to return home.

In his living room, Osceola scans the footage. The followers that bothered replying to his latest call have all made excuses. Kellie McCarty can't get time off work. Clint Guzman's got a cold. Lies. If you need time to get over this last failure, he figures, just tell me. Don't stage faith that's no longer there. He wonders if Althea were still alive, if she'd join him, or turn her back

like the rest of them.

In August, a hyperactive hurricane season locks Big Cypress' doors. Osceola's cooped in his trailer, no longer able to return to the cypress tree alone to touch the bark. Instead, he sinks deeper into the online cryptid forums, watching footage and scrolling comments until his eyes sting. The summer months yawn into tropical autumn. One day, he uploads the hand footage onto Truephenomena.com, hovering his mouse over the 'post' button.

"Reuben," he yells over his shoulder. "I'm thinking of releasing the hand footage."

"Go crazy," his son yells back from his room.

A year ago, when Reuben was ten, he would've come running. Now, he sulks as far from his father as he can get. Osceola tries shrugging it off as his son's impending teenage years, but, even on the surface, he knows he's ruined their relationship. He'll admit to himself that it's easier scrolling the forum's encouraging comments than finding his way back to his boy.

Osceola posts the hand footage. In two days, the view count reads '300,000.' Another day, it doubles. By the end of the week, he gets another email from Eliza Dufour, of The Florida Ecology Society, telling him she wants to interview him for a feature in the magazine.

"Reuben, come here!" Osceola says, not taking his eyes off the computer monitor. He hears his son's footsteps coming down the triple-wide's dark hallway.

"What's up?" Reuben says, not quite past the hallway's frame.

"I'm leading an expedition into the park this weekend with a journalist."

"So?"

"Well, I thought you'd want to join. Just us? I don't think the other followers are up for the trip." Osceola watches his son's gaze travel to the carpet. "I want you to touch the same bark

he's touched again. Maybe get a photo of you doing that for the magazine?"

"Is Kito going?"

"I don't think he'll make it either." Kito's still angry over Osceola's command last summer.

Rueben scratches his shoulder. "I've got a lot of schoolwork, you know?"

"No, yeah," Osceola says. His son's studies are year-long in homeschooling. "Yes, focus on school. That's good."

"Okay," Rueben says, already heading back to his room.

#

Eliza Dufour pulls into Oak Hammock, glancing at a swaying pair of Nikes on the electric pole. The sight's congruous among the dilapidated trailers—furniture and trash clustered around the front railings. Pulling her Subaru into Osceola's side yard, she's relieved the place is clean. She knocks, and Osceola invites her inside.

To Eliza, Osceola doesn't look like other 'cryptozoologists.' He wears blue jeans and a checkered button-down under brown, professor's hair and dark features. Eliza puts down her Pelican bag, surveying his living room. The magazine's prestige is at stake with this feature. Some of her colleagues, concerned with funding, groaned when she announced the story in the Ecology Magazine's editor room.

"Welcome to The BCAC headquarters," Osceola says, gesturing with his arms. "In all its glory." No disguise in his facetiousness. Osceola can't help but notice Eliza is beautiful. No makeup with a sharp nose under almond-shaped eyes.

"Will any other members of the Coalition be joining us?" she asks. Eliza was expecting a

whole party.

“No just us.”

"May I?" Eliza holds up a camera, aiming the lens at the wooly replica in the corner. Without an answer, she begins snapping photographs. Osceola's thankful she doesn't ask him to pose with the statue. "We're running this story," she says unzipping her pelican bag, "to bring awareness to the ecosystem, same as you."

Osceola notes her last words are a question. "I only agreed to this because I respect the magazine." He laughs nervously. In the last few months, most of his conversations have been online. He hasn't left his triple-wide in some time.

"Keep laughing," Eliza says, snapping pictures. "Makes good candid shots." Tiny whirring sounds fidget from the lens auto-focus. "Weird to be on camera when you're usually behind one?"

Osceola doesn't realize that was the source of his discomfort. "I guess that's right."

"Let's get right into it." Eliza retrieves a fresh yellow notepad. "What makes you believe there's a primate species in Florida's National Parks?"

"Mrs. Dufour—"

"You can call me Eliza."

Osceola offers a cordial smile. When he tells her to call him what his followers call him, the ecologist frowns. "I've grown fond of Osceola," he says. "Don't get me wrong, I don't think it's respectful, but I've gotten used to it. I haven't gone by Richard since my wife died."

"I'm sorry."

"It's fine," he says. "The followers call me that." Osceola gestures to an office chair by

the server tower. "Please, sit."

Eliza sits, crossing her ankles. "Why haven't the rangers seen anything?"

Osceola takes his seat across from her, ready for the boldness of these questions.

"Twenty-five new species of primates have been discovered in the past ten years," he says. "A few of these were sizable—not lemurs or marmosets. And they still went hidden." He gazes upward, recalling countless online debates. "In the last decade alone, the pygmy-three toed sloth was discovered in the Caribbean. The giant squid, a cryptid since before 2004, is now a household name."

Eliza likes his articulate response. He shows her the track molds: hair striations and skin wovels. "The musculature," he explains. "It's made with a midtarsal break. A pair of joints in the middle of an ape foot. These molds are evidence that cannot be explained."

"Your logic isn't exactly Newtonian," she says. "But I'll bite."

The interview continues on their way to Big Cypress in Osceola's truck, hitched with two ATVs. He's planning on showing her the cypress tree, the one *he* touched. Eliza and Osceola discuss The Homestead Act. Visions of the state's future. Wilderness conservation. To Osceola, the conversation feels like the most natural thing in the world. Eliza understands. She's a native. She tells him about the swallowtail caterpillars she plucks from her green pepper plants, and how meticulously she roots out the bull thistle, so she can remove the weeds without worrying about fertilizer runoff, red tide. Both feel that the world of their childhoods is being paved over.

"Have you ever seen a Florida Panther," Eliza asks him. Her true hope for this expedition.

When Osceola tells her he hasn't, he sees a longing in her eyes that he's also seen in the

mirror and fights the impulse to compare her panther to his biped. Parking, he unhitches the two ATVs.

"You know how to ride one of these?"

"This isn't my first time in the field," Eliza says, throwing her leg over the Yamaha.

"Won't the engines scare the animals off?"

"We'll take the Corn Dance Unit on foot," Osceola says, mounting his ATV. "That's where we caught the hand footage but it's a ride to get out there. Just wait," he says before firing the engine. "We might see him this afternoon."

"Hope you don't have one of your members out there in a gorilla suit."

"I'm not one of the quacks," Osceola says. "I'll find him." He says it with so much conviction, Eliza thinks he just might.

From the ATVs, they pass a ten-foot alligator basking on the bank among smaller specimens, visible from the cedar walkways built over the red mangroves. They ride the eleven-mile dirt trail toward the cypress tree. The engines growl through the canopies.

Eliza keeps glancing sideways, imagining a hairy creature in the trees, watching her with human eyes. Civilization further behind, she begins wishing for that sight. Despite her skepticism, if a biped emerges on their path, she can help Osceola claim a semblance of respect in the scientific community. Not only because she likes him, and the discovery would help with conservation efforts, but his search relies on imagination, maybe even faith. Something that all humans lose.

Ahead, Osceola slows, maneuvering the ATV around something in the path. He kills the engine, motioning Eliza to do the same. She catches up to where he's standing over a mutilated

carcass of a white-tailed deer. The head's intact, but the midsection's missing, flesh ripped away, exposing the white of a ribcage. Guts and ligaments punctuated by bone. Eliza photographs the deer, bringing her lens right up to serrated bite marks in the muscle, jutting from visibly gnawed bone. Flies swarm before landing.

"Think an alligator did that?" Osceola asks. A black bear?"

"I'm not sure what carnivore did this," Eliza says, brushing mud from her knees. "I haven't ruled out human."

"You think a human did this?" Her insinuation that the deer might be planted ticks Osceola's pride. "Come on, that's more unbelievable than the truth. Look at your tracks."

Eliza scans her boot tracks, clearly articulated in the mud. "Then how did it get here?"

Osceola notices a tremulous note sharpening her tone. "Look," he nods toward a lace-barked pine a few feet off the trail. "There's our answer." A cream-colored pine is splintered halfway up the trunk—a blood splatter painted over the wood. "He must've thrown his prey at the tree."

"That's impossible."

Osceola thinks Eliza's firmness betrays her. Non-believers never want to face the facts staring right back at them. The two venture further into the dome thicket, careful to stay quiet, though Osceola believes he's moved off. Eliza's close behind, feeling an anxious charge in the palmettos and dwarf cypress. Ten meters off the trail, the ground's less firm—water seeping through the soil. Osceola stops, holding his hand up like a Marine, and sniffs the air. The sultry forest is quiet, absent of the cicadas. Eliza furrows her brow, peering across the glade. Above, the tree canopies seem to bear down on her.



"It feels like we're being watched," she says.

"You smell anything?" Osceola whispers. He can see her heartbeat knocking against the veins above her clavicle.

"Let's go back to the trail."

"He's nowhere close," Osceola says, turning back. "We'd smell him. It'd be almost unbearable."

Back on the trail, the tingling feeling of being under a microscope stays with Eliza. Osceola's seen that look in his followers. The instinct of being in the territory of a higher predator. He asks her if she's okay.

Eliza takes a sip from her canteen, looking back at the route through the domes they just walked through. "I usually love the field, but something felt off out there. The dead deer. I let my imagination wander."

"The beauty of this place," Osceola looks at the tree limbs, "can look creepy, sometimes."

They continue riding east and Osceola feels the fatalistic tug Big Cypress always gives him. The last sunlight flickers above through the leafless trees, reaching up like skeletons toward the lowering sun. When the trail ends, they dismount the ATVs, slinging backpacks over their shoulders, and head into the buttonbush and cocoplum. They wade through knee-length water, warm like bathwater against their skin. Eliza asks to wear a noise amplifier, sweeping the device ahead of her as she hikes.

At the tree the creature touched, they pause, Osceola regarding the cypress like Gethsemane. He takes his hand and places it in the same position the biped had clasped. Eliza gives him an appraising look and takes a picture of him, pointing out that a primate's hand would

dwarf any human's.

"I'm not a fool," he says. "I know what people say about me." Osceola thinks about the jeers from the Audubon Society Q&A for, the smirks.

"I don't think there's a primate species out here," Eliza says. "But I hope there is."

"When I find him," Osceola says, thinking that this one might have faith. "People will realize that if we got this wrong, we got a lot more wrong. Fifty-two percent of the Earth's species have gone extinct. There are eight billion of *us*. What are the scientist doing about that?"

Eliza flicks the cypress's bark. "Who do you think finds the statistics you love to quote?" she asks. "Scientists, real scientists, who aren't your enemy. If I'm being honest, no one's your enemy. The Ecology Society doesn't have any personal vendetta against you. If you discover a primate out here, great! That'll push policy. But, I don't buy it. There's something else going on here, isn't there?"

"Can I tell you something," Osceola asks. "Off the record?"

To Osceola, Eliza's eyes are like some valley, some ocean. "Sure," she says.

"When my wife died, I felt—" Osceola searches for a word he can't find. "I should've done something. Anything, but we avoided the doctors, and it turned out Althea," he chokes on her name, pointing to his head. "She had a hematoma. I'm not delusional. I know why it feels better to be out here in the parks, and I know that's not the only thing I'm doing wrong." Osceola crouches to a seat in the cypress tree's roots and thinks about his son. "I don't know why I'm telling you this," he says. "It's not your burden. Sometimes, I think I've created a monster."

"No, you haven't," Eliza says. "He was always there. Now, we just have to find him." But when she looks down at Osceola, crumpled against the tree roots, she sees a man who hasn't

talked with anyone outside his circle, a circle she suspects he's lost. None of his Coalition are here. She tries not to pity him, thinking the only way this whole day won't be a sad affair is for the animal he thinks touched that tree shows itself. "Let's get moving," she says. "The sun's going down. The gators will be more active."

A half-mile northwest, the water recedes. They find the hunting tower Osceola sat on with Reuben when Kito had his sighting. Osceola shows her the ape pheromones, ceremoniously spritzing the trees around the tower. Hours creep past. The shadows grow longer. They listen for howls—sounds like colossal metal dragged over rubber—in their headphones. Time sputters, fizzles, then draws to a crawl. Eliza thought the interview would've been over hours ago and thinks herself foolish now. The leader had started out impressive, exactly what she'd hoped for, but now she finds the truth behind his relentless search hard to ignore. She doesn't want to write a feature on a person the ecology magazine's readers will scoff at, or worse commiserate with.

Why hadn't she told him to turn around? A hope that this was all real, though walking back through the swamp at night would be dangerous. She's drowsy but holds the sound amplifier primed ahead, scanning the pink horizon for something to happen. Her eyes adjust to the new, darker world. After a few silent hours, her eyelids grow heavy. She touches Osceola's forearm, letting her hand rest there.

"I only hear the insects," she says. "We have headlamps to see our way back. I think it's time to call it."

"Give it a little more time," he says. "I'm sure of it." His eyes go back to the swamp, unflinching as the changed environment.

A few minutes later, Osceola tells Eliza to point her sound amplifier south, behind them.

She does, adjusting the sensitivity level, but only hears wind and crickets. He raises his brow, as if to say, 'did you hear it?' She shakes her head, and he nods gravely, pointing his amplifier in the same direction, before finally giving up, and trying a new position. The stars above are bright, and cast complex shadows from the tree canopy, wavering on the ground below.

#

Eliza's unsure what wakes her—the dawn light or the dew blanketing her. Feeling stiff, she shuffles off her side. She blinks back her eyelid's heaviness, now alarmed. She doesn't know where she is until the memory of the previous night comes back like a floodplain. Ahead, Osceola's still in the same position she'd left him in hours before she'd fallen asleep, unmoving.

"You didn't sleep?" she asks. Her voice is raspy. "We need to get out of here."

"I wanted you to see him," Osceola says quietly. "Have a sighting."

"I wanted to. I still do. Since we arrived, I thought we just might. But I think I'm just psyching myself up—wanting it to be real."

"I'm sorry," Osceola says. "I shouldn't have made you sleep out here. There's just this nagging feeling, that if I stay a little longer, he'll come. I always wonder, then regret not staying. Maybe he showed up a few minutes after I left? I just needed him to return and show himself to you. I've only seen him once, and sometimes, I think the species has died out." Eliza gets the feeling Osceola's talking more to himself than to her. "But Kito just saw him?" he says. "I smelled him. The scratch marks, the roars. Should I just accept it?"

"Accept what, Osceola?"

He sighs and takes off his headphones without looking away from the swamp. Eliza touches his shoulder, and he jumps. "Listen," she says. "In '97, I was in my master's program,

writing my thesis on the Florida Panther. I was out here. Studied and surveyed their habitats. I estimated there might be 100 left—bleak figures. My thesis was on cohabitation: panthers interacting with human populations. I wrote about roadbuilding as an aggregate for those interactions. How every hour, twenty acres of state land is developed. The shrinking wildlife corridor on the western part of the state."

"The darkest spot in satellite imagery," Osceola says.

"No lights. More panthers."

"Until they turn the lights on."

Eliza turns Osceola to face her, forcing him to look away from Big Cypress. He looks years older than he did when she first walked into his trailer: dark spots like grimaces under his eyes.

"My research took me all over Florida," she says "Through the parks. I spent weeks out here waiting for a glimpse. Over two months and I never saw a single panther. I had camera traps like you and nothing. I wrote my thesis and graduated. I thought that was the end. Flash forward thirteen years—I'm hiking in Tallahassee after spending the whole weekend at a conference in an auditorium. I'm alone and hiking through some thick brush. The kind that makes you feel like the state's another planet."

Osceola nods, telling Eliza he knows these plants too.

"In front of me," she continues. "There's a glade about 100 meters ahead. That sight's still branded in my head. The probability of seeing one is astronomical, but I swear to you, a Florida panther walked right into the glade. She stood there, very still, looking at me, then kept walking, unconcerned with how much I couldn't believe she existed. The harder I searched, the

more I wanted one to bound out of the thicket, the more elusive those damn panthers became. But the day she wasn't on my mind, a little gift came sauntering out in front of me like a miracle."

"Hell of a story," Osceola says. "Maybe one day, I can tell one just like it."

"That towel you're thinking of throwing in—burn it," Eliza says, motioning to the hunting tower's ladder.

They climb down and Richard "Osceola" Armitage of the Big Cypress Anthropoid Coalition and Eliza Dufour of The Florida Ecology Magazine hike through the knee-deep water over four miles to where they left the ATVs. Under the luminous sky, they listen and sniff and hope for the Skunk Ape to emerge—running upright through the cypress, a pervasive scent enveloping the surroundings. As they wade, all around them, large animals move, undetected, and Eliza turns to Osceola.

"I hope you find what you're looking for out here."

###

## CHAPTER 4: IT NEVER RAINS AND YOU NEVER WORK

Bama's summer of 1982 was blazing. Alone, under a fierce sun, he walked The St. Augustine Amphitheater's parking lot, flooded with tailgating Parrotheads. Where a Jimmy Buffet concert begins, he thought. His first show. The band was on their last set of a three-night run. Over the concrete, he waded through the flock of bodies, gulping liquor and cheering eternal vacation. His stringy blond hair fell over sun-crisped shoulders, covered by a lime-green tank top. A delinquent joint hid in his pocket. He knocked plastic cups with those he passed.

Bama had first heard Buffet's music in his father's Trans Am; his daddy pressed the needle past ninety mph, cradling a beer between his legs. At the time, Bama was six and already under the music's spell that rattled the truck's cabin. Those melodies had pulled him into the speakers where he floated, escaped. That day, his daddy instilled a love for trop rock, from *Living and Dying in 3/4 Time*, to *The Ballad of Spider John*, Bama learned the cassettes' lyrics by heart.

As he got older, he learned Buffet's stories had characters and plots, heroes and villains. Tranquil guitars. Pulmonary congas. Marimbas and steel drums. Vibraphones that Bama felt told the sad stories, happy. Growing up on Buffet, he took refuge in HiFi audio systems when his father drank, or fry oil scalded his arm at the restaurant where he worked as a line cook. Bama could hit play and float by an island.

When his twentieth approached, he bought tickets to that island, where it was unloaded from semi-trucks after being dragged all over the country, assembled onto different stages like a plaster sandcastle. Bama saw this island—hot and palpable—in every drunken, red-flushed face

wading by him, where he hoped to be accepted as one of them.

Headed for the Amp's entrance, he got sidetracked. The tailgate setups had palm-draped gazebos over Tiki bars. An assembly line of blenders kept the margaritas flowing like lazy river rides. Inflatable pools overflowed, filled with women who started their tan sixty years previous, soaking the booze right through their pours. On his right was a makeshift bowling alley: carved shark fins at the top of the pins, bowled over by a gigantic coconut. If the lot is this bitchin,' Bama thought, what was the show gonna be like?

Near the Amphitheater's entrance, a dunk tank made him stop, distracted by the woman sitting at the top of the tank's platform with electric red hair. She was the most gorgeous lady Bama had ever seen, sitting cross-legged and mocking a line of men waiting to throw a plastic iguana at the tank's bull's eye. Strands of curly twists cascaded to freckled shoulders and a freckled face, bright with laughter. Unsure of what to do, Bama watched.

"You hold that iguana tail like you hold your dick?" the woman on the dunk tank yelled at a shirtless man. He missed. "Good form," she said. "Yours must be just as skinny."

The men howled like boars, and the woman smiled with teasing blue eyes that seemed to sear across Bama's sternum. The line dwindled. More men missed, thrown by her taunting. Stumbling over his flip-flops, Bama entered the cue. Embarrassed of tripping, he recovered by gulping his beer, already eyeing the cooler next to him. On his turn, he was handed the plastic iguana and stood behind Tiki torches that designated the pitching area. The woman looked down, a grin like saltwater taffy.

"You about to get wet," he decided to yell, immediately hating himself for it.

The woman flung her head sideways as if his comment had struck her. "Honey, I'm



already wet."

Bama straightened up like a bona fide baseball pitcher, held the iguana to his chest, and spit to his side before cranking his head back as if checking for a runner stealing second. Kicking his leg outward, and shimmying, he pitched. The plastic toy whacked the bull's eye. The woman fell, letting out a mock-horror shriek, and plunged. She lingered underwater, and Bama watched her through the tank's window. A Weeki Wachee Mermaid, he thought; her red hair behind her, beautiful and alien.

"Guess you get to claim your prize," she said at the surface.

"What do I get?" Bama looked around, summoning the confidence he stored for a moment like this one.

"You get to take *me* to the Jimmy show!" she said laughing. "And buy all my drinks, and dance with me all night, and lift me on your shoulders when he plays *Little Miss Magic*. The woman launched herself from the tank. Water dripped onto the hot concrete. "Wring me out now, mister."

Bama fetched the woman her sandals and a towel from the tailgate and tried looking away as she toweled. "I get to buy all your drinks?" he asked.

"Yes sir! I drink like a fish, too. You got yourself the hottest date in the whole Amp."

"What's your name?" he asked.

"They call me Lil Miss for *my* song, the one about Jimmy's daughter. Never had a daddy to sing to me, but I love those lyrics. He sings about dreamin' and a little meandering mind. Sums me up perfect like maybe he wrote it for me. Or every little girl like me who needed to hear it."

"People call me Bama, like, you know. The song." Bama gave her a toothy grin and hoped she wouldn't cringe. When she didn't, he felt good. "Good story in them lyrics," he said. "Kinda takes you to a place without consequences. You find trouble, you'll find your way out. That's Bama Breeze's story and I ain't answered to nothin' since."

Lil Miss slapped his chest; a smile opened her face. "Come on let's get drinks, Alabama."

The way she had said his name made him stiffen. Guessing she was the type to get a few drinks, then wander off, Bama knew he'd have to control his urge to cling to her side like a remora. But she grabbed his hand and led him toward the amphitheater, through the parking lot's raucous fans and roaring sound systems. The two meandered the tailgates, past Parrothead chapters from Pennsylvania to Texas, dressed as pirates and play-fighting with swords. Bama noticed the farmer's tans on them and thought they must live hamster-cage lives: dress shirts that dropped their corner offices for the lot. Beside them was a Rube Goldberg machine, starting with falling dominoes, that teetered a flamingo, pushing a blender's start button. Bama eased closer to Lil Miss, handing her a beer.

"Next time get tequila," she said coyly, accepting the Mexican lager.

"Sorry," he told her. "This is my first show." Above, Bama noticed the cloudless sky. Sheering now, but on the horizon, a dark storm rolled. Heat lightning in the distance opened the skyline in flashes. "Storm's brewin,' he said. "Hope these tents can take the rain."

"The sound of weather is Heaven's ragtime band," Lil Miss quoted the band. "Besides, if it storms, you'll get lucky. I got a white bikini on!" She poked his ribs. "Hey. Where you from?"

"Alabama, like the name, but I'd be a conman if I didn't tell it's nowhere special."

"Well, Mr. Alabama. I ain't from nowhere either, but I still wanna know."

"Place called Prichard," he said. "Nothin' there. Fxin' to get out soon."

"That's what I did! I ride the tour in my little Honda, hang with the local Parrotheads, then us die-hards move out for the next show. Started this summer, but I could do this forever. See the whole country. Meet beautiful people. Beats the life I was livin' back in Melbourne by a few long shots."

"So how you make money?" Bama asked, patting his pocket to make sure his was still there.

"That, my love, is top secret."

Bama was intrigued and prayed silently to no particular god that Lil Miss wouldn't leave him when the show started, and that he'd find out her secret. He had shown up alone. Now, he had more than could've ever hoped for, and thought maybe all the stories his father had told him about that Jimmy Buffet show magic were true.

Inside the amphitheater, they paused at the top, looking down at the fans dancing to the opener, bathed in greens and reds and yellows beaming from the stage's light system. The opening act was a reggae band, Lil Miss told Bama, called The Party Waves. The crowd below swayed and romped. Many clapped their hands overhead, missing the beat as the guitar's sound explored the arena, electrifying the currents where fans wiggled their backsides as if rhythm was something to ignore. They stomped and dipped their heads outside tempo like cuckoo birds leaving a clock.

"Damn," Bama said in Lil Miss' ear. "Us white folks really can't dance."

Lil Miss laughed. "Think you can do any better, white boy? Come on, let's find seats."

They sifted through the crowd. Lil Miss stepped in harmony with the dense flow of

bodies; she could sense when the flock would breathe, opening a new route for them to scurry through. She was beautiful and quick-witted. Her body had symmetry, from tautness to curves. She could've told him anything, and he'd nod, and her flirting just might get him within spitting distance of the stage.

Spying two open seats from the aisle, Lil Miss showed Bama toward a group of men in khakis and black sunglasses, despite the darkening skies. Bama suspected they were rich. Guys like them, he thought, scooting past, they paid to get this close to the stage, and when Bama heard them talk, they sounded like lawyers you'd want to hire. Big, sarcastic words that made him feel young and broke. Bama maneuvered the row and thought one of them might have scoffed. Hard to tell with the stage lights and drinks. He knew they all had eyes for Lil Miss, in her frayed jean shorts and white bikini top; her mermaid hair, still wet from the dunk tank.

"Tread lightly, ma'am," one said to her. "My heart just fell out—must've dropped out at the sight of you. Don't step on it."

"Oh, really now?" Lil Miss said, trying to move down the aisle, winking at Bama behind her. "My heart will be up on the stage playing us some tunes in about an hour."

The men's laughter pushed their waist buttons—Bama thought they were wasted enough to laugh at anything—and let them pass. In their seats, they watched roadies move the stage like ants, replacing the stage decor with Buffet's *Somewhere Over China* motif. Bama and Lil Miss placed wagers on what songs he might play. Lil Miss thought: *A Pirate Looks at Forty*. *Coconut Telegraph*. Bama shrugged. *Changes* and *Come Monday*, he thought for sure. He was ecstatic to hear the band play *Fins*.

Without warning, Jimmy Buffet walked on stage, a Martin & Company acoustic slung

over his shoulder, dressed in a blue T-shirt and white Bermudas; thin sandals, and a thick mustache with a shaking of gray up top. He smiled the way Bama's father might have before he gave him a sip of a red wine cooler that looked like Kool-Aid to Bama when he was young. His father didn't drink on Sundays and sure threw a fit each Lord's Day, but he was 'how they make 'em' where Bama was from: a man with no inclination to leave the county he was born. Bama wanted to be made of something different.

"Well folks," Jimmy Buffet said, adjusting his guitar straps and grinning into the microphone. "Looks like we're going to have a sprinkle of rain tonight. That's alright. If the skies open, we'll just float away in one, giant margarita." He laughed and every Parrothead was on their feet, filling the venue with cheers that roared up to the dark nimbus clouds above. Buffet basked in the applause. Bama's heart palpitated; he felt Lil Miss tickle him. Without taking his eyes off the stage, he looped a red strand of her wet hair around his finger.

"You think anyone's comin' for these seats?" he asked.

She answered by pointing to the heat lightning that brightened menacing shapes in the clouds before the thunderheads would hit like semi-truck horns. Jimmy sat down and played an acoustic *Changes in Latitude, Changes in Altitude*, and Bama and Lil Miss sang along with 5,000 others. Lightning crackled, almost drowned the music, and Buffet played a few more acoustic cuts before The Coral Reefer Band joined him on stage. Bama felt a mixed urge to dance wildly and keep still, staring at the music. By the fifth song, he wanted to kiss the girl dancing by his side, every so often bumping him playfully.

"It's just one of those kinds of nights, huh?" Buffet said between songs. "Where everything just seems to work itself out."

If the Lord's willin' and the creek don't rise, Bama thought to himself, hearing the first chords of *The Weather is Here, Wish you Were Beautiful*, and before the second chorus, the rain fell like misery—pounding the stage's weather ports secured over the band like a tunnel. Waterfalls streamed from the sides into the stands. The band kept playing. The wind howled but Buffet's grin never faltered. He stuck out his tongue and collected raindrops. Bama's thoughts turned to how to play up the night's magic—figure out how to make this spell last forever. During the intermission, he had a dumb idea.

By *Come Monday*, he had kissed her. After *Lil Miss Magic*, he knew he loved her, but couldn't say it yet. When *Steamer* played, the Parrotheads were given their cue to fill the arena in reefer smog and Bama obliged, lighting the joint he'd rolled just for this moment. The pot was a welcomed fire in his lungs. He laughed when Lil Miss got down on one knee, the whole row's eyes on her.

"What're you doin' down there?" he asked.

"Fuck it, Alabama. I wanna marry you." She had beaten him to his dumb idea.

#

The last night of the St. Augustine show ended with walloping rain. Bama and Lil Miss found their way to her Honda where they were all wrangling and breath. Her red hair fell onto his chest, the torpor just outside. The next morning, they hit the road.

That first summer was the easiest on their hearts and wallets. Bama's pockets comprised mostly of lint and lose strands of stale reefer while Lil Miss seemed to have endless cash. Her purse kept the gas pumping and diner food in both their bellies. The tour left Florida, and the band headed west to Seattle, Bama and Lil Miss behind the semis. They fell right back into the

flock after a twenty-day trek toward Washington's overcast peaks, cruised the I-90 through the Blue Ridge, then onto the Great Plains where a flat sheen of golden fields yawned over the land like a tabby cat. Atlanta's Tabernacle, Colorado's Red Rocks, then Bonner Spring's Azura. In Montana, they pitched tents during the night with open sky flaps, watching the stars devour the duskiness above.

"You can see the layers in the sky, " Bama told her. "Like origami. I never seen anything like that."

The Seattle show was at the Paramount, a place for brut champagne, but they guzzled margaritas and ashed joints on the French carpeting, rich with dark hues, below a beaded chandelier, that hung in the haze they exhaled into the four-tiered lobby. Bama traced the gold-leaf encrusted walls with his eyes to the lacy ironwork balcony, thinking about the ticket prices Parrotheads dropped to get up there.

"Heard he'll play Paris next tour," a rowmate shouted over the music. "That's where all the writers go. Jimmy's the best storyteller since Hemingway bit it."

"Can't miss Paris!" another said. " All the chapters will be there."

Bama and Liss Miss exchanged a glance.

"What you do?" Bama asked a man in the next seat during the intermission.

"I'm a dentist," he said. Bama's surprised by how young the man appeared.

"What about you?" he asked another.

"I work in finance. I see all the Buffet shows I want."

"Yeah," Bama said "Me too." He looked over at Lil Miss, wondering about how long they could go without stopping, get a job, and have to start running the hamster wheel with

everyone else. Most folks like him saved up for a ticket, saw Jimmy in the hometown, and went back to work. Not him. Not with Lil Miss.

After Seattle, the band dipped into Oregon, playing the Paramount Northwest, and the two carried on riding alongside the other dozens who also followed the tour. The next two tour stops, Hawaii and Tahiti, Bama and Lil Miss sat out. Lil Miss explained she'd never been outside the states. Same with Bama. They figured only the rich could afford this extravagance, so they headed to Cathedral Gorge State Park in Nevada and hiked the eroded patterns of bentonite clay that rose like spires from the ancient lakebed. There, they waited for the nine-day run at Caesars Tahoe but the desert heat pushed them into the cool, artificial air of the Vegas casinos. Lil Miss gave Bama a gambling allowance that he didn't question and quickly lost at The Flamingo. After Bama's flush was beaten by the dealer's Four-of-a-Kind, Bama scattered the chips across the casino floor in a tantrum. Lil Miss followed when security escorted him out, his hands behind his back. She helped him up when the bouncer shoved him to the sidewalk, where he skidded on his palms.

"You walk out of a casino on your accord, you ain't have enough fun," Bama said. They shared a laugh and walked the strip, arm-in-arm. The Vegas lights glowed and they reached the Bellagio fountain show. "It's like one giant middle finger," Bama said. The waterspouts burst, synchronized with light and music. "In a goddamn desert. Thousands of gallons of water, controlled by all this money."

"You won't ever have to worry about that," Lil Miss said.

"What does that mean?"

"I'll show you next time we need cash," she said.



Bama kissed her, and when the fountain show was over, they watched the still water. Bama hummed *Come Monday* into her shoulder. The next morning, the two left Vegas for Tahoe. After Tahoe, they were right back on the road for Boulder, Lil Miss funding their way through the tangle of highways and mountainous roads. Bama's cup never went dry.

#

After the summer tour, Bama found himself next to Lil Miss in the fourth-row bleachers, the designated 'Splash Zone,' of a shiny new stadium in a certain Florida water park for an orca show that Lil Miss insisted they see. Bama wasn't impressed. He sat in the stands, listening to the hokey show tunes playing over the loudspeakers. He wasn't sure what they were doing there, but he made no complaints. His new life over the last year was sunburnt honey.

He noticed Lil Miss turn, studying the bleachers—the circuitry working in her head. For a moment, Bama saw what she must've looked like as a child: young eyes devising how to scale the kitchen counter for the cookie jar. She hadn't been eating right on the road, bruising easily. Against the suntanned tourists, she looked 'sick-tuckered out,' as she would say.

The show began. The orca swam from the stage's right-side pool in a burst of foamy water. The surface churned, and the orca dived like a grim shadow. Through the glass, Bama watched the animal's coloring: a false smile. Trainers in wet suits appeared along the tank's edge, holding buckets of fish, cartoon grins on their faces, and dolled out herring and smelt into the orca's mouth by the armful. A trainer with Hasselhoff curls stood on the orca's back like a surfboard.

"You think he likes that?" Bama asked though he clapped from muscle memory.

"Probably not," Lil Miss said. "But in the wild, they gotta worry about food. Here, he

does a few tricks and gets everything he needs."

"What if you got put in a cage?"

"Then baby, I'd sing and dance like Judy Garland and you best believe I'd eat good for it too."

The show continued; the orca splashed the audience. Lil Miss watched the water recede in puddles all around the bleachers. As the show closed, a round-faced trainer entered the pool and danced with the orca, holding his flippers. Bama, who was used to corny acts, thought it a little silly and he wished he'd brought his flask. They waited for the families to filter down the aluminum bleachers before leaving, Bama following Lil Miss. On her third step, she slipped and fell down a whole flight, hollering the whole way. People close by whipped their necks. There were gasps and concerned shouts.

Bama chased after her twisted body, crumpled at the bottom of the painted concrete, still damp from the orca's splashes. When he reached Lil Miss, he looked over her frail body—her ankle already starting to swell. What he couldn't see was the hairline fracture in her wrist, the bruised patches that would cover her legs and belly and smear her freckles in purple from lack of nutrition. An employee ran up and offered his hand to help Lil Miss up, but she yelled him off.

"Why the hell don't ya'll have proper rails here?" She winced. Closed her eyes. A crowd gathered; Bama wondered what to do. A wheelchair was brought out, and Bama wheeled Lil Miss away. She told him to stop for a camera before a hospital.

"Turn the flash on," Lil Miss told him. "Get every bruise."

Bama and Lil Miss never stepped foot inside a courthouse. Bama didn't own a suit. This woman's a goddamn genius, he thought to himself when Lil Miss filled him in. She introduced

him to Joseph Ryker, her personal injury lawyer. And, when the check was cut, the Parrotheads were ready for the fall tour. On the road, Bama and Lil Miss drank margaritas, ate cheeseburgers, and managed to stay in love.

#

The 80's almost over, The Parrotheads found themselves in the Oak Hammock Trailer management office. A tiny desk fan droned next to Jareth Gongya, who eyed their paperwork. Jareth wanted the RV, their Fleetwood Bounder, as collateral since the Parrotheads had no proof of income. No tax transcripts. His contract stipulated that after six months of failure to pay lot fees, the RV's title would be signed over to him. His fifteen-year-old daughter, Sydney, sat in the corner, ignoring them with a paperback.

"The plot will be empty when you're out of town?" Jareth's jaw was tight. "Fine, but fees are due every month. No exceptions."

"Fixin' to settle down between tours," Bama told Jareth. "You listen to Jimmy Buffet? Just put out another album. Puts one out every year—"

"Son, I don't care," Jareth said. "Long as your checks don't bounce, you're good, but I want the first six months upfront for a deal like this one. Never done anything like this in all my years."

"We'll pay in cash," Lil Miss said, winking at Bama.

At this, Jareth smiled, and the paperwork was signed.

"We're going to need to figure somethin' out before the summer run," Bama told Lil Miss after leaving Jareth's office. "Rent's gonna put us back."

"Don't worry. I've got a plan," she said. "Matter of fact, I got plans."

The deposit put a dent in the waterpark payout, already bled from the band's last run across the states. The Parrotheads had put 226,000 miles on the RV's odometer, and both felt the miles on their bodies too. Bama's drinking had become ugly. Ugly enough for him to tell Lil Miss he didn't want to go for a place in the Keys, where the bars would play tropical rock within earshot of a front porch. On the last run, the *Hot Water* tour, he had too much in Philly. Ended up on a stretcher.

"Get it out, baby." He had heard Lil Miss say from somewhere above, registering her nails against his shoulders while heaving. Bama emptied a sour, bubbly yellow that had little bits of lime pulp in the foam. His brain did somersaults in his skull. There was acid in his sinuses. He had wanted to lie down—knock out right there in the venue, but part of him knew people from the rich Northeast chapters were watching, rolling their eyes over 'that Florida boy' puking his guts out. Same bum spotted at every show, he thought miserably. The last thing he remembered before he woke up in a hospital.

"They had to pump your stomach," Lil Miss had said, seated beside him in a bleach-white ward. "Scared me, baby. I thought you was gone." She reached for his hand. A clip device was on his ring finger; IVs ran underneath a bandage on his forearm.

"Takes more than a 750 to kill me." Bama rolled over. "When I was asleep, I had a lot to drink about," he quoted the band, glad to get a reprimanding smile from Lil Miss.

"You ready to make a run for it?" she asked. "They kept buggin' me for insurance and all that. I gave 'em fake names. Told them we'd lost our licenses." Lil Miss eyed the hallway.

"They'll be back any second now."

"Yes ma'am," he said. "Let's scramble."

The *Hot Water* tour ended in New Orleans and The Parrotheads treaded I-10, then parked The Fleetwood in Oak Hammock. The first month in the trailer park, Bama met one of the neighbors, Eddie Grobe, a quiet man who the neighbors had said was up to something.

"I don't know what he's building," one told Bama. "But whatever it is, it's big."

Bama liked Grobe just fine. Borrowed his tools to make decorations from the discarded items he'd collected from the parking lots after the shows. He showed Bama how to carve an old oak stump into a wooden shark fin, and helped him mount it to the top of their RV. The polished fin reached up like a crown over their Tiki torches and seafoam-pastel lawn furniture, all shaded by a honey locust tree in The Parrotheads' yard. Here, no neighbors asked them to turn the music down, but the tour life had squeezed The Parrotheads.

"I feel like my forehead's turning into a coconut," Bama told Lil Miss. "Not the husk either. Feels like what's underneath that."

"You say that every year," she said. "But mark my words—come October when the sky gets all crimson, you'll be itchin' to hit the road."

She was right. When The Meeting of the Minds came, a Parrothead charity event that went down in Key West, Bama had some tequila with his deliberation, and they headed south.

#

His cigar burned listlessly in an ashtray. Bama sat at a bar's circle booth, waiting for Lil Miss to return with drinks. He'd given the musician \$20 for a request and wanted him to start playing by the time Lil Miss got back. She was over by the bar, her red hair whipped back by a fan. Bama's eyes roamed her jean shorts, absorbing her curves. Since the waterpark, Lil Miss had been eating healthy again, her skin and hair back to the mermaid brightness Bama got

stunned by in that first lot. Lil Miss laughed at something the bartender said. Doubles were poured.

"Why we not married yet?" he asked her when she returned, easing her way into the vinyl upholstery, crossing her legs in Bama's lap.

"I asked you, remember? Balls in your court, Alabama," she said lazily. "I meant that proposal." Lil Miss took a puff of Bama's cigar and placed it back in the ashtray. "Listen, you know those big cities—people walkin' so fast with briefcases and suits. They see you—think they're better. Or worse, they feel sorry for you since you ain't got what they do."

"We got a beautiful life," Bama said. "We got what the music's about. Those suits, they're not doin' people right. Rodney King. The Gulf War. Scientologists. Everyone's got their hands dirty. People with suits and money, they're criminals just the same."

"See Bama, you understand. You're my only one." She leaned into his ear as if about to tell a secret. "Let's marry right now."

Bama met her with a hazy smile. "You're about one sour away from not being able to stand."

"That's when I do my best dancin.'" Lil Miss slapped his chest. "Seriously though, let's do it. Tonight. They got chapels here. Listen," she said, grabbing his collar. "We tell the chapters we got hitched—maybe they'll donate to a registry. Hell, we need a dishwasher."

God damn, get this woman a Nobel Peace Prize, Bama thought. "You really think we can work that out?" Bama already imagined a fuller pocket.

"The Meeting of the Mind's got all these fundraisers." Lil Miss flicked her straw around the glass's rim. "Us getting married is the story they're looking for to donate. And, don't you feel

bad either! These people got every comfort they could ever want. Only reason they're givin' to charity is for the tax cuts. Everybody knows that."

"We get hitched," Bama said. "Get some appliances, then ride the tour and come back for winter." Bama grinned. "Everyone will be freezin' up north; we'll be layin' out by the pool in Oak Hammock."

Warm silence fell over their plotting as the musician tuned his acoustic to play Bama's request. They knew the words. Had sung them together countless times at the Buffet shows. When the musician strummed the first two G chords of *Come Monday, The Parrotheads* hummed along with him.

"Finish your drink, Alabama. We're getting married tonight."

The next day, Bama looked over their wedding photo, printed on the back of a postcard. A glimmering ring was around Lil Miss's finger, her freckled arm grasped Bama's. Even at a glance, he knew people would see a deep, rare love. Their eyes were closed as they kissed.

"Good story in that kiss," he told his wife, licking salt off the rim. "Us humans are weird animals. We got flaws and sometimes get nasty, but most people, I think, are still worth a scrap."

#

Back in Oak Hammock, they waited on May, when the first show of the *Beach House on the Moon* Tour would bring them to South Carolina. The album release kept Bama's mind stocked with new riffs and choruses, energizing them both for the nationwide drive. This tour had thirty-two stops. Bama wanted to make at least twenty-five. He thought about scalping tickets, but price-gouging was for parasites. He'd be shunned by chapters across the nation.

Lil Miss watched *Murder She Wrote* on their brand-new television, donated by rich

suckers, and told Bama her new plan to get tickets. "First, we need to get you sober," she said. "You been sittin' around this trailer gettin' beat-your-kids drunk for months. Go a few days without the hooch."

"How's that gonna get us ticket money?"

"I'll tell you how," Lil Miss said. "You did good with that chainsaw for the shark fin on top of the RV. Too good. We need you to have an accident."

Bama frowned. He understood but pretended he didn't.

"There's a private hospital over in Winchester," Lil Miss said. "You'll have to do it sober for the blood work."

Bama searched her face for a joke. There was none. "You want me to cut myself?"

"We'll get you patched up. When you get out, we'll get it infected. Then we go back, get you some antibiotics. I call my lawyer and we got a medical negligence case. Florida ain't gotta cap on settlements. Ryker said those land in the millions if we play our cards right."

Lil Miss's plan really irked Bama when he stopped drinking. He couldn't sleep. No booze, and he thought about all the ways the scheme could go wrong. What if they had to amputate? People die from infection, he thought. He'd never go on a tour again. He thought about this as he made his way to Eddie Grobe's trailer to borrow the chainsaw.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jareth's station wagon pull forward, rifle up dust, but the superintendent passed him without stopping. Approaching Grobe's massive trailer, Bama saw the satellite dishes and tubing strapped to Grobe's roof. Outside his door, he heard the usual strange noises from Grobe's trailer like deep hums. Bama rapped his knuckles, then banged. Grobe appeared at the door; his dark eyes receded into wrinkles.



"Need to borrow your chainsaw again," Bama said. "I'll have it back in good time."

Grobe agreed and left Bama to wait outside. When he returned, he handed the chainsaw over. "The fin looks good, Bama," Grobe said. "Give me a knock if you need anything else."

Outside their RV, Bama stood under the bright honey locust tree. A breeze ruffled the golden leaves and he felt eyes on his back. He brushed off the feeling as nerves and spotted a branch three feet over his head. He revved the chainsaw, watched the blades rotate the bar, and lifted the tip to the branch.

A few minutes later, Bama was reclined in the RV's passenger seat. His skin had turned anemic-white, his shoulder leaking. Lil Miss drove the Fleetwood Bounder from The Parrotheads' plot, and Bama thought he saw Jareth's station wagon, parked right out of sight from the honey locust. He couldn't be sure. He had a hard time catching his breath as if soon the dark edge of his vision would close, and his eyes would roll back to the black nothingness under his skull. On the ground, the chainsaw's motor hummed, the blades unmoving and splashed red.

#

Incandescent lights painted the hospital room a sterile white. The physician's needle driver twirled and bore into Bama's grisly shoulder, closing his laceration an eighth inch at a time. The nurses gave him a local anesthetic, but he felt everything—sharp prods that ended with yanking. Bama tried to focus on the doctor. He wore thick glasses, worked quickly, tying each knot like butcher twine. Bama's eyes followed the physician's hairline receding behind his surgeon cap.

"Nasty cut," the doctor said. "Next time you do some tree trimming, make sure you're not sawing with the tip. I know a dirty joke that'll help you remember."

Bama ignored him. He didn't want to be remembered, watching through the pain for any slip of the doctor's hand that might be useful later. He's released when the suture's finished, his right arm in a sling.

"What'd Ryker say," he asked Lil Miss on the drive back. Over the speakers was *The Missionary*: a war song about lost men who don't know they're lost and don't know they're at war. "This had better work. That was agony."

Lil Miss twisted the radio knob, silencing the music. "Soon as we see the infection, we get pictures. But you gotta write that you started seein' the signs tonight."

"Can you pull over?" Bama asked. "I'm too high to walk with you drivin.'"

Lil Miss looked over at him, worried. "For what?"

"I want to get that bottle out of the cabinet. "

"I know you're in pain, baby. But before you relax, you need to write—get the details in that Ryker sent me."

When they made it back to their plot, Bama listened as Lil Miss told him what to write. He took a defiant swig of vodka and retreated to the kitchenette, despondent and hurt, a roasting sensation under his bandage. With a legal pad and a blue pen, Bama wrote at the kitchenette table under a small lamp with yellow light as if this were some contract with the devil. He described the pain, the indifference of the hospital staff, how the doctor put his glasses on with gloved hands—must've touched the door handle with those same gloves. He imagines his wound turning yellow and gangrenous.

In the darkness, Lil Miss appeared, a cigarette between her lips. She read over what he wrote and removed the bandage. They both took a swig of vodka, and Bama felt a prickle on his

ribs. Lil Missed kissed him, lifting her hands over her head so she wouldn't burn him with her cigarette. Their heads moved rhythmically, mouths exploring places they knew well. Bama took another swig from the bottle, preparing for the sting, and offered it to Lil Miss. They fell to the floor—all writhing and sweat and gasps—over carpet stains and unswept particle board.

After, Bama thought about his arm. A bar story. Soon, he'd laugh over the then distant pain in a sports car, the top reclined, racing down Highway-1 with Lil Miss, scraping the blue sky with his fingertips.

#

Someone was knocking on the door. Bama woke to agitation and felt a fever spiral through his body: a dull headache, a throbbing burn in his shoulder. His mouth tasted like a urinal cake. The knock persisted. This time, louder. A bat against the side of the RV. With his free hand, he pinched Lil Miss's thigh. She stirred, threw one of Bama's shirts on, and went to answer. Bama peeked through the rear window from the bed, trying to make out his wife's posture. From the window, he saw Jareth, his bat slung across his shoulder. Bama imagined his scowl.

"You guys had some trouble yesterday," Bama heard him say from the RV's steps. "I saw your man take a chainsaw to the shoulder. Put that bar right down on the tree branch, right where he knew he shouldn't have." Lil Miss went to speak, but Jareth cut her off. "Thing is," Jareth continued. "He sculpted that beautiful wood sculpture ya'll got on top of your RV, not two months back. I watched him do it—man knows his way 'round a chainsaw. Then, you came out runnin,' with that sheet, ready to stop the bleeding. Almost like you knew it was gonna happen. Awfully convenient but thank the Lord he's okay."

Bama thought about the gears in Lil Miss' mind, trying to pull together an excuse but heard nothing.

"Well, I just wanted to come and check on ya'll," Jareth said. "You've been honest renters, and I never had to worry about those lot fees. Least not yet." Jareth knocked his bat against the RV. "Anyways, I had an evaluation done on your Fleetwood here. Ya'll got it for a steal and she's worth about twenty thousand."

"This is our home—" Lil Miss began.

"I was thinking you could sign her title over to me, so I can look out for her. 'Course ya'll still need to pay lot fees and I know you been itchin' to get back on the road to whatever the hell it is ya'll do. Just don't want the IRS sniffin' around nice people—'specially seeing as how your husband's injured. I even brought the mail from your box."

He lay back down when he heard the Station Wagon pull out. He knows, Bama thought. Probably knew before we ever even signed the lease. Owns a park like this one, he's probably seen his fair share of hustles. He's a hustler himself. Had them cornered like an animal that bares its teeth when you pet its head. Lil Miss came back inside, holding up the envelopes.

"Good news or the bad news?"

"I heard," Bama told her. "What's the good news?"

Lil Miss ripped one of the envelopes open and held up the first two *Beach House on the Moon* Tour tickets. Jareth's blackmail still in the air, Bama couldn't help feeling that tingle and itch of wanderlust. Most days, he was the worm at the bottle's bottom, but catching the live music made that okay. Lil Miss held up the other envelope with Ryker's firm logo, the address printed in the corner.

"This is the bad news."

"He knows *everything*?"

"Yeah, Bama I think he knows. Son of a bitch watched your accident. He's smart. Guy like that probably keeps dirt on all his renters."

"So, what next? Hit the road?"

"The hospital will take a long time to settle, and we can't hit the road with slim pockets."

Bama looked up at his wife who fanned herself with the tour tickets. "We gonna give him our RV?"

"He'll call the feds," Lil Miss said. "Not think twice of it. He does that, we go down for fraud. That's big boy time, baby. Can't have that."

"They can't prove it."

"They're the government, stupid. They got teams of lawyers. Only reason we got the water park to settle was they didn't want the bad press on their killer whale show."

"We're trapped." Bama groaned. "That what you tellin me?"

"Not trapped," Lil Miss said. "Just gotta play it safe. We sign the title over for now; Jareth stays off our back 'till we get the payout, then we go see Jimmy in Paris." Lil Miss smiled at him the way she did at the top of the dunk tank. "How'd you like ménage à trois under the Eiffel tower?" She made no attempt at a Pepe´ Le Pew.

"Ménage à trois?" Bama asked, sure to sound like the cartoon skunk. "Who's gonna share our bed?"

"You. Me. And a pool full of presidents printed out on little slips of green paper."

It was Bama's turn to smile.

Later, when all anyone could hear in the park was the electric substation, the night sky dark purple, The Parrotheads made their way to the retention pond behind the Oak cluster. They waded into the tea-colored water and lily pads bounced off the tiny waves of their entrance. Bama let Lil Miss take him in her arms, cradle him like an infant. She ran her hands through his hair; spun his body slowly in the algae-filled water, stirring up the muck that had laid stagnant since the last rainstorm. Bama thought he felt bones under his toes.

#

A few days later, Bama's sour. "How am I gonna applaud at a show with one fuckin' arm?" He asked Lil Miss. "If we can even get more tickets." His shoulder had stopped feeling like a man o' war had wrapped its tentacles across him and squeezed, but he was irritated he couldn't drink on the medicine.

Lil Miss held up a newspaper, the classifieds. "I'm posting an ad," she told him. "'Lonely young woman looking for companionship.' Anyone who answers can write to us. I'll send them photos."

"Your face gonna be on them?" Bama asked. Antibiotics had brought his fever down, but thick puss was still on his bandages each morning. "You ain't heard from Ryker?"

Lil Miss shrugged. "That'll take time. We need cash now."

A week floated by, then dozens of envelopes filtered from the marks and piled on their kitchenette table. Bama watched Lil Miss write back, relieved the pictures she sent were nice ones. "It's about the fantasy," she told him. "They don't want the filthy ones right up front. These rich guys want to feel like they're in charge. They want to tell Sharlene to do it first."

"Sharlene? That your pitch?"

"Sharlene's a married woman who escaped an abusive husband. She wrote to a real sad man yesterday. He's divorced too." Lil Miss held up the man's letter. "Sharlene feels real bad for him, but I don't." They both cackled.

Money orders flooded from places like Coconut Grove and Coral Gables. Sharlene got them back on the road, but Paris was a long way off. Bama sulked. Lil Miss had thrown out all of his bottles, making him promise to go the two full weeks until he'd taken every pill that killed his infection. When his fever broke, Lil Miss gave him a Rolex one of the Johns had sent her.

"For being good," she had said. "We could get you a bust down when the hospital payout comes."

Bama thought about putting diamonds on the watch. He couldn't imagine wearing something so ugly. Talking to all those Johns must've been getting to her head, he thought. That, and he couldn't shake the feeling that the hospital check was a pie they'd never get their hands on.

"What if I went down to South Beach," he asked her. "I'll bump into guys on dates—uppity fuckers. Coke dealers. Lambo drivers. Kind of guys who got pet tigers in their backyard. They love flashin' money, probably carry a few thousand around just for daiquiris."

"Rich people don't drink daiquiris," Lil Miss pecked his cheek, careful to avoid his shoulder.

"Just listen," Bama said. "I'll bump into one of them, let the watch slip and crack. Then I'll argue with them till they fork over at least a grand. Bet if they're with a lady, they'll pay me anything just to get rid of me."

"Good plan, Alabama. But I know how to make it better."

Bama scoffed. "How?"

"We'll get you a fake one. You can bust three of those in a day."

#

The Parrtoheads got another summer's tickets. They could even afford the gas to get there. In a five-star steakhouse in Brickell, they decided to treat themselves.

"I do too gotta heart," Lil Miss said over an aged ribeye. "I'm not writing to nobody's grandparents talkin' about needing money. That's those folks' retirement. I'm scamming the rich. So are you! Otherwise, we're just a couple of crooks. Not lovers helpin' karma along where she needs to go."

"Believe what you want," Bama said. "But we're Bonnie and Clyde now." He stuck two asparagus into his lip like walrus tusks. "Why don't you get Sharlene to ask for more? You know how much plane tickets to France cost?"

"She asks for too much, the letters stop comin'." Lil Miss yanked the asparagus out of his mouth. "The story's a trick, but it's gotta be believable. You start makin' it look like a *story* and they figure out the ending. No fun for them if they know how it ends."

"What the hell are you talkin' about?"

"The end of the story is," Lil Miss said, cutting into her lobster tail. "Sharlene comes to live with them. They find out Sharlene ain't real, they walk out." When Bama motioned the waiter over, Lil Miss added: "Yeah, have another drink Alabama, you're just gettin' sharper."

Bama stuck his tongue out at her. "I get that part," he said. "The fantasy. I just can't imagine what kinda person worries over a woman he ain't ever seen. They really care about Sharlene?"



"She makes it a game," Lil Miss said. "Too fun for them to stop playin."

The Parrotheads finished their meal, taking their time with the dry-aged steaks and Gulf lobsters. A woman two tables down spilled wine on her dress.

"Imagine the waiter did that?" Bama said. "How much you think dry-cleaning for a dress like that would cost?"

Lil Miss matched his grin.

A few days later, restaurants all over Miami received invoices for designer dresses with wine stains. Hand-written letters came with receipts from a dry cleaner and a vehement threat that if the restaurant refused to pay—the dress owner would write Michelle Orange, The Herald's nastiest food critic. The restaurant owners coughed up the affordably low fee, compared with what an Orange criticism could do. The trick paid for itself in a week. The Parrotheads spilled a \$3 wine onto a \$600 dress that Lil Miss had a John send her.

They *were* Buffet's Bonnie and Clyde. Lil Miss and Bama.

#

In a decade, they never made Paris, but their love endured. Lil Miss aged and started sending old photos, when her red hair was still vibrant. Years of cigarettes had blighted her fire, but if you ask about her in the Key West bars, they'll still tell you she's a firecracker. Bama's scar had a tenth birthday. He still drops his watches. Now, people suspect that he's homeless, and they wouldn't be half wrong. An RV he didn't own separated him from this judgment. The truth, he thought, is their cons were slowing down. Their alchemy would soon stop churning out gold, but Bama still had enough to take his wife to Jimmy Buffet whenever he came to the Sunshine State.

#

In their RV in Oak Hammock, Bama's half asleep. The news from the TV follows a story of a hurricane that had swung over the park. He's curled around Lil Miss who turns the TV off and the radio on, playing *Money Back Guarantee*.

"Hey, baby," she coos gently, tracing her fingernails over his right shoulder where his scar bristles. "You awake?"

Bama sings Buffet's lyrics, using Lil Miss's arm as a guitar fretboard; his fingers moving along her freckles. Lil Miss wraps her arms around his body, and they hum the song together as the rain wallops against the Fleetwood Bounder's windows like their first show in St. Augustine.

After the rain, Bama pedals his bike toward the liquor store. The air is crisp, wrung out from the storm. He casts a glance toward a neon sign peeking from overgrown cord grass furled over the road's shoulder. In the daylight, the red haze of light coming from a cross is barely detectable. Bama pedals into the wind, exploring what lies beyond the state road, a sight he's passed hundreds of times without ever stopping. Below the cross is a marquee with a number and meeting times, posted in neat, white letters.

Standing in front of the cross, the Florida sun pelts Bama with heat that could cripple a northerner, but he only feels a glow, a gentle breeze, looking over the sign, debating, as if seeing land from a spyglass after being marooned on an island where it never rained, and you never worked. Bama chuckles and pedals toward the liquor store.

He hasn't forgot that Lil Miss told him to pick up limes and more margarita mix.

###  
END



## READING LIST

*A Swim in the Pond in the Rain* by George Saunders  
*A Visit from the Good Squad* by Jennifer Egan  
*Afterparties* by Anthony Veasna So  
*As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner  
*Bastard out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison  
*Birds of Opulence* by Crystal Wilkinson  
*Burning Bright* by Ron Rash  
*Burning Down the House* by Charles Baxter  
*Deacon King Kong* by James McBride  
*Drown* by Junot Diaz  
*Educated* by Tara Westover  
*Florida* by Lauren Groff  
*Fortune Smiles* by Adam Johnson  
*Fuckface* by Leah Hampton  
*Harrow* by Joy Williams  
*Heavy* by Kiese Laymon  
*Her Body and Other Parties* by Carmen Maria Machado  
*I'll Be Gone in the Dark* by Michelle McNamara  
*Inherent Vice* by Thomas Pynchon  
*Jesus' Son* by Denis Johnson  
*Jitterbug Perfume* by Tom Robbins

*Knockemstiff* by Donald Ray Pollock

*Milk Blood Heat* by Dantiel W. Moniz

*Nights I Dreamed of Hubert Humphrey* by Daniel Mueller

*No Country for Old Men* Cormac McCarthy

*Normal People* by Sally Rooney

*Salvage the Bones* by Jesmyn Ward

*Sing, Unburied, Sing* by Jesmyn Ward

*Stories of Your Life and Others* by Ted Chiang

*Sula* by Toni Morrison

*The Bear* by William Faulkner

*The Devil All the Time* by Donald Ray Pollock

*The Girl with Curious Hair* by David Foster Wallace

*The Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison

*The Last Philosopher in Texas* by Daniel Chacón

*The Late Rumspringa* by Austin Smith

*The Man Who Shot Out my Eye is Dead* by Chanelle Benz

*The Master's Castle* by Anthony Doer

*The Nickel Boys* by Colson Whitehead

*The Overstory* by Richard Powers

*The River Runs Through It* by Norman Maclean

*The Story Genius* by Lisa Cron

*The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien

*The Underground Railroad* by Colson Whitehead

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston

*There There* by Tommy Orange

*Underworld* by Don DeLillo

*White Teeth* by Zadie Smith

*Wonderbook* by Jeff Vandermeer

*You Want More* by George Singleton