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THE BREVARD CHRONICLES: SHORT STORIES

by

JOSHUA DULL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
and in The Burnett Honors College
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Thesis Chair: Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, D.A.

ABSTRACT

America has a long history of making promises it can't keep, the most accessible buzz word for such promises being, "the American Dream", where everyone will enjoy some level of affluence and assimilate into the proverbial "melting pot" so long as they work hard and follow predetermined rules set by the power structure. In this model American lifestyle, the spiritual essence of humans is buried by the materialistic drive of capitalism, which drives us farther apart and alienates us from our neighbors. Yet in the mid 2000s, in the aftermath of some of the country's worst disasters, this power structure began to crumble. As with any transition, those with stake in the power structure suffered, which was virtually everyone in America at the time. Yet regardless of what they suffered, they found themselves still alive, still breathing. This proved something existed beyond the American dream, something more spiritual and intangible.

The aim of these stories is to explore the lives of those left in the wake of the initial post-9/11 economic collapse of Brevard County. Dubbed the "Space Coast," it stood as a pinnacle for the lofty promises of the American dream and a staple of its subsequent collapse. The following stories render this time and place, populated not only by those who lost something during the economic failure, but the young people who'd been promised a bright future and watched it ebb away before their eyes.

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to everyone I grew up with in Brevard County, Florida, upon whom society gave up. I wish I had been stronger for you when I knew you, and I hope this collection at least begins to give you a voice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First order of thanks goes to my grandmother Mary Golden for giving me a typewriter and free range of imagination when I was little. I probably wouldn't have even considered writing if it wasn't for those important years.

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I want to thank my High School English teacher Karen Blaney for assigning a writing prompt about terrorists taking over Buffalo, Wyoming in 2002 and thus re-invigorating my desire to write. I don't know if I would've returned to creative writing if you hadn't recognized and acknowledged my potential in those crucial years.

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Love your hate, your faith lost.

You are now one of us.

“Miseria Cantare - The Beginning” by AFI

AMARANTHS

Sarah Mansfield drove into the heart of what was supposed to be a subdivision called Gatsby Villages. Lanterns lined the asphalt, casting sequential pools of white light along the black roads, curving through expansive fields of grass. When she was younger she remembered riding by this place on her way to Path of Light Lutheran Church with her parents and feeling sad because backhoes and bulldozers had ravaged the forest of pines that once stood in its place. Sarah drove to the west end of the street, turned left and parked. She opened her trunk and pulled out a garden spade and the first of ten violet chrysanthemums. Sarah walked each of the ten plants into the middle of the field, between the street and a tan wall about 200 yards away, arranging them in a circle. Stars glittered between thin clouds. She looked across the expanse, streetlamps glowing among the surrounding shadows - a field of lights. It should have been a neighborhood by now.

Before her mom was diagnosed, her parents had even talked about moving here once it was developed. Her mom had gotten a raise at the School Board and the new gated community seemed like a promising upgrade from their two bedroom home in Rockledge. Then people started losing their jobs. Banks started foreclosing on homes. Places like this were abandoned. She remembered saying goodbye to her friend Lavender whose mom had been laid off from Lockheed Martin. They had to move in with her grandma in Cocoa Beach.

Having planted the flowers, Sarah tossed the garden spade into her trunk and brushed dirt off her leather pants. She sat on the grass against her car, taking in the emptiness. She'd seen her mom at the hospital that day, but she'd been too weak to smile. Her father was drying tears when she came to him in the waiting room. Sarah hoped her mom would make it long enough for her

to graduate High School next year, but seeing her today evaporated that wish. Sarah knew she was tired of holding on. The future without her was bleak and uncertain. Her mom often talked about the garden she would plant in their new house here, when everything seemed bright and promising. Sarah hoped maybe she could see this small garden on her way to the afterlife. Red lights blinked from distant aerals in the west. A star fell near Orion's constellation like a cosmic teardrop.

After the hospital bills, burial costs, and the loss of her mom's income following her death, Sarah and her father could no longer afford their house in Rockledge. They found a smaller house in Merritt Island, near the 520 causeway. Sarah didn't go to the field of lights anymore. There was no reason to drive by it on the way to church and she spent more time in her room. She read Poe and Lovecraft and painted a crooked haunted house tree on her pale blue walls. The silhouette of a girl sat at the base of the tree clutching her knees, lines from songs and poems spiraled from her head and turned into bats.

"You're painting back over that if we move," her father told her. On nights she couldn't sleep, Sarah found herself drawn to the Georgiana settlement on Crooked Mile, further south from her house. A Methodist church stood watch on a corner and behind it lay the oldest cemetery in the county. She liked to walk among the weathered stones and tendrils of Spanish moss. She wondered about a stone with the name of three girls who all died the same day in the early 1900s. The gnarled, overreaching live oaks made her tremble, but she loved the solitude of this place for the dead. She wished her mom could've been buried here, but her ashes rested in a columbarium at Path of Light, essentially an ornately decorated filing cabinet for human remains.

The trees thinned out in the rear of the cemetery and the moon covered her in comforting blue light. The copse of trees at the front of the cemetery took on an ethereal silver sheen, harkening to some deeply repressed childhood memory of which she couldn't recall; only the ineffable longing it conjured within her. It became a ritual for her; to pass through her fear, then meet with her sadness. The cemetery refreshed her sorrow into something sublime, keeping it from decaying into cynicism. Then one night she saw a dark figure standing on a stump at the back of the graveyard. She hid in the shadows and watched him. He stood as still as the stones around him. She never went back at night again.

A year later, her first year at Brevard Community College, she returned to the field of lights with her friends Justin and Jake. She and Justin had taken an advanced biology class together at Ridgewood High in Merritt Island. She didn't think she would've passed without his help. Jake was Justin's best friend since third grade, when the field of lights had been a forest and their church was under construction. Heat lightning revealed billowing blue clouds in the west. The boys cracked open cans of Guinness Jake bought with his fake I.D. and they followed her out of the streetlights to her garden. One plant had died. Another plant sprouted violet flowers, but semicircles were missing from its leaves, eaten by bugs. Another plant's flowers had been picked, telling her others had found this place too. The remaining flowers grew in profusion. She wondered if they'd had a caretaker while she was gone. Jake poured beer at the base of the dead one. Justin walked with Sarah into the midst of the flowers. In their center, a single red flower sprawled from the ground like a starfish among violet coral.

“What's this one?” Justin asked.

“I don’t know, I didn’t plant it,” she said, kneeling down and touching one of the long crimson petals, “Maybe it’s the amaranth. In mythology it’s the flower that never dies.”

Justin stroked his beard with his thumb and forefinger, staring at the plant, “It doesn’t look like any amaranth species I know of,” Justin said, “they usually have longer clusters of smaller flowers.”

“I choose to believe it’s an amaranth,” said Sarah. It reminded her of the Asiatic lilies her mom used to plant beneath her window. She’d started planting them after Sarah learned that all living things die, including everyone she loved. Her mom told her about the amaranth, and how souls live on, even after the bodies containing them die.

“Guys look,” Jake pointed to the east as the sky lit up like dawn. A molten saffron dart shot up into the night.

“Terrorists?” said Jake.

“Shuttle launch, dumbass,” said Justin, “Atlantis.”

“Didn’t another one blow up awhile back or something?” said Jake.

“Yeah, Columbia, back in 2003.”

“I’m surprised they’re still having shuttle launches after that,” said Sarah.

“They still have a space station to work on,” said Justin, “I don’t think the shuttle program is going anywhere.” The three stood among the flowers watching the glowing spacecraft until it became as dim as a star in the ambient light of Brevard County.

THE CITADEL

Tucker and Jamie stepped out of a tan Ford Bronco, wearing black hiking boots, cargo pants and muscle shirts. A black sweatband threaded with a white anarchy symbol gripped Jamie's wrist and Tucker wore a bandana. A dense forest of slash pines, coconut palms, and palmetto stretched forth in their intended direction. Tucker looked to her.

"Shall we?" They started off into the understory of sharp fronds. Tucker pared away at face level limbs with a serrated survival knife, wishing it was a machete.

Jamie and Tucker were skating in the ruins of what once was a subdivision in Melbourne, Florida when she told him she was leaving. They skated through overgrown grass, large piles of broken concrete, and asphalt. A few scrawny sage palms lingered in the grassy areas like survivors of a recent massacre. A landing Cessna hummed from the airport nearby. With night falling, Jamie and Tucker slid through the chain link fence enclosing the lot and began walking toward the 7-Eleven to buy a 40 oz. with their fake IDs.

"You're awful quiet tonight," said Tucker. Jamie looked at him and shrugged. Tucker stared at her.

"I'm just thinking," she said.

"About what?"

"Just this place, what I'm gonna do next year," she said. Cars passed by them. A horn blared from New Haven Ave.

"Dad can get you into a starting position at the Cape," said Tucker.

"With a high school diploma?" she said.

“You’d have no problem getting into BCC, then transfer to UCF or Gainesville in a couple years,” said Tucker.

“No,” she stopped walking, “I’m going to be gone by this time next year, Cuz.” Tucker stopped and looked at her, imploring her to elaborate. Jamie shook her head, stroking a loose bang behind her ear.

“You’re the smartest person I know, Tucker. I know you’re not stupid enough to think I’m going to hang around this dump longer than I have to.”

“Our family is here, our friends are here, we’ve made all these memories, yeah I kinda thought you would,” said Tucker.

“There’s nothing for us here. Palm Bay is a fucking wasteland and it swallows everyone up and spits them out,”

“It’s our home, though,” Tucker said. Jamie looked away, lit up a cigarette, and continued walking. Tucker stared for a second, then followed.

“What’s your plan, then?” he asked.

“Good question,” she said. A distant siren punctuated the ambient noise of the city.

“I reckon you’ve got time to change your mind, then.” He said. Jamie chuckled under her breath and they started walking again. They got to 7 Eleven, purchased a bottle of Old English and two packs of cigarettes, then drove to the end of New Haven and sat on the graffiti marked railroad trestle stretching across Crane Creek. Three years prior, two kids had been playing on the bridge and didn’t see or hear the train until it was too late. Jamie reminded Tucker of this as they walked out, but he assured her they’d hear it coming in time to get off the tracks. Besides,

the trains didn't come near as often anymore. Tucker said something to make her laugh. He stared a second longer than he should have at her smiling face against the night.

"You sure we can break in without getting caught?" Jamie asked.

"No. I'm not even sure I saw what I saw." Tucker dodged a massive banana spider web.

"I know we're already this far, Tucker, but what are you really hoping to find here?"

"If there's any truth to the legend," he vaulted over a fallen sable palm.

"You really think I'll see my future at the top of this thing?"

"It's not uncommon for people to gain divine instruction after climbing tall structures. Moses got the ten commandments from climbing an old ziggurat," he said.

"If you believe in that kinda thing." Rain dripped from the canopy. Suddenly, they approached a blockade of neck high palmetto bush.

"How the fuck do we get through this?" Jamie asked.

"How bad do you want to find yourself?" said Tucker. She charged into the dagger-like fronds. Huge palmetto bugs buzzed out from the thicket and Tucker recoiled with an uncharacteristic shriek.

"Quit being a pussy." Jamie laughed from somewhere inside the underbrush.

"I hate roaches," he said, then inhaled and pushed his way into the brush.

Tucker was driving back toward Melbourne on US 1 when he thought he saw something metallic and sword shaped among the canopy of remaining forest surrounding the defense contractor sites on the edges of Palm Bay. He had needed to clear his head, and skipped out of

school earlier that day to drive down US 1. No real destination, just to drive for a while then turn back. He thought about Jamie's declaration the other night, hoping it was just a passing phase. He knew she had to make a major life decision in the coming months, but he had never considered the possibility she would leave. Jamie wasn't a blood relative – the two related by an aunt who'd married into Tucker's family, however Tucker had held a special affection for her since early childhood. His heart always beat faster when he knew he was going to see her and her sister Alexis. Jamie used to boss him around at family gatherings, given her two year lead on him. Yet Tucker matured socially and intellectually at an exponential rate. When he was eight, he'd already learned classical piano and long division. It was a Friday night and his parents had brought him and his sisters over to her folks' house so the adults could have happy hour and the cousins could all play. Jamie stayed locked in her room, struggling through her math homework. Tucker wanted to see her, so he forced his way in. They argued until Tucker finally took her paper and did the first three long division problems right before her eyes.

“If I do this for you, will you come play with us? I bet I'm done in ten minutes.” He said. Jamie's eyes relaxed from glaring.

“Really?”

“Yeah. But don't tell anyone. For one, you and me'll both get in trouble and two, I don't want my parents to know I know this. They'll put me in some school for dorks.” He did her homework. He did it well. She got to play with him and their other siblings. Jamie and Tucker were laying on the trampoline after running through the woods outside her house, staring up at the violet sky when their parents called them inside.

Low grey clouds rolled smoothly by overhead, and moisture misted along Tucker's windshield. An array of live oak and pines strafed by on the left side of the road. When it thinned out, a faint spear of manmade construction appeared deep inland. He squinted through the small dregs of rainwater and the window tint. Whatever it was only stayed in sight for a second before another wall of trees obscured it. Maybe it was just an antennae, but it seemed too thick. Tucker passed Jordan Blvd. leading to the 750 acre Jordan Scrub Sanctuary and the site of Harris Corporation's Government Communications Systems Division. The horn of an oncoming car cut through Tucker's trance just in time for him to swerve back to the right lane and avoid a head-on collision.

Four years ago, when Tucker was playing in his first metalcore band, he, Jamie, and their older friend Terrance sat out in the parking lot of a church called the Tabernacle smoking a joint in a pool of orange streetlight. Twice a week, punk and hardcore shows were held at the Tabernacle, price of admission either five dollars or a can of food for the needy. Tucker had joined the mosh pit after his spot and caught an elbow to the temple. His head pulsed with soreness, but nothing he couldn't handle. This was the life. The evening was muggy, but felt cool after immersion in the writhing sea of sweating bodies. Terrance exhaled a cloud of smoke, then took two steps from the cousins and turned to face them.

"So I'm dropping out," he said.

"Of the band?" Tucker asked.

“Nah, man. Fuckin’ school. I told my dad and he doesn’t give a shit, and I’m done being owned by the fucking institution. You guys should do the same. Get out of the system before it completely takes you over.”

“I don’t think that’s the answer, man,” said Tucker, “You’re always going to be in the system. The trick is to learn how to manipulate it.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of a retarded idea, Terrance,” said Jamie.

“When you guys get further in, you’ll see. As for me, I’m out. I’m gonna prove to y’all that I can break out of the system and do just fine.” Terrance handed the joint back to Jamie. She sipped on the bud and stared at Terrance’s shoes.

“You guys wanna be punks, you gotta strike out on your own. I’m telling you. That’s anarchy, guys. You’ll see what I’m saying when you get older.” He took the smoldering roach from Tucker and inhaled one last hit. A couple cars pulled out of the parking lot, red brake lights illuminating the asphalt, powerlines, and wooden fence at the other end.

“There’s a party in the neighborhood, you guys should come,” said Terrance.

“I’m all set tonight. Got an early morning,” said Tucker.

“Alright, take it easy, kids.” Terrance fist bumped Tucker and Jamie, then wandered out into the shadows cast by the streetlamps overhead. Cars gradually left the parking lot, melting into the surrounding darkness. Sirens and horns sounded from within the city.

Later on, Jamie and Tucker were walking back to his house in Eau Gallie, tired from the evening of thrashing and music. Tucker hoped he wouldn’t sleep through his alarm. He delivered papers on weekday mornings before the sun came up. Tucker did his best to rely on his parents as little as possible. They gave him an allowance, but he insisted on doing chores for money as

well. As soon as he was old enough, he took on the paper route. As the two cousins walked along the edge of a canal bisecting two neighborhoods, Jamie brought up Terrance's declaration.

"He's fucked, huh?"

"Not necessarily," said Tucker.

"What does he expect to do without his diploma? Especially this late in the game?" They came upon a fence. Tucker hoisted himself over the lip, scanned the yard for evidence of dogs or other surveillance, then hopped over. Jamie followed.

"It does make life more difficult, but you can get through life without a high school diploma. It depends on what you want out of it," said Tucker.

"Maybe. I don't know, I can't think of anyone who dropped out and is doing okay," Jamie said.

"Of course there are, look at..."

"Yeah," said Jamie, a sardonic smile on her face.

"Whatever. It's not like either of us is dropping out," said Tucker. The two cousins reached Sarno Boulevard, beyond which lay Tucker's neighborhood. A car sat idling outside the small, poorly lit playground at the neighborhood entrance, behind a two story realty building. Tucker motioned for Jamie to walk with him on the opposite side of the street. That playground always creeped him out.

What Tucker had seen was apparently called the Citadel. Tucker heard of it first after telling his cousin Clayton what he saw. Clayton and his mom were both conspiracy nuts who internalized every urban legend and popular myth they heard and regurgitated it as fact. Tucker

thought Clayton had an active imagination when he'd tell him about encounters with sasquatches and UFOs until he got a little older and Clayton's mom Susan started telling Tucker similar stories. However Tucker's friends Jeff and Fat Bastard corroborated the Citadel story when he told them about it at school that week. Apparently Harris, in conjunction with several other defense contractors in the area, began building a satellite uplink tower that upon completion would have been able to connect to every satellite orbiting the planet. However, for whatever reason, the project was abandoned. Jeff thought the UN shut it down, Fat Bastard seemed to think funding ran out. Clayton mentioned something about aliens, the Illuminati, God knows what. Whatever happened, the tower sat unfinished and abandoned on the Harris property. Rumor had it that if one was to gain access to it and climb to the top, they would see their future, as the electronic equipment used there somehow affected the time/space continuum. Maybe he could talk Jamie into breaking in and climbing it with him. He figured he could use the adventure as bad as she could use an insight into her future. Hell, if the rumors were true, she might see what she was about to walk away from and change her mind.

"Yeah, I've heard of it," said Jamie, "You don't actually believe in that shit do you?"

"I don't disbelieve it," Tucker said. She sat at her computer, shooting her way through a digital hostile planet in *Quake 4*. Tucker lay on her bed awaiting his turn and poring over a map he had brought over, trying to triangulate the position of the tower he thought he'd seen.

"Come on, worst that happens we don't find it and at least go on a pretty awesome nature walk."

"Or get fucking arrested," she said.

“Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“Shit,” she exclaimed, her character having died in the game. Jamie stood up.

“You’re up,” she said, “and I don’t know, I’m nervous about the future, yeah, but I don’t think breaking onto restricted property to climb a tower is going to help.”

“What if it does?” he said, Jamie collapsed onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. Tucker settled in at the computer. Jamie propped herself up on her elbows.

“When were you planning on going?”

“Well, Friday night is happy hour, Saturday is the show, so maybe Sunday afternoon? We’ll go in through the Jordan Scrub preserve and sneak in.”

“Alright, as long as you don’t get us lost,” she said.

“I don’t get lost.” As Tucker clicked away at the keyboard, fighting aliens and cyborgs, he noticed a collage of papers and images on a small bulletin board behind her computer. Tacked to it was a crumpled schedule, a couple articles from Alternative Press, and a photograph from a tattoo magazine of two pierced, tatted girls making out.

Tucker and Jamie were walking back from their skating spot in the ruins of the old subdivision when a disheveled human silhouette emerged against the streetlights down the sidewalk, limping, with both arms bowed out like some aberration of an old west gunfighter. He mumbled to himself and scratched the back of his neck intermittently. The cousins both set their skateboards down. Tucker bowed up and looking to the figure’s hand for a weapon. Jamie cracked her knuckles. The figure stopped for a second, seeing them, then continued shuffling forward.

“You’d think this fool would’ve crossed the street by now.” Jamie said.

“He’s probably thinking the same thing,” said Tucker. The disheveled man came within twelve feet of them and the streetlight revealed his features.

“Terrance?” Tucker said.

“Oh hey!” the man slurred, “y’all scared the shit outta me!”

“Likewise,” said Tucker, “you remember Jamie right?”

“Yeah, fuckin’ a man, how you guys doin’?”

“Alright, just getting by I guess.”

“Ain’t seen y’all in a minute. How’s the ol’ crew?” Tucker began to fill Terrance in when suddenly he started hacking and coughing.

“You alright dude?” Jamie asked.

“Yeah yeah,” he snorted and spat on the sidewalk, “y’all got any change on ya?” Tucker handed him a five dollar bill, his face scrunched up at the sight of their old buddy.

“Thanks man..yeah..been tryin’ to get a gig. Dropped outta school so I could play in the band more, but everyone moved on. Fuckin’ tough out here man. You know where I can get some cheap shit?”

“Fraid not, man,” Tucker said, “is there anything I can do for you?” Tucker didn’t expect an actual reply.

“Yeah lemme get some smokes man,”

“Here, take the whole pack,” Jamie handed over her Camels.

“Thanks, man. God bless y’all.” Terrance shambled off, mumbling something until he was out of earshot. Tucker and Jamie looked at each other and exhaled.

“That’s exactly what this city does to you,” said Jamie. Tucker looked her in the eyes and shook his head.

“You will never end up there, Jamie. You’re too smart and you got people on your side. He’s just got his dead beat, alcoholic dad.”

“It doesn’t matter, dude. That’s just proof that there’s nothing for us in this town. It isn’t built for people like us.”

“What, him? If he wanted, I could help him get clean. Hell, my dad could probably get him on as a temp at the Cape if he can make it through a methadone program and stay clean.”

“Is that the answer to everything? Either Uncle Kevin gets you a job at the Cape or you end up homeless?” said Jamie

“Eric from Cocoa isn’t homeless. He’s still in the band.”

“Yeah, and he’s living with his mom, working at Home Depot part time.” Jamie lit up a cigarette, then looked down the road despondently. Tucker wanted to reach over and touch her face, but stopped himself. Though they weren’t technically relatives, he still thought such a gesture would be weird. They continued walking through the shadows and streetlights.

There it was. If this was the Citadel, it wasn’t the metallic futuristic spear of ingenuity Tucker imagined. What rose from the rolling green lawn beyond the fence was a squat concrete tower, maybe four stories, with various antennae and a thick steel pole rising from its interiors. It reminded him of Weathertop from *Lord of the Rings*. The forest ended abruptly at the fence, which rose about 14 feet with a spiral of razor wire at the top.

“Holy shit. That’s it, isn’t it?” Said Jamie.

“I don’t know, what I saw from the road looked much more majestic,” said Tucker. He checked the map he’d printed out to verify US 1 ran alongside the site he triangulated.

“Yeah, this is it.” Tucker scanned the immediate area for cameras or guard towers.

“See anything suspicious, like ATVs or anything?” he asked Jamie. She shook her head. Tucker approached the fence with a pair of wire cutters. As he cut, he wondered how many silent alarms he had just set off.

“No turning back now, eh?” he said to Jamie, slipping the wire cutters back into his pack. She smiled, brushed a lock of dark hair from her face and stepped through the slit in the fence with him. As they walked toward the structure, Tucker increased his gait slightly. Jamie sensed this and stepped up her pace. Tucker strode faster, prompting Jamie to stride even faster. Then Tucker bolted ahead. Jamie rushed forward and they raced toward the Citadel. Jamie caught up to Tucker, stuck her foot out and tripped him.

“I’m going to punch you in the ovaries,” he shouted as she ran ahead laughing.

Saturday night came around and with it, the sweaty adrenaline soaked ritual of the hardcore punk show at the Tabernacle. Tucker threw himself into the melee of limbs amid the pulsing, riveting guitars and thick grooving riffs. The screams of the vocalist mirrored his and everyone else’s deep seated aggression. Tucker and Jamie saw each other in the pit and collided with each other. Others saw this and shoved. Tucker smiled, his blood pumping fast. Then he saw the neo-nazi. Glistening skull, white muscle shirt, and both arms desecrated with tattoos of third reich images. He strutted into the pit with his fists balled up, cocking his head like a rooster and then he started decking people. He hit Jamie square in the face before Tucker could get to

him. Tucker saw red and lunged at him. Four of the neo-nazi's friends dove in and tore at Tucker, but Jamie was already in the fray, punching and biting and kicking. Other kids in the crowd came from every angle, attacking the intruders. The music stopped. Blood and spit splattered the ground. A cacophony of shouting filled the space. Eventually doors busted open, tear gas misted into the venue and police with batons burst in through the doors. Tucker ran out a fire exit with a deluge of people, scattering in every direction. He ran past the parking lot, through the darkness of the neighboring Eau Gallie High football field, and stopped at the baseball diamonds, dipping into the dugout where Jamie was already waiting. When they first started going to shows, Tucker had said if a riot ever happened like the ones spoken of in *American Hardcore* and they got separated, this would be where they'd meet up. Tucker grabbed Jamie's hand and squeezed. They hugged each other, and he felt her face for fractures or other wounds.

"I'm alright," she said, "you?"

"I'll live," he said. Tucker's knuckles, face, and abdomen began throbbing as the adrenaline subsided. The cousins stepped out of the dugout and looked toward the pulsating red and blue lights, the meandering dark bodies. Shouting and sirens emanated from the Tabernacle, the parking lot filling up with police cars and emergency vehicles. Jamie sighed.

"That's the end of that," she said. Tucker looked up to her and started to speak, but didn't have the words or energy. They turned and began walking back to his house, the chaos behind them fading into nothing.

Jamie reached the concrete tower and leaned on it, catching her breath. Tucker came up behind her. They searched for an entrance on the building itself before realizing the ground formed a large man-made hill and it was likely that parts of the facility were underground. Jamie approached an iron cellar door ten feet from the tower. A keypad rose out of the ground next to it, frayed wires hanging out like dreadlocks.

“So much for getting in through here,” said Tucker. Jamie pulled on the handles and the doors eased open with a hydraulic hiss.

“Nice,” said Tucker. Grated steps descended into a yawning void. Arctic air carried dust and a distant mechanical droning from within. The two cousins descended into the abyss.

Jamie clicked on a flashlight, forcing the surrounding shadows further back. Layers of dust covered the metal walkway they stood upon. A few feet below them lay gray blocks of neglected servers. Circuit boards crawled up the walls like futuristic hieroglyphics. Jamie panned the flashlight over two vats of some murky liquid.

“Hope that’s not radioactive,” said Tucker. They moved forward on the walkway. Dripping water and creaking metal echoed throughout the man-made cavern. Each noise made the two of them jump. A diagonal column of gray light appeared at the end, revealing a metal stairway leading into the tower. As they moved toward it, Tucker slipped. Jamie dropped the light and clutched his arm as his feet dangled over what was easily a 20 foot drop.

“Fucking fuck,” he exclaimed. She hoisted him back up through the hole in the walkway.

“Geez, Tucker,” she said, “you almost died.” Tucker let out a heavy exhale.

“Let’s just keep going,” he said, “I’m alright.” They proceeded forward and ascended the grated steps leading out of the catacomb and into the Citadel. They emerged into a cylinder of

grey steel walls. A massive reactor of some kind sat in the center, multicolored wires and black rubber tubes connected it to various outlets on the rising walls. Jamie shined the flashlight overhead to reveal three hydraulic arms like mechanical pinchers.

“What did they try to do here?” Jamie said, panning the light across the strange machinery.

“If the rumors are true, they tried to connect the satellites of the world to one focal point. No nation would ever be able to keep a secret again.”

“That must’ve had something to do with the Patriot Act, right?” said Jamie.

“That wouldn’t make sense. Word is this was built well before 9/11.”

“Weird,” Jamie focused the light on a spiral staircase leading out of the strange reactor room. They made their way to it and climbed upward past the hydraulic arms, past another level of long dead computers and office chairs. Layers of dust and cobwebs covered the floors and desks. Many appeared to have water damage. They ascended past another level with a large oval desk before a cracked screen the size of a wall. A strange red glow emanated from the edges of the floor.

“Check it out,” Jamie pointed to a column of daylight issuing from the ceiling on the other side of the stairs. She clicked off the flashlight. Rain drops trickled down a thin metal ramp leading to the top. Jamie and Tucker ran toward the ramp and out into the fresh open air outside. Steady rainfall greeted them upon exit. Several thin metal ramps extended from the platform, leading to nowhere. Four antennae jutted into the sky, the tallest topped with a red beacon. Tucker looked to Jamie.

“Here we are,” he said. They walked to the edge of one of the incomplete ramps and sat facing east. From their vantage point the grassy plain below stretched to a small copse of woods, US 1 and the Indian River. To the north lay Palm Bay and the edges of West Melbourne. Tucker pulled a flask out of his backpack, took a long sip then offered it to Jamie.

“What the hell is this?”

“Wild Turkey. Snagged some from Dad’s liquor cabinet.”

“I’m good. I want to think,” she said. The drizzle let up slightly. Thick low clouds sailed overhead. A wet breeze tousled their hair. Tucker lit up two cigarettes and handed her one. They smoked in silence for some time, watching the clouds sail over the gray water of the Indian River past US 1. Even the lawn before them seemed tinged with gray by the overcast and rain. Tucker watched US 1, the monotony of the road punctuated by occasional cars. He thought about the tower they stood upon and the dust and neglect it contained. He and Jamie were the first people to lay eyes on the advanced machinery in at least a decade. The place might have stood as a bright shining beacon of ingenuity and human potential, assuring supremacy over the sky. Yet like the Tower of Babel it was abandoned, left to decay. Just like the trailer park he and Jamie were skating at when she told him she was leaving. Just like the rusting train tracks cutting through the city and across Crane Creek in downtown Melbourne. Just like Terrance’s promise to defeat the homogenization of the school system and therefore society, blazing a path toward independence that the next generation of punk rockers and anarchists could follow. Melbourne, Palm Bay, Cape Canaveral, the entire region was a landfill of empty promises. Unfulfilled dreams. People began with big ideas here, then walked away and left them to rust. But that couldn’t be completely true. He had a strong family, and a childhood of memories. Something

good had once been here in Melbourne, so something good could surely happen again. He didn't want to just give up on this city that he'd spent so many years in. He looked to his cousin and his heart ached.

"You're really leaving next year, huh?"

Jamie smiled despondently at him and blew out smoke.

"I've been here too long. Long enough to outgrow this place and watch it die."

"I still believe in this place, though," said Tucker, "I mean, we loved it here. We've made memories."

"I wouldn't trade them for a single second, Cuz. But those days are gonna be gone soon. People grow up, people die, and this city? Well, it is, what it is." Jamie took the flask from Tucker. She put her arm around his shoulders. Rain began spitting from the sky again.

"You're gonna be alright, Tucker. You're the smartest person I know. You don't need me around."

"That's not the point Jamie. I...", his heartbeat increased, "nevermind."

"You what?" She looked at him.

"Nothing," he averted his eyes.

"Tell me."

"Seriously, it's nothing,"

"Don't fucking lie to me, Tucker,"

He kissed her. Hard and swift. Her body tensed for a second, then she pushed him away.

"Woah." she said,

"Sorry, I just..." Tucker's face glowed.

“I’m not really sure what just happened,” Jamie said. Tucker breathed out loudly and looked everywhere but at her.

“That was kinda weird. I’m sorry,” he said.

“Well, technically we’re not related…” she said.

“Yeah, true, but still, right?” Tucker finally looked back at her.

“Yeah, for a pretty solid reason, besides the fact you’re like my brother,”

“Uh…do tell,” he said. Jamie stared at him incredulously.

“Dude, I’m a lesbian.”

Tucker jerked his head like he’d been slapped.

“I thought you knew,” she glanced down at the lawn below, “I haven’t come out to the family yet, but I honestly don’t know how you of all people didn’t know that. I mean, have you seen me with a guy in the last three years?” She chuckled and shook her head. Tucker pulled off his bandana and wiped rainwater off his face.

“Shit… makes quite a bit of sense actually,” said Tucker. He motioned for the flask and took a long pull. Jamie was now laughing. He allowed himself a grin, then passed the flask back to her. They sat silently again sipping on the Wild Turkey. Tucker tried to light another cigarette, but his fingers were too wet and the rain had picked up. Droplets dragged down his cheek.

Tucker looked out over the lawn again and ahead to six months when he and Jamie would hold a long embrace before walking through security at Orlando International and flying away from the fourteen year chapter of time they shared.

“Look, Tucker,” she said, “I’m going to miss you a ton. But I have to do this. So, let’s just enjoy the time we do have together. Besides, it’s not like I won’t be back to visit.”

“It won’t be the same,” he said.

“It’ll be okay.” They sat in silence for a few seconds longer. The sun struggled to shine from between the clouds.

“Reckon we better make the hike down, in case there’s eyes on us,” said Tucker. They stood up and began to descend the flimsy, incomplete ramp.

“Well we didn’t see our future, but I’m glad we did this.”

“Oh,” Tucker said, and pointed north, toward Melbourne, “there’s the future.” Jamie followed squinted her eyes. There was the main Harris compound, The Florida Tech Campus, downtown Melbourne and the graveyard.

“The cemetery?” She said.

“I reckon. That’s everyone’s future isn’t it?” Tucker grinned. Jamie smiled and rolled her eyes.

“That’s fucking lame,” she said. The rain slowed to a stop. White light from the sun peeked between the rolling gray clouds. A few rays colored the grass a vibrant bright green. The red beacon of the Citadel continued blinking.

IRREDUCIBLE COMPLEXITY

In late 2005, NASA's administration promised Congress "not one thin dime" would be taken from the space science budget in accordance with President Bush's goal to place a man on Mars by 2014. On Thursday, NASA announced a \$3 billion budget cut to be made to Space Science despite an increase of spending to \$16.8 billion this fiscal year.

"There was no money available anyplace else," NASA's administrator of science told Congress, "We took a hit."

The story sent a chill through Dawson Echert. He shut off the news and took a sip of his Knob Creek. His cocker spaniel Molly lay on the couch with him, her head in his lap. He'd spent the past nine years at NASA, working from an intern position up to a project manager, reaching toward his dreams of assisting in the manned exploration of other planets. Dawson and his wife Christa had purchased the three bedroom Merritt Island house in early 2005. The housing market bubble had begun to burst throughout the nation, however he anticipated holding onto the house until the economy stabilized. With the lofty goals of NASA at the time, his job appeared secure. Dawson stroked Molly's ears and she sighed through her nostrils. He glanced at the picture of his parents on the wall, who'd taught him to believe that hard work never goes unrewarded. Dawson's position was important enough, he thought. Surely he'd survive this budget cut. He stood up from the couch and clicked off the light filling the living room. As he entered the master bedroom to lay down next to Christa, his phone rang. He said hello twice only to be answered by static and breathing on the other end. The line went dead.

"Who was that, hon?" Christa asked sleepily. Dawson climbed into bed with her.

"I don't know," he said, "it was a dead call." He laid awake most of the night.

Kennedy Space Center cut seventy five positions from Space Exploration. Dawson walked toward his car with a box of his belongings, tears cascading down his face. Several others joined him in the parking lot, who also had their livelihoods stripped from their hands. Sobbing faces followed him into the parking lot, some of whom had been at the company longer than him. Dennis, who worked on a team developing anti-gravity space suits, carried a box with picture frames featuring his kids. Dawson had met them at his New Year's Eve party in 2005. Dennis had shared Dawson's optimism for the Mars endeavor, and he'd stayed in the office for hours after shift, absorbed in schematics and diagrams. The tears trailing down the face of this man of science shook Dawson to his core. All of these people had value. They all would have made history. Dawson blinked to dry his eyes. The massive parking lot radiated heat like a solar panel.

When he arrived home, he released an excited, oblivious Molly into the backyard. He walked over to an archaic wooden Gazebo on the west side of his yard and picked up a tennis ball. An oak tree towered over the house, shadowing a magnolia and an avocado tree on either side. His wife's rose bushes lined the back fence. A year ago he and Christa stood in the backyard dreaming. She held the crook of his arm, head against his shoulder,

"I'll plant my garden right there," she pointed to the back fence.

"That'll be nice," Dawson said, "Maybe I'll build a shed over in the corner there," He wrapped his arm around her waist. She wound her arm around his.

"We could build a treehouse for the kids," said Christa. Dawson glanced down at her.

"Kids?"

“We’re going to have them eventually, aren’t we?” she said.

“Yeah, of course,” said Dawson, “I guess we’ll talk about that when the time comes.”

“You do want them, don’t you?”

“Of course, babe,” he ran his hand through her blonde hair. After they moved in, he bought the cocker spaniel and Christa planted her rose garden.

Disengaged, Dawson tossed the tennis ball for the dog, who tackled it and ran back, dropping it at his feet. The scientist in him said that there were other programs he could apply to, and if that failed, other agencies throughout the Brevard County area. However the idealistic dreamer within him despaired, thinking he’d crossed the event horizon of his dreams. The dog came bounding back up to Dawson. He let her back inside then poured himself a glass of bourbon and sank into the couch. Molly tried to set a rope in his lap, but Dawson stared vacantly at the wall. She eventually retreated to the opposite side of the living room and gnawed on the rope. Christa wouldn’t be home from her job at Patrick for another two hours. He paced the living room, replenished his glass, and turned on the TV. He stared blankly at the soap opera that came on. The phone rang, and Dawson’s heart jumped with a quantum of hope that maybe a new project came his way and NASA wanted him back. A telemarketer greeted him on the other end, disappointing him with a pitch for lower long distance rates. He instructed him to take him off their list. The setting sun cast long shadows through the living room. When Christa returned, she found Dawson asleep on the couch, the dog snuggled up against him.

Dawson held out hope that NASA would call him back with a different position. After all, the Mars Rover project was still going strong. He wished he could travel back in time and

apply to that program back when he was still an employee. Months passed and no word from NASA. Dawson took a job as a night auditor at the Intrepid Coves hotel in Cocoa Beach, which kept food in the pantry, the lights and cable on. However the mortgage, car payments and student loans rapidly drained his severance package. Christa was saddled with the health and homeowner's insurance, in addition to half the mortgage. They'd grown used to Dawson's sizeable paycheck, but now both relied on her lower paying job as a financial counselor at the Patrick Airman and Family Readiness Center. Eventually their homeowner's insurance policy was denied renewal because they lived on a "barrier island". United Space Alliance granted Dawson a second interview for an engineering management position, but after two weeks of hopeful anticipation, he received a letter of rejection. He re-applied for the Mars Rover program, the Shuttle program, anything he could think of at NASA, but his applications vanished into a vacuum of silence. He ended up taking a temp position at DRS Tactical Systems in Melbourne, figuring after a year he could get hired on direct and work towards a job similar in pay and benefits to his career at NASA. He worked every day for two months, running on less than four hours of sleep on some nights. His eyesight suffered from hours of staring into computer screens. He started gaining weight from a completely sedentary lifestyle. Then one day he arrived at DRS to find his temp contract terminated. The company laid off 150 temps and full time employees. After a half hour drive of screaming at no one, punching his steering wheel at stoplights, he parked his car in Cocoa Village and pounded beer at a bar called Crossbones until he couldn't stand up. Christa had to drive him home after she got off work.

The mortgage finally caught up to them. Dawson and Christa sat at the table, poring over bills they couldn't pay between her position at Patrick and his only job as a night auditor. He looked Christa in the eyes and promised they'd get through this. Every day in the news, stories of foreclosures haunted the headlines.

"We won't be one of them," he'd said, "we're going to get through this storm. Any day I bet NASA will call me back."

"Honey, I'm with you in this, but the best option may be just to go ahead and file for bankruptcy."

"Absolutely not, we're going to get through this. I do that and my credit is screwed for seven years."

She tried to point out that it might save the house, but he refused to hear it. Their discussion devolved into an argument that resulted in him storming out of the house to meet up with his high school pal Jeff at Waveskimmer's Pub in Cocoa Beach. Jeff worked in the stucco business and times were tough for him too. He'd lost a contract earlier in the year for a Viera housing project called Gatsby Villages. After a few pints, Dawson forgot his age and babbled the ears off of a couple in their twenties until they finally walked outside. When he tried to pull a young brunette girl onto his lap by her hand, the bartender told him he'd had enough. Dawson told him to fuck off. Jeff pulled him away from the bar as two men approached from the pool table. Jeff managed to get Dawson out into the gravel parking lot of the bar before a confrontation took place. Cars coasted by on A1A south. He woke up at ten the next morning on Jeff's couch with nine missed calls from Christa.

Days spent hungover became a common occurrence. Dawson would sometimes come back in the early morning from the night audit job and drink until noon. The Knob Creek and Concha y Toro wine he used to keep became Jim Beam and Budweiser. Christa suggested AA but he repeatedly told her he was fine and to stop judging him. Finally one Thursday night, he was out in Cocoa Beach and Christa called him again and again with no answer. She didn't see him until that evening when she got off work, and she said they needed to talk. She leaned against the kitchen counter. Dawson sat at the table with a glass of water.

"I know you're struggling. We both are. But if we're going to get through this time, I need you here with me."

"What do you think I'm doing?" He said. She walked over to the table, still standing.

"Dawson, you were out all night. On a weeknight. You didn't tell me anything, and I was up all night wondering where you were."

"I'm sorry. I was wrong. It won't happen again."

"You keep saying that, Dawson, but it keeps happening." She sat down at the table with him. She stared at him until he made eye contact.

"I know it looks bad, but I've got this under control," he said, "at least I wasn't out driving."

"Dawson, when you're out, I don't sleep. I stay up all night wondering if you're in jail. Or worse. It's affecting me at work. My supervisor pulled me aside the other day to ask if I was alright."

"They make medicine for that, you know," Dawson said. Christa's eyes widened. She inhaled and folded her hands on the table.

“I’m trying really hard to be here for you, but you have to help me help you. I cannot do this if you aren’t willing to at least go with me to counseling or AA or something. Anything.”

“What are you saying?” He placed his hands on the edge of the table.

“You’ve lost two jobs. We’re about to lose the house,” a tear trickled down Christa’s cheek, “and you’re about to lose me too.” They stared at each other for a few seconds. The kitchen clock ticked. Molly woofed at a passing car. Christa started to reach for Dawson’s hand, but he stood up abruptly.

“I have to go to work,” he said. Christa sobbed into both her hands as he slammed the door behind him. When Dawson came home the next morning he fell asleep on the couch, moving to the bedroom when Christa left for work. When he woke at around two in the afternoon, he found the first of the divorce papers on the kitchen table. Two bill collectors called that evening.

The house went into foreclosure. Centurion Realty erected a sign in the front yard and it went on the list. He begrudgingly left the house for hours at a time so it could be shown to prospective new buyers, more than ready to build new lives on top of his broken dreams. Often he would drive to a cul-de-sac that dead ended as a boat launch on the Banana River, right outside the airport. He’d sit on the back of his Cadillac, stare at the water, and sip on a plastic bottle of Jim Beam. Cigarette butts and beer bottles littered the concrete and floated among the mangroves. Occasionally he would see the rubbery backs of manatees near the boat launch, snorting a short spray of mist when they came up for air.

When Christa finally moved out, he spent hours in the backyard with Molly, throwing her a tennis ball while he swung on the bench. Sometimes she would seem to sense he didn't have the energy, and she'd lay at his feet while he nuzzled her belly with his foot. Yet even that was taken from him. She developed cancer in her throat and a diagnosis alone would have cost \$5,000. With only the night audit position left and the impending foreclosure, he simply couldn't afford to save the dog. He held onto her as long as he could, but there were days she wouldn't eat and would barely move because of the pain. He tried taking her to the vet to be put down three times before he finally committed. Her eyes stared into his soul with terror and betrayal as he walked out of the office. While driving home, he pulled over in the middle of 520 and puked from crying so hard.

Dawson spent his last night in the house on an air mattress. Jeff had offered him his couch, but Dawson wanted one last night in this place. The next day, the foreclosure would be finalized and Dawson would be sleeping on Jeff's couch like a shiftless twenty-something. The stifling emptiness made him sick, but for this fleeting moment, he still had one thing left. He struggled for a comfortable position, but he'd gained forty pounds in the last six months alone and the stiff mattress hurt his back. He stood up and walked out his front door, where he used to sit and puff on his pipe. A tall oak tree reached over the roof to touch the one growing in the backyard. Every morning he would raise a flag in honor of his father, a Korean War veteran. The night was still and cool. The drone of a plane's propeller from the nearby airport accounted for the only noise. He smoked a cigarette in the empty driveway. Phlegm coated his throat and the tobacco buzz only made him feel sadder. He wandered back inside. The kitchen had been

stripped clean, light blue nighttime glowed upon the cabinets from the window over the sink. He remembered carrying Christa into this room like it was their honeymoon night. He would come up behind her in the mornings while she played Sudoku over her coffee and kiss her cheek. She'd press her head into his shoulder. They would have coffee together and talk about their futures. That time seemed like another century.

He walked out into the living room that once was filled with guests when he hosted a New Year's Eve party. They had sung karaoke, had smoked cigars and drank fine bourbon with friends from the Cape in the enclosed back porch. The living room erupted in vibrant cheers when the countdown reached zero and he kissed Christa with passion. They laughed and danced until dawn broke through the curtains. He and Christa spent the first day of 2006 curled up in bed, sleeping in the golden sunlight, Molly asleep between them like a child.

Dawson glanced out the window, the Centurion Realty sign hanging on a post next to his driveway. He wished for a drink in his hand but the nearest Sunoco was further away than he felt like walking. Shortly after Molly died, he'd had to stop paying on the Cadillac and it was repossessed. He wandered back toward the master bedroom, the mattress sitting in the middle of the dark room. The only furniture in the entire house. The loneliness was an invisible fence across the threshold. He remembered the hollow, cold feeling of curling up against himself in an empty bed.

Dawson walked out into the backyard, into the gazebo and lit another cigarette while swinging on the bench swing chained to its rafters. He puffed on the cigarette, listening to the crickets hidden in the grass he hadn't mowed in two weeks. The crescent moon hung over the roof of the house. He watched the sky for the International Space Station, which finally drifted

across like a wandering star. When he was an undergraduate at Penn State, he'd heard of a concept called irreducible complexity, where at one point an organism or machine cannot be deconstructed any further and still function. Supposedly this served as proof of intelligent design. Dawson found the idea fitting. He could be reduced no further. Tomorrow he would walk away from this catacomb of dead memories forever. Some dignity remained in having nothing left to lose. There was power in being reduced to zero, he thought. Not a force in the cosmos could hurt him now. A strong and sudden wind rolled through the yard, shuddering the oak tree. Tiny leaves cluttered across the gazebo roof like exoskeletons. Smoke colored clouds covered the moon.

MACHINERY OF NIGHT

Normally on a night like this, I'd be alone at the Merritt Island foreclosure home I'd been able to buy after two years couch surfing and renting. Maybe I'd be watching a Tarantino movie or reading a gothic novel on my back porch. If I couldn't sleep, I'd drive to lonely places throughout the county where I could do some solid thinking. One of my favorite spots was this old graveyard deep in Merritt Island. There was even an old stump at the back which I'd stand on. I'd stare across the tombstones and make my attempts at prayer. It was 2:00 a.m. and I wished more than anything I was on that stump in somber meditation. Instead, I was lying on my friend Howard's couch in his one bedroom apartment after spending most of the night snorting coke and drinking Maker's Mark. Howard was in his room railing out some girl from the first floor and lights from both the living room and kitchen windows blared in my face. My head felt like an overloaded computer, with random thoughts racing through it too fast to develop or ponder. Just a collage of colorful mental images, no emotion tied to a single one. I paced around the living room, razor lines of outside light cut across the walls. I picked up my empty box of Camel cigarettes off the ground, then regarded the overflowing ashtray on the floor. I looked through it for a half smoked cigarette I could light up, but all were smoked down to the butt. My guitar sat against the TV stand, I'd brought it over thinking we'd be playing it tonight. Howard's girl moaned louder than N.W.A or whatever gangster rap he was playing. I walked to the front door and twisted the doorknob with my left hand, my right still in a cast from a fight down at Waveskimmer's a little while back. I stepped out into the sweaty night, the tinny trill of an outside AC unit echoed off the faded pink walls. One of the neighbors stood outside his adjacent apartment, leaning on the railing smoking a cigarette. He nodded at me and I nodded back. As I

approached the stairs leading to the street, a guy and a girl screamed at each other from inside the corner apartment. Their silhouettes threw wild, erratic gestures at each other through the toenail colored blinds, and I wondered if I should wait around for the guy to get fed up and smack her across the mouth. I debated if I should intervene, me and my broken punching hand. I turned and walked down the stairs.

The soles of my riding boots were worn to almost nothing, and I could feel every inch of the asphalt beneath my feet. I hadn't ridden a motorcycle since I rode out here from Arizona and sold mine. I thought about getting a pair of boat shoes or something more practical, but all my jeans were boot cut and that'd mean buying a whole new wardrobe. The streetlights threw jagged light patterns across the asphalt and concrete. Cars flowed out of the parking lot of Iniquity Cabaret on the corner, slipping into either direction down A1A. I walked through the strip club parking lot, on my way to 7 Eleven. A sinister red line of neon ran along the roof of the club. Two girls in miniskirts and dayglow tube tops shouted obscenities in each other's faces, cocking their heads and contorting their bodies robotically. A bouncer did his best to break them up before one girl pulled the other to the ground by her hair. An old man with large glasses waddled through the chaos, his face vacant and jaded. I wondered what his life was that'd warrant him spending his Friday night alone in a titty bar. A police car raced by on A1A, probably to another bar with another cacophony like this one in its parking lot.

I wandered away from the neon hued bacchanalia of drunk people and strippers behind me. I felt dizzy and dehydrated, wishing I'd been asleep two hours ago in my own bed. Howard worked as a phone rep at the marketing firm where I was now a manager. He and I had a lot in common – both of us came to Cocoa Beach looking to start again. For both of us, the marketing

firm was the first legitimate job we'd had in years. The only reason he was just a phone rep and I got promoted was because of the two of us, I'd never seen the inside of a prison. He came here straight after a two year stint in Cincinnati. I came here from running enforcement in a chapter of Hell's Angels in Tucson after getting myself saved. I liked Howard because we understood where each other came from. We both came here trying to put our pasts behind us. However, nights like tonight, those commonalities were a problem because it didn't take much for one of us to get the other back to old habits like snorting powder or pills. I'd hoped I'd escape the drugs when I left both the chapter and Tucson, but they were here and they were plenty. Pain gathered behind my right eye, like a thousand little pins localized right along my optic nerve.

"God forgive me," I said to the air. I approached a puddle from one of the afternoon storms that stretched all the way across the parking lot. I cursed under my breath, the water seeped through my old boots and into my socks.

As I crossed Garfield, a single streetlight lit up a figure hobbling down the street. It scratched its chin and then shuffled forward into the darkness. I felt for my switchblade that I must've left in my right pocket, just out of reach of my good hand. I kept my eyes on the shambling silhouette and crossed the street onto a crumbled concrete slab with an abandoned Japanese steakhouse. A chunk was missing from the bottom corner of the large plastic sign, a crack running underneath and through two of the Japanese characters. I scanned the parking lot for anyone hiding behind the disheveled wooden building, or by the half collapsed chain link fence overgrown with pepper trees. Back in Tucson, I never left my apartment without a gun. I was trying to abandon that part of my life forever. I still carried the switchblade, but walking through dilapidated spots like this made me uneasy enough to miss the convenience of firepower.

When I got to the 7 Eleven on Hayes Avenue, a thin old man in glasses stood outside what looked like a blue Camry. He didn't look dangerous, just a little too friendly for how I was feeling tonight. I kept my eyes locked forward and quickened my gait. Sure enough, as I reached for the door he said,

"I thought I was getting one thing but wound up with somethin' else!" He held up a donut which I assumed he was referring to. Why this man thought I'd give a shit, I didn't know. I should've just ignored him.

"Hate it when that happens," I said.

"How're y'all doing tonight?" he slurred his words a little.

"Oh just peachy," I said. Maybe I should've said, 'fucking peachy'. The man's eyes widened in melodramatic surprise.

"Peachy!? You're peachy!?" He did a little dance and stared at me wide-eyed, as if I'd just told him the donut he was eating granted him immortality. I walked right into the store and rolled my eyes. Hopefully he'd be gone by the time I got out. I felt bad for the man, he was obviously lonely, judging from his strange and somewhat sad choice of social activities on a Friday night, but in my best mood I didn't like talking to strangers. I sure as hell didn't want to on a night like tonight with my head throbbing from too much cocaine. I grabbed a bottle of Advil, then wandered down the back wall of refrigerated cases, debating whether I wanted to grab a 12 pack or not. The fluorescent light made me squint. I walked up to the counter, asked for a pack of Camels. The clerk looked about as tired as me, the fluorescent lights he had to work under his whole shift undoubtedly sapping his energy to a flat-line of sentience. I was grateful for a simple transaction with few words.

When I walked out, a brunette stood outside the store, fake tits nearly bursting through a short white dress with tiger stripes. Upon seeing me, she smoothed out her dress real quick and smiled.

“Hey, boy. What are you doing?” I liked what I saw. Howard was getting his back at the apartment and this woman was sexy enough and seemed easy enough. I wondered if Howard had condoms at his place.

“Just getting some smokes; what are you doing?” I walked up close to her and she leaned against the store window.

“Nada, just looking for some candy,” she lit up a cigarette. I caught a pungent whiff of her body spray. I knew it was cheap stuff, but I liked the smell.

“You’d have been in luck two hours ago,” I said. She stared at me and turned her head sideways.

“You have beautiful eyes,” she said.

“Uh, thanks,” I whacked the bottom of my pack of smokes with my cast.

“What happened to your hand?”

“Some prick hit me in the fist with his jaw,” I said. She laughed and I fumbled in my back pocket for my lighter.

“So you don’t have any...?”

“Candy? Not anymore I’m afraid. Had I counted on running into ya I might’ve saved you some.”

“Guess I’m shit outta luck then,” she breezed past me before I could come up with some smooth ass line. Her dress skirt was high enough that I noticed a cross and cursive lines on her

thigh. A bible verse I'd have to get up close and personal to make out. Strange. I started to reach for my own Celtic cross necklace with my busted right hand.

"I like your tat. What's it say?" I asked. She stopped and glanced down at her thigh.

"It's from the Bible. Somethin' about living water."

"Gospel of John, chapter seven," I was shocked I knew that off the top of my head, "why that one?"

"I don't know. I guess cuz there was a time I believed in that stuff," she said. I nodded at her and she walked back to her car. I made my way back to Howard's place. As I approached the parking lot past Garfield, I nearly slipped and fell into the drainage ditch. If anyone saw, they were cloaked in the shadows of the closed buildings. I heard shuffling footsteps behind me to my right. They stopped when I stopped. I took a few more steps forward. So did the footsteps behind me. I did a contortionist maneuver reaching for my switchblade, then whipped around to face some scraggly drifter. His skin looked like rawhide and his lower lip protruded like a tray for his two yellow teeth jutting out. He stared at me cockeyed, like I was some absurdist sculpture he was trying to figure out. A dirty white shirt hung off his frame, half tucked into sweatpants. He started to take a step forward.

"That's far enough," I said. If I'd had my .357 this would be over already, but it sat locked up in a safe at my house.

"I just wanna bag o' chips man,"

"I ain't got no cash, homes." I wasn't going to use my one good hand to reach for my wallet and I didn't believe him. I planted my left foot and watched his hands, waiting for them to go for a weapon. He started to step forward again. I clicked the blade out.

“You know what that is.”

“Iss cool man, iss cool,” he backed away, “God’ll take care of me, man. He’s always watchin’ out.”

“If you don’t walk in the opposite direction, you’re gonna meet him,” I said.

“Yeah, Ima just go on out and meet him.” The man shuffled off across the street toward Garfield. I breathed out and slid the blade back into the handle. Though this guy was obviously talking out of his head, I found it interesting how the destitute junkie or homeless panhandler was always quick to appeal to a higher power. Homegirl at 7 Eleven once believed enough to get a verse tattooed on her thigh, yet she walked these streets faithless now. Guess that meant to believe in God in a worn out, degenerate place like this, you had to be on drugs or crazy. The thought made me wish I could drive to the graveyard right now and stand on that stump. Talking to God made sense there. I gazed upward, the light pollution blocked out the stars and the sky looked like a thick black ceiling. I couldn’t imagine anything beyond it, and I felt alone and pointless. The night I got saved, I was sitting on my bike in the middle of the Sonoran desert stars shimmering in all directions for eternity. Everyone I’d hurt, tortured, or caused the death of came rushing back to me in one loud, violent burst and I called out into the sky. I prayed for forgiveness and a change. I didn’t know where to start, but I’d do my best, if God would just take me and show me where to go. I landed in Brevard County because I couldn’t ride any further east and a couple distant cousins in Palm Bay opened their home to me. Looking at the sky tonight, blood full of booze and head full of powder, I wondered how good those prayers were now. I wished I could feel God watching me, undoubtedly pissed and disappointed. I’d take the

high of that existential fear over this numb, robotic malcontent. Low slung powerlines buzzed overhead. I continued walking toward the red neon beacon of Iniquity.

When I got back to Howard's apartment complex, two police cars sat outside with their lights spinning across the brick façade. A girl screamed from the back seat of one, "Michael!" over and over. I walked past the officers, a guy who I assumed was Michael, and a pick-up truck with the windows and windshield smashed in. When I got up the stairs, the corner apartment door was wide open. Dead cockroaches lay on the floor, a pipe, and spoon on the coffee table. The old neighbor was still leaning on the railing, wearing a dirty white shirt and a blond mustache. I figured he was a cook from the stains. He waved and I motioned with my thumb toward the commotion downstairs.

"Girl got drunk and smashed that guy's windows with a cinderblock. I hear them two fighting almost the same time every night," the old man said.

"What a life, huh?" I said, then walked down to Howard's apartment. He stood in the kitchen naked, evidently not expecting me.

"Where's your girl, man?"

"She in the shower," Howard made no effort to cover himself, "'bout to go finish her off. Where'd you go man?"

"Just to the store. Got some smokes, that's about it."

"Lemme get some," he said. I handed him two and told him I'd probably be heading back home early to get my head together. I made up a story about plans in Palm Bay with my cousins that afternoon.

"Cool man, I'll see ya round," he went in to bro hug me, but I stopped him,

“Put on some pants first, hombre.”

“Aw shit, my bad.” He went into the bathroom and I grabbed the tiny acoustic travel guitar I’d brought over before this night devolved into rampant substance abuse. I thought about just driving back to my house, but with a twenty minute drive across the causeway between here and there, I wasn’t going to risk a DUI. The comedown was sapping my energy and I didn’t want to walk anymore, but few things are worse than being wide awake in a house with two people having sex when you aren’t. I walked back out of the apartment, past the open door on the corner, past the cop cars and the repeated screams, “Michael,” and down the street toward the beach. I stopped in the middle of Ridgewood Avenue and looked both directions, a hollow tunnel of power poles, sea grapes, and houses each way. I felt like I was between two universes, like this was some purgatory between the degradation I was used to and a more intangible, ethereal world I’d tried to come closer to by getting as far away from Tucson as I could. I’d spent the early months here living with my cousin and her folks in Palm Bay while I worked on an associate’s degree and scoured the county for a job. I did what I could to keep myself so busy I wouldn’t have time to think about drinking or drugs, or starting fights. Moving to Merritt Island felt like a milestone in my striving toward a more God-pleasing life, whatever that looked like. Yet here I was, narcotics running through my system, feeling grumpy and violent, as if I’d never said that prayer under Arizona stars. Howard was a good friend and he’d also come out to the beach looking for redemption. Thing is, he didn’t have cousins willing to house him when he arrived here and he had a felony on his record. With the economy crumbling all around us, people with degrees still losing jobs, I couldn’t think of a worse time in history to be an ex-con. The owners of the firm turned a blind eye to his record, but Howard didn’t have many options on

where to live. The best he could do right now was Cocoa Beach, and it was painfully apparent to me how quick an environment like this can drag down a once bad man trying to make himself good.

I crossed the street and came upon a small public parking lot enclosed in sea grape bushes. A streetlight provided an odd turquoise tinted light to the sleeping houses and the boardwalk dividing a field of sea oats. A massive tan condominium loomed over the boardwalk, its design some kind of Greco-Roman aesthetic. I hopped onto the low railing and pinched the guitar pick between the forefinger and thumb of my busted hand. It was uncomfortable, but I could still play with it. I knew I wasn't going to sleep and I was dreading the long hours of daylight ahead. I usually went to church on Sunday morning, but I figured maybe I'd hit up the Saturday night service tomorrow. I began strumming a haunting classical piece, something my adopted mom Jennine had taught me before I ran away at sixteen. I'd severed ties completely when I joined the gang, in case someone tried to get back at me through her. I wondered what she'd think if she saw me now. The song trailed from my guitar like cigarette smoke until the soft glow of dawn diffused the sky.

THE HOUSE ON REDDICK STREET

Afternoons like this hit Angelica the hardest. She came home from school to an empty house, her Tía Laura and little brother Ramón still gone. The failing light outside cast the walls in a lonely blue pallor. She opened the living room blinds, letting in the remnants of light, then turned on the TV. Most days, Tía Laura would be back with Ramón, and Angelica would make him a peanut butter sandwich like she used to when they lived with their Mami. Today was his tee ball practice, though, so that meant if she didn't stay out skating after school with her friends, she'd come back to a house haunted by stale memories. Angelica collapsed into the overstuffed sofa in the living room. Streaks of pink laced through her dyed black hair, tied in a ponytail. Her sharp eyebrows always seemed to be glaring, partly from the eyeliner she used and partly from the demeanor she'd adopted. One of Laura's recurring complaints was her monochromatic color scheme, always wearing black. With the darkness creeping into the living room, Angelica clicked on the lamp. They tried to keep the use of lights and electricity to a minimum. Car doors clapped shut outside in the street. Laura entered with Ramón, in his yellow Astros jersey and clutching a McDonald's bag. Laura held her phone to her ear with her shoulder, purse in one hand and keys unlocking the door in the other. Ramón ran in to give Angelica a hug. Laura shut the door with her foot, phone still pressed to her ear, and mouthed, "money?" Angelica pointed to the kitchen counter where forty dollars sat; her contribution to the power bill that month. Laura snatched the money off the counter, still speaking in rapid Spanish into the phone as she walked into her bedroom.

Angelica had night terrors before her brother was born. She lived with her Mami, Elaine, on Reddick Street in Melbourne. She went to sleep at night to the sound of her father yelling, Mami crying and the thumping bass from cars going by in the night. Sometimes the shouts were further away, outside the house. Sirens occasionally followed those shouts. A Formosa palm sat outside her window, with two fronds that reached out like arms. When the sun set, it would cast a crawling shadow across her bed, like a man reaching through the window toward her. A streetlight held it in place throughout the night and she'd hide beneath her covers, afraid to leave until morning. She liked it when the train came with its constant, lulling rumble, masking the other noises like distant thunder. She'd forget the frightening sounds outside long enough to drift into sleep. Yet some nights, her nightmares waited for her, and she'd jolt awake trembling and sweating, just to be met by the hulking black shape of the palm outside her curtains.

When she was eight, during her parents' divorce, Angelica walked outside and ripped the fronds off the palm. She came back inside with cuts on her hands from the sharp edges. Seeing her hands, her mom swatted her a few times after washing them and applying Neosporin. That night Angelica slept soundly, with no scary shadows creeping across her bed.

On Tuesday Carla, Angelica's shift manager, called her into the head housekeeper's office when she arrived Friday night at Brevard Community College. The gray light from the overcast afternoon sky streamed in through the half opened blinds behind the desk where Bill, the head housekeeper sat. His forehead was ribbed like a washboard, silver hair swept across his scalp like cirrus clouds. Carla stood to the left of the desk. Angelica wondered if she'd been seen selling weed on the premises.

“Angelica, you’ve done great work here,” said Bill, “but the college has cut the housekeeping budget and to make ends meet, we’re afraid we have to let you go for now.”

Angelica looked at Carla, who averted her eyes.

“I don’t understand,” Angelica said, “did I do something wrong?”

“Absolutely not,” he said, “you’ve done great here and I will provide you the best of references at your next job. It’s just that given the budget cuts this fiscal year, we had a decision to make. We could end our hiring program with the Children’s Home Society – the same program I’m sure you recall is what placed you with us, or we could let some of our current employees go.”

“But I need this,” Angelica said, “I have bills to pay, I’m not just doing this for beer money.” The manager closed his eyes and nodded his head,

“I understand that, Angie, but these were the options and the college has decided to give other girls the same opportunity we gave you. You will do just fine wherever you end up.”

Angelica shook her head, her skull and crossbones earrings dangling against her cheek.

“I’m sorry, Angie,” Carla said. Drops of rain tapped against the window and palm fronds flitted in the top right corner like slender green fingers. Angelica was given the option to finish out the week, which she took. As she exited the manager’s office, Carla followed and pulled her to the side.

“This had nothing to do with you. You’ve come a long way since the group home. You and I both know you’ll be fine.” Carla met her eyes, outlined in mascara and blue eye shadow.

Angelica sighed and said, “Mad respect to you Carla, but your confidence ain’t gonna get my bills paid.”

“Your tía will understand. Times are tough,” said Carla.

Angelica rolled her eyes and crossed her arms.

Carla touched her shoulder, “She’ll have to understand, Angie. She’s gotta know how bad the economy is.”

“The economy? I’m getting laid off so someone else can come take my job. That ain’t saving anyone money.” Angelica said.

“Actually,” Carla ran glanced downward, “no one is filling your position.”

“So all that stuff about ‘giving other girls an opportunity’...?” Carla looked to Angelica’s eyes and shook her head.

Angelica finished her shift. The mundane periods wiping down desks and vacuuming offices made her mind wander, how and if she would explain this to Tía Laura. When she’d agreed to allow her and Ramón to live with her, it’d been on the conditions that she help pay the utilities and groceries, and that Angelica would one day talk to her mother again. She clocked out from the college where she’d spent the past eight months working nights, then walked out into the muggy night.

Angelica and Ramón sat on the overstuffed blue couch after school the next day. Ramón ate a peanut butter sandwich that Angelica made for him and *SpongeBob* flickered from the TV. A wooden coffee table sat before them with a half full ashtray and a few tabloids and magazines. Angelica threaded the chain of her stainless steel heartagram necklace around her forefinger. She hadn’t told Laura she’d lost her job yet. Maybe she could hold off – she could talk to Tucker, her ex with whom she’d remained friends, and get more weed to distribute until she found another

part-time job. That meant being out more, so she'd lose sleep and probably wouldn't keep up with her homework. If she couldn't make up the lost income in time, the insurance on her Intrepid would be the first to go. Or she could tell Laura, who'd yell at her for about ten minutes then afterward they could work on a solution. She hoped that solution wouldn't involve her moving back into Hacienda Girls Home. During her stepdad's molestation trial when she was fifteen, she moved in at the Girls Home to escape Mami's accusations against her, claiming Angelica made up the story of her stepfather raping her to get him out of the house. Angelica shuddered at the memory of that confrontation – she denounced any affection she ever had for her mother, standing at the front door holding Ramón's hand, the phone in the other. She called Laura and told her they were moving in. Laura told her,

“You can stay for a week or two until things smooth over, but I can't have you two living here. I can't afford two more mouths to feed.” Angelica threw the phone at her mother, and walked out of the house. She walked to the end of Reddick Street, then lit a cigarette and sat on the curb. She was dating Tucker at the time and his neighborhood bordered Hacienda Girls Home – she knew a few of her friends that went there because they wanted out of their parents' house. It beat sleeping under an overpass. That week, she and Mami walked into Hacienda Girls Home to begin the residency paperwork. She stayed up all night thinking about Ramón, hoping he would be safe until she could figure out how to get him away.

Angelica wanted to light up a cigarette, but she wouldn't smoke around her brother. Not that it mattered – Mami used to all the time. Ramón sat a few inches from her and stared at the TV.

“Are you ready for the game Saturday?” she asked. He nodded his head, eyes remained fixed on the TV screen. A car rushed by outside on Montgomery Avenue and Angelica shifted a little closer.

“Are you excited?” she asked. Ramón nodded again, taking a bite of his sandwich and maintaining his gaze on the TV.

“I might be able to come to this one,” she said. Ramón gave Angelica a brief smile, then looked away.

“What’s going on, Ramón?” she asked. Angelica moved even closer. She placed a hand on his shoulder and stared, her eyebrows furrowed.

“I wanna see Mami again.”

Angelica sighed and looked away. She bit her lip, which was veiled in purple lip gloss. A nauseous sensation coiled below her sternum.

“Why can’t she be around us anymore?”

She closed her eyes and looked back at Ramón, “I wish I knew,” she said. She wished she could just tell the seven-year-old that their mother valued a man in her life more than her own children. How she kept jumping from boyfriend to boyfriend, almost all of them abusive. She wished she could explain what their stepfather did to her when she was fifteen. She put her arm around Ramón and pulled him in. He rested his head on her shoulder. They watched TV in the amber light of the living room until Tía Laura came out to tell them it was bedtime.

“I wanna stay up with Angie,” Ramón said.

“You have school in the morning, so does Angie,” said Laura. “Come on now.” Hanging his head, he slid off the couch and wandered to the bathroom to take a bath and brush his teeth. Angelica crossed her arms and looked back at the TV.

“Did you go to school today?” Laura asked. She stood with one hand on her hip.

“Yes, Tía,” Angelica fixed her gaze on the TV.

“You better have, you know how close you are to getting kicked out.”

“They would’ve called you if I didn’t, wouldn’t they?” Angelica narrowed her eyes, thick with mascara. Laura shifted on her feet. She walked closer to the couch and touched the armrest lightly.

“I need to tell you something, Angie,” said Laura, “Easter is the Sunday after this one,”

“Yeah?” Angelica turned her head toward her tía, “and?”

“I want to have dinner here, like we used to. I’m going to invite the whole family. The *whole* family,” Laura walked around the arm of the couch, standing between the coffee table and the sofa.

Angelica raised her eyebrows, “You don’t mean –”

“Ramón wants to see his mother. It’s been six months, Angie. You remember what our agreement was,”

“Yeah, you said when I was ready.” Angelica stood up, bumping the coffee table.

“My exact words were ‘when some time has passed.’ Time has passed. She’s still your mother and you can’t spend your life hating her. It’s not fair to Ramón to keep him away either.”

“Is this why Ramón was asking about Mom? You tell him this first?”

“He asks about her a lot. I’m tired of dancing around explanations.” Laura picked up a lighter from the coffee table and lit a cigarette. Angelica glared and pursed her lips.

“You have a choice, mi vida,” said Laura, “You can come to dinner or you can not come. One way or another, she will be there,” Laura exhaled smoke and turned to leave the living room. Angelica scowled at her aunt, then exhaled and fell into the couch. She glowered into the TV, the noise like static against her whirlpool of thoughts.

“Tía?” Angelica said. Laura stopped and looked back at her,

“Nevermind, forget it. It’s nothing,” Angelica shook her head.

“Buenas noches, Angie, don’t stay up too late,” Laura said, turning again to leave.

“Goodnight.” Angelica clicked off the lamp beside the couch. The flickering blue light from the TV danced across her face. When it seemed Laura and Ramón were asleep, she slipped out the front door and into the night.

When Angelica was nine, a stratum of gray clouds marauded the skies from the approach of Hurricane Erin. The streets were still; no cars rushing by, no one hollering into a neighbor’s window. A crumpled Doritos bag sat near the sidewalk, undisturbed by the still air, the dirt on either side covered in small patches of grass like the back of a mangy dog. A solitary police car rolled down the street from US 1, its lights on, but no siren. She stepped back from the window as it coasted by the house.

The storm came in the night. The entire house shook from winds that wailed like her Mami crying. Water crawled down the off-white walls from cracks in the ceiling. Thunder immediately followed blasts of lightning, and baby Ramón cried from their bedroom. Angelica

knocked on her Mami's door, but she didn't answer. The man she was in the room with was not Ramón's father. He disappeared as soon as Mami told him she was pregnant. Mami had been with this new guy for a month. They would inhale smoke in the living room that looked like puffy clouds, then disappear into the bedroom. They had done this before the storm hit. Angelica knocked on the door again, but no reply. The infant's cries rose above the storm and she passed through the living room, around a coffee table covered in dirty dishes and charred aluminum squares, then into her room where her brother lay in his crib. She pulled him out of the crib, took him into the closet and held him while the house shook. The last thing she remembered was a film of water creeping in under the closet door.

Angelica stood in the shadows of two pepper tree bushes outside the weather station on Croton road. The Doppler radar at the station towered above the slash pines, encased in a massive white golf ball. Toward the south, a jet rose above the woods from the nearby Melbourne International Airport. She used to hide her cigarettes in a Ziploc bag here when she lived at the Hacienda Girls Home across the street past the Bridle Path neighborhood. She would sneak out in the night to smoke and talk to Tucker. The neighborhood was too quiet for her to sleep in those days. A car rolled up on Croton road, parked outside the gate and flickered its lights. She stubbed out her cigarette and climbed in the backseat with Tucker and his cousin Jamie.

“What happened, Angelica?” Jamie asked. Tucker drove with one hand on the gear shift.

“Where to fucking start?” She lit a cigarette and hung the cherry out the cracked window.

“Lost the job today, my aunt wants my fucking mom to come to some party we're having.”

“Shit, what are you going to do?”

“Jamie,” Tucker said, “feel the room, Cuz.”

“You mean, the car?”

“Yeah, in other words, feel the mood. She probably doesn’t want to get into it.”

“It’s cool, Tucker,” Angelica said, “I just needed to get outta my house.”

“So what are you gonna do? Isn’t she making you pay rent or something?” Jamie’s hair was pulled away from her face in a tight ponytail. She wore a black tank top and a ball chain necklace.

“Ain’t exactly had time to figure that out.” Streetlights from Sarno road strobed across Angelica’s face. Metalcore issued from the rear speakers, barely audible. A spiked wristband gripped Tucker’s wrist.

“You’ll figure something out. It isn’t the end of the world,” Tucker said. He turned onto US 1 from Sarno. A chain link gate enclosed a crumbling quadrangle of cement and a dilapidated building. A weathered yellow sign read *Ray’s Marina*, the paint peeling from five years of neglect. The three of them arrived at Tasty Freez where US 1 curved toward the Indian River. Tasty Freez had been in place since 1956. Teens and young adults still meandered in the fluorescent light from behind the counter, waiting to order soft serve, hot dogs, or chocolate coated ice cream cones. Tucker always said, “Melbourne isn’t dead as long as this place is in business.” Jamie’s rebuttal was always “when” this place went out of business, the town would be dead. They sat at one of the many red picnic tables beneath the tin roof adjacent to the building. Splotches of black dirt fused to the blue concrete floor by decades of rain water. Foam

insulation coated pipes in an open janitor closet like orange tumors. Tucker and Jamie stared at each other for about three seconds, as if talking but their lips didn't move.

Then Jamie got up, "I'm gonna smoke real quick."

"You can smoke here, ain't no one gonna say anything to you," Angelica said.

"Don't wanna be rude to anyone around us," she said and walked behind the building. A pickup truck peeled out in the parking lot, belching black dust against the streetlights.

"Tell you what, Angelica," said Tucker, "I'm cashing out of the weed selling game, so I'll give you my product. Give me back 50% of what I normally charge so I can pay Mark off. That should get you through till you find another gig."

"What the fuck, Tucker? That means after that money's spent I'm out of that job too!"

"I can put you in touch with Mark. He deals for West Side in our neighborhood and I can vouch for you, but honestly, there's more heat on now. And with us so far into high school, it's time for me to get out. I don't need the money that bad."

"I swear the universe picked this week to just shit on me," Angelica said.

"I'm sorry, Angelica. Mark and I got stopped by a cop last week at Andretti's, right after he and I'd made a transaction in the laser tag arena, asking us what we were doing, where we were going. Then he just sort of stared at us and drove on. That night, I saw a cop across Fatzler. Not on Mark's street, but I knew he was observing."

"That could be anything, there's cops all over this bitch, ain't no reason to cash out, just be more careful," Angelica said. Melting ice cream dribbled across her hand and wrist.

“The writing’s on the wall, girl. I’ll give you what I’ve got, but I say sell that shit fast. And watch your surroundings.” Angelica sighed and looked toward US 1 despondently. Lights glimmered from Indianland miles away across the river.

“It’s not the end of the world, Angelica,” Tucker said.

She met his ice blue eyes. “No disrespect, but how the fuck would you know? Last I checked, you’re living comfortable with your parents paying all the bills. You weren’t doing this cuz you needed to.” Tucker held the remnants of his cone away from him, letting the vanilla drip onto the concrete.

“I know because you’re you. You’ll do what it takes to survive and you’ll rise above. You got your brother out of that house, didn’t you?”

Angelica peeled at a strip of paint on the picnic table. Voices murmured from a group standing in the fluorescent light of the Tasty Freez sign.

“Your mind’s made up, huh?” she said, shaking her head, “I know what that means.” She watched the intermittent cars pass by on US 1. Tucker took a bite out of the candy shell on his cone. Jamie returned to the table and they changed the subject.

Tucker and Jamie laughed about stories from shows and parties. Tucker told the same story about a mysterious scar from a Warped Tour mosh pit Angelica had heard at least three times. She tried to participate but her mind kept wandering.

They piled back into Tucker’s Camaro and drove out to Ballard Park where they smoked a bowl beneath a darkened pavilion. Boats rocked gently in the black waters of the Indian River lagoon. Angelica recalled her and Ramón’s birthday parties here when they lived with Mami. Every party had no less than fifty cousins, tíos, y tías and it seemed Mami had a new boyfriend at

each one. The last time she had a birthday here, Tucker had come with her. They watched her older cousins play basketball and walked along the lagoon's rocky banks.

Tucker pulled a basketball out of his trunk and tossed it to Jamie. She and Angelica engaged in a heated one on one. They played full court and Tucker kept up with the two girls for a little while, then faded to the sidelines as Jamie blocked, Angelica swiveled around her, and they wrestled for layups and fades. Angelica elbow checked Jamie hard in the ribs. The girls locked eyes and Jamie smiled at her. She knew she needed this.

After skipping the last half of school to apply for jobs at the mall, Angelica drove aimlessly through Melbourne. Laura was with Ramón at tee ball practice and she didn't want to go back to the empty house. She turned onto Babcock from Apollo and drove by Melbourne High, a sea of glistening cars in its parking lot. She thought about going in and seeing if Amanda Shilling, her old guidance counselor was in. She'd probably like to hear that Angelica was doing okay and that she and Ramón had gotten out of the house on Reddick Street. She drove past instead and turned up her music.

She kept her phone pressed between her thighs in case it vibrated with the call from a prospective employer. She couldn't go into that school because she was not okay. She still hadn't told Laura she'd lost her job. She definitely wasn't going to tell her that the income from weed sales would be gone soon. If Laura caught her selling weed, she'd surely be back at Hacienda. Maybe she'd keep Ramón, though. Laura had grown more attached to him since they began living there. She didn't want to think of Ramón having any more turmoil in his life. He still didn't understand why it was dangerous for him and her to live with Mami. Angelica kept

driving straight down Babcock, following a route embedded in her muscle memory. She turned down University Blvd, past nondescript gray projects, windows shielded by iron bars, an Indian cuisine restaurant, and a Dollar General. She idled outside the disheveled pink house where her mom still lived. The vacant lot next door, which the nearby church used for overflow parking on Sunday mornings was still there. A Sunfire with a faded black paint job sat in the driveway. Angelica gripped the steering wheel. She didn't know what would happen if her mom walked outside.

Angelica was fifteen when the night tremors returned. A shadow crept across her bed, but the Formosa palm had long since died. This one came from her door, not her window. She pretended to be asleep, and the weight of another body pushed her bed down. The springs creaked, his hand slid over her mouth and he whispered in her ear, "This is just a dream, Angie, your favorite dream." His other hand pressed her wrists into the bed. A police car rushed by outside, red and blue shadows whirling through the room. It kept going, past her window and disappearing into the dark. Angelica clenched her eyes against the sweaty heat of his body, the creaking of bedsprings, the heavy breathing drowning out the sounds of the night. She was too scared to make a sound, no matter how much what he did hurt.

She drove away from her old house without getting out of the car. Even being near the potential presence of her mother ignited rage in her chest. Memories from the days of her stepdad's trial tore at her brain.

Hurtful things her mother said:

“You made this up to drive us apart,” when the police first arrived.

“He swore he wouldn’t do it again. He loves me,” when his bond was set for \$15,000.

“Why don’t you want me to be happy? What kind of daughter hates her own mother?”

Tía wasn’t there for that – she wasn’t there every night that Angelica had put her headphones on Ramón so he didn’t have to hear men in the other room screaming at their mother. She wasn’t there when Angelica prayed that it didn’t escalate into a sharp smack again. Tía wasn’t too scared to leave the house because of strange men and gunshots outside, or the guys who’d cat-call her as she walked from the bus stop. Tía didn’t have to sit at breakfast with the man who pressed her down into her own bed and violated her in the night. Yet she wanted to just invite her mother to dinner on Easter, the woman who had put her and Ramón under the same roof as these cabrónes, as if she and her mother had only had an argument over her curfew or something. Tía couldn’t possibly imagine what a betrayal that was. Angelica pressed her foot into the gas pedal. She couldn’t stay in this neighborhood a second longer. She rolled up her window before two guys strutting down the street could holler at her. One might have been her old friend Zack, but she didn’t slow down to make sure. The afternoon sky was the color of sand. Her car rumbled across the railroad tracks and she drove north on US 1 until the broken buildings, dingy auto body shops, and liquor stores became Melbourne Yacht Club and Strawberry Mansion.

Angelica sat in her car two houses down from Laura’s house on Westminster. Tía Laura’s car was already in the driveway. If Angelica walked in now, Laura would ask her why she wasn’t at work. She probably already knew she skipped the last half of school today. Angelica

wanted to walk inside only a little more than she wanted to walk into her mami's house on Reddick street that afternoon. She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel and compulsively checked her phone for texts. Some old Social Distortion played from the speakers. She thought about texting Tucker or Jamie, going skating with them or something until her shift would normally have ended. She was going to have to see him later to get his weed, though, and the idea of human contact made her nauseous. She could drive somewhere and smoke a bowl by herself, but she lacked the energy to drive her car much further. All she wanted to do was go inside and lay down. She coasted up closer to her house and walked up the front steps, bracing herself for Laura's sermon.

One Easter, when Angelica was thirteen, she wore a violet dress with flower imprints to Tía Laura's house. She was in the backyard, back when her Uncle Jimmy was still alive. He laughed and played dominoes at a table with some other relatives she didn't recognize while the little kids looked for Easter eggs. Angelica walked with Ramón through the yard, pointing to the eggs as she spotted them. Ramón was at least three eggs ahead of the other kids before some older cousin scolded her for helping. He took six eggs out of Ramón's basket and handed two apiece to his three kids, then told Angelica that her brother needed to learn to be fair. Ramón looked up at Angelica as if he'd done something wrong.

Mami was dating a white guy at the time. She didn't know his name, he was some military guy, but he seemed nice. He hung quietly behind Mami, holding a beer and nodding his head a lot. Angelica approached both of them and pointed to the cousin that took the eggs out of Ramón's basket to give to his kids.

“That’s kinda fucked up,” her boyfriend said.

Mami looked at the man, wearing a white shirt with a criss-cross pattern, then back to Angelica, “Tell Ramón I’ll give him ten when we get home.” Angelica walked inside, past relatives who stopped to kiss her cheeks and tell her how beautiful she was, past Tía Laura talking to another arcane relative, and approached the candy dish on Tía’s coffee table. She extracted a handful of bite-sized Three Musketeers. Laura stopped her as she passed through the kitchen,

“Where are you going with those?”

“That guy outside just took eggs out of my little brother’s basket because I was helping him find them, then gave them to his kids. I was gonna give these to Ramón instead.” Laura looked out the window and asked who. Angelica pointed at the man, sitting at the dominoes table with a beer.

“You put those back, I’ll go talk to him.” Tía Laura breezed right through the kitchen and outside. The cousin she was talking to smiled down at Angelica and topped off her glass of wine. Tía approached the man at the table and placed both hands on her hips. After the party, when Mami’s boyfriend drove them all home, Ramón had six more Easter eggs than he would have had before. Mami kicked her sandals off when they arrived in the house, turned on the TV, and never mentioned the ten eggs she promised Ramón. No matter, Angelica thought.

Angelica had been at the group home for four months. One afternoon as she was leaving her quarters for her shift at BCC, Amanda Shilling from Mel High stopped her in the parking lot and handed her a cell phone. Laura was on the other line.

“I’ve spoken with your mami already. You and Ramón can come live with me for some time. She will have to come check you out, then you can come here. There will be conditions though. I’ll talk to you about it when you get here.” Shocked, Angelica thanked her and handed the phone back to Amanda.

“I went out on a limb here, Angelica.”

“What did you tell her?” she asked. Amanda looked over her shoulders.

“You’d listed her as an emergency contact, so I used that to call and tell her in more words or less that if she didn’t take you and your brother, given what your stepdad did, DCF would.”

“I don’t know what to say, Ms. Shilling. Thank you, thank you so much.”

“Try not to talk about it with anyone too much – what I said technically isn’t true. I could lose my job for this.”

“Yes. I won’t say anything.” Angelica stepped forward and hugged Amanda.

“Make it count, Angelica. Woman to woman.” Amanda walked away. That night, Angelica met up with Tucker at the weather station to tell him.

Angelica made it to Ramón’s game Saturday morning. His team, the Astros, played against the Tigers. Ramón had a powerful swing for a seven year old, sending more than one ball into outfield. The second string kids on his team didn’t keep up, though and the Tigers beat them twelve to eight. Ramón emerged from the dugout hanging his head, smears of red dirt across his black shorts. Angelica and Laura descended the bleachers and told him he did a great job. They took him to the nearby McDonald’s Playplace on Hibiscus to cheer him up. Laura and Angelica

sat at a high round table while Ramón disappeared into the two story knot of multicolored tunnels.

“Glad you could make it,” Laura said. The cacophony of children’s voices echoed off the high walls.

“For real?” Angelica said. Her head still felt groggy from the party last night. The afternoon sun streaming through the wall of windows didn’t help.

“Yes Angie. It means a lot to Ramón to see his sister in the bleachers cheering him on. You know he thinks the world of you.” Laura took a sip of her sweet tea.

“Glad somebody does,” said Angelica.

“What’s that mean?” Laura asked. Ramón tumbled out of a tube slide and waved at them before running back to the playground.

“If I tell you, you gonna flip out on me again?”

“Cuéntame, Angelica. What’s going on?” Angelica sighed and looked at her aunt.

“You ride my ass every day about school and the bills. I know I have to help you with them and I’m trying, but you act like I’m just slacking all the time. Then on top of that, you’re inviting my mom to dinner, forcing me to see her again. You don’t know what it was like having to grow up always scared because she couldn’t find a man that wasn’t a psycho. You don’t know what it was like to, you know...” Angelica rubbed her forehead.

Laura rested her right arm on the table and leaned forward.

Angelica continued, “I know it’s been a minute, but it ain’t like you just get over something like that.” Laura glanced down at the table. Her fingernails were painted bright pink, but chipped in places.

“You have to face her one day. Family is all you have in the end. Elaine didn’t mean to put you in danger, and that man is in prison for what he did to you. There’s not much more she can do.”

“She blames me for him being in prison. Why you think I wanted out of there so bad?”

“I know you’re angry, Angie, but you two staying away from her has affected the whole family. I want to see us all back together.”

“Tía, if family is so important to you, why didn’t you take us in at first? Why did I have to go to the Girls Home just to get out of the house with a fucking rapist?” Laura jolted as if bitten by an insect. Angelica stared at her, waiting for a response.

She shook her head, “You two are my sister’s children. What was I supposed to do? Tell my sister that I was taking her kids and she couldn’t see them? I had enough trouble making ends meet on my own too.”

“The man molested me. And who knows what could’ve happened to Ramón.”

“I’m sorry. She just kept finding these guys, and everyone could see how bad they were except her. I just got so sick of telling her what to do and her not listening.”

“Why don’t you just say it, Tía? You didn’t believe me.” Angelica’s eyeliner intensified her stare, and Laura broke eye contact with her. She stifled a tear threatening to freefall.

“I was wrong. We all were.” Angelica nodded her head and pursed her lips. Tía Laura glanced down at her feet. Kids milled around the playground like ants. Angelica started to thumb through her flip phone, but closed it and set it on the table.

“I’m sorry, Angie.” Laura glanced down at her heels, her legs crossed. Angelica watched the playground. She tried to imagine what reconciling with her mother would look like, tried to

imagine a conversation that wouldn't explode into violent accusations. But it had been six months. Angelica knew she couldn't keep Ramón away from her forever. If Tía Laura could admit she was wrong after all this time, maybe Mami could too.

"I'll come to the party, Tía," Angelica said, "if you think it'll do any good. I'll come and I'll try to talk to her. But I don't think I can do it unless you're sitting there with us." Tía smiled and touched Angelica's hand.

"I can do that," said Laura.

The Cinema World parking lot was a black sea of asphalt illuminated by intense white area lights. A coolness resided in the 3 a.m. air, a half degree below the sweat inducing humidity of a Florida October. Angelica waited in her car listening to the Used and staring at the emptiness of the lot. It seemed infinite, disappearing into a wooded lot in either direction except New Haven Avenue and the monolith of the theater. Headlights slowed and turned off the deserted street and coasted into the parking lot. Tucker's Camaro pulled into the spot next to Angelica's Intrepid. He exited the vehicle with a briefcase. She stepped out of her car.

"A fucking briefcase? You look like a lawyer or something," she said.

"Twenty bucks from Wal-Mart and no one questions it. Wanna pop the trunk?" Tucker handed her the briefcase.

"I ain't carrying this around, everyone who knows me knows I don't roll with a fucking briefcase." She placed it in her trunk. The clap of the lid reverberated throughout the lot and she turned to face Tucker. He looked like he wanted to reach for her hand, but he always looked that way.

“Just give me 15% of whatever you make this time so I can cash Mark out. The rest is yours. Just do it quick, girl.”

“Thanks Tucker, this will get me through at least next month.” She felt a swelling in her chest, an archaic remnant of the affection she once had for him. Still had for him.

“Do you want to hang out? Just for a little while?” she asked him.

“Sure.” They hopped onto the back of her intrepid and laid against the rear window, staring into the perfect black blanket of night. Tucker lit two cigarettes and handed her one.

“Have you told your aunt yet?” A cloud of smoke faded into the darkness.

“No,” Angelica exhaled, “the job thing’s for me to worry about. Her and I talked today and I’m going to face my mom next Sunday. The three of us are gonna talk.” She looked at Tucker.

“That’s good. What are you gonna talk about?”

“Honestly, I don’t know.” A motorcycle rumbled by on New Haven. “All I know is that for me to do this, they have to think I’m whole. That I’m handling my business.” They stared into the darkness, watching the smoke trail away. A cool wind touched their faces.

“What happens after this for you, Angelica?” Tucker never abbreviated her name.

“What do you mean?”

“So you come to some kind of solace with your mom, find a job, and life goes back to normal. Then what?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “I guess I’m just so close to my past, I haven’t thought about the future. Why?”

“I’ve been thinking about what comes next for me. If I’m honest, that’s really why I quit selling. The future’s gonna come hard and fast.”

“I got laid off from the college cuz of budget cuts. I’m definitely not going to college myself, my grades ain’t good enough. It’s kinda hard for me to even look at the future cuz there ain’t much hope in it.” Angelica leaned over and squeezed the embers out of her cigarette.

“There’s always hope, Angelica,” Tucker said.

“That’s easy for you to say,” she said, “society’s built to help people like you.” Tucker exhaled. They laid in silence for a few minutes. A helicopter crawled across the sky. Cars rushed by on New Haven every few minutes between the ornamental palms and oak trees.

“I miss this,” Tucker said. His hand inched toward hers. They faced each other and smiled.

The Friday night of Easter weekend, Angelica was parked outside a vacant section of a Palm Bay strip mall. One of her customers tonight worked at the McDonald’s there and asked her to meet at the opposite end of the parking lot. She had gone to the Good Friday service with Laura and Ramón earlier. The entire service that night, scenarios and potential conversations with her mother intruded into her imagination. After she returned from church, she changed back into her denim shorts and a black muscle shirt, grabbed a few seven gram baggies, then drove out to Palm Bay. She cranked her music and lit a cigarette, the coming encounter with her mother on Sunday looming in her mind like an approaching hurricane. She would certainly bring another guy to the party, and she wondered if she’d see makeup covering bruises and cuts. Anxiety rolled in her gut like a trapped python.

Headlights at the McDonald's occasionally crawled through her rearview mirror. She checked her phone for messages, the guy should have been here by now. She tried to think of some positive memory of her mother that could be the key to forgiving her. Maybe the times she took her and Ramón to the skating rink or the pool in summer time. Maybe the parties at Tía Laura's or going shopping with their abuela when she was alive. It couldn't have been all bad. After Ramón was born, Mami was single for almost a year and Angelica remembered being happy. She remembered being able to sleep at night. She and Mami cared for the new baby together, and Mami didn't have time to parade abusive men through the house on Reddick Street.

A blue Nissan Sentra parked next to her and a gangly kid with messy hair got out of the vehicle. Angelica rolled her window down and withdrew two baggies from her center console. The kid greeted her with a nervous smile. Not one second after the exchange, a searchlight lit them up. Angelica had been so caught up in her thoughts she hadn't noticed the police cruiser in the parking lot, watching her car and the entire transaction. Red and blue lights strobed across the darkened building. The kid took off running. One of the two hulking silhouettes pursued. Angelica trembled in her car. The approaching figure's shadow crawled up her body and face as it got closer.

"Step out of the vehicle, please," the officer said. Angelica contemplated starting the car and heaving it into reverse.

"Ma'am, please step out of the vehicle." The officer's hands fell to his sides, near his taser. She stepped out of the car, shaking, tears welling up in her eyes. How could she have been so stupid? She'd never made this mistake. The officer took her license and looked down toward her. He was an older white man with dark hair. His badge said, "Mindler."

“Miss Robles, my partner and I were watching you for some time. There was not much ambiguity in what we just saw. I have probable cause to search your vehicle, or you can save both of us a little time –”

“Please,” she said, “it wasn’t what it looked like, he owed me some money, that’s all.”

“Lying isn’t going to help your case, Miss Robles.”

“Officer, please, just let me go. Please.” Angelica’s knees throbbed and she felt nauseous.

“Place both hands on the hood of your vehicle please,” said Mindler. He patted down her pockets, then moved to her vehicle where he found six more baggies of marijuana. Tears streaked mascara down her cheeks.

“You know what this is, Miss Robles,” said Mindler. The radio buzzed from his car, “This is intent to distribute.”

“Officer please, I just lost my job, and I have to help my family pay bills. I swear this is a one-time thing. I promise,” she pleaded with Mindler as he slid the handcuffs on.

“I’m sorry, Miss Robles, but you are under arrest.” Her body shook with sobbing. The spinning red and blue lights cut across her face. The backseat of the police car loomed before her and she started dry heaving.

“Please, I have to see my mom tomorrow. It’s Easter for God’s sake. I haven’t seen her in a year,” she clenched her fists in the handcuffs. The officer opened the door and guided her head in. The door slammed shut. Laura would get the call in the middle of the night and she would have to tell Ramón why she wasn’t there in the morning. Mami would learn her daughter was in custody. The reunion, the moment she might have made peace with everything, the fleeting sanctuary she’d created for herself and Ramón was snatched away before her eyes. The police

car lights strobed across the asphalt outside, illuminating her car which would be impounded.

She pressed her head against the window and wept.

Angelica spent the weekend in jail pacing and doing sit ups. Every night there were fights and she was stuck in a cell with a woman covered in sores who spent most of the time mumbling to herself in a corner. When Angelica was booked at 2 a.m. Saturday morning, Tía Laura had exploded upon her through the phone. Angelica bit her lip to keep from crying. When Laura calmed down, she told Angelica she could try to post bond for her on Monday. Maybe. Angelica hung up the phone and was escorted to her holding cell. Clanging bars and shouting pervaded through the nights, and she didn't sleep for three days.

When Angelica entered the courtroom for her hearing Monday afternoon, she saw Tía Laura and her mami sitting in the second to front row of chairs. Dark circles under her eyes replaced her makeup. She was surprised at how she expected to see mami there, just like she expected Tía to be there sitting as she was, with her hair tied back and scowling through blue eyeshadow, reeking of disappointment. Yet Mami looked upon her with something else. Some sad sense of kindness. Her skin looked healthy, her makeup light and demure – not heavily caked over bruises. The two women shared a look from across the courtroom that lingered for several seconds. Angelica offered a small smile. She didn't picture reuniting with her mother here, but it made some strange kind of sense. It became easier for her to imagine a conversation involving the possibility of forgiveness. Angelica turned to approach the judge.

FIREFLIES

When I was a kid, my mom and dad would take me out to the park to catch fireflies. I'd run out into this huge field of green grass at Ballard Park in Melbourne, pink sky overhead. I stood in the middle of the field with a mason jar, waiting for the sky to grow darker. As night came down, little lights came rising out of the damp grasses, hovering around me. I'd run back and forth scooping them into my mason jar until my parents called for me. When I got back to them, I'd tell them I was holding a jar full of starlight. The greenish glow of the floating bugs mesmerized me on the ride home. It seemed to light up the whole backseat.

One night, sometime in the late '90s, I was in the grip of an intense nightmare where two hairy, humanoid monsters came busting into my room and drug me out of my bed. The shrill buzzing of a mosquito truck pulled me out of the dream as it cruised down my street. I thought it was one of the monsters from my dream. The truck roared past the house, amber light blinking bright enough to fill my window and reflect off the other houses in our neighborhood off San Filippo. I breathed out a labored, shuddering breath as the noise and light faded away. The mosquito trucks started coming twice a week at night, belching gas out into the air. The poison they pumped through the neighborhood killed the mosquitos off, alright. But it killed the fireflies too. I must've been in third or fourth grade when I realized this. I ran out into the field at Ballard Park with my mason jar while the sky turned pink. I waited to start seeing the sparkling, blinking lights rise out of the grass, but nothing came. I sat in the grass and hung my head, mason jar laying at my feet. The ride home was dark and sad, the empty jar rolling around in the seat next to me. Not long after that, my parents got divorced and I grew too old to chase fireflies anyway. I stayed with my mom and little brother in a modular home on Jupiter.

I spent a lot of time with my cousins Tucker and Jamie, hiking in the woods around Palm Bay or racing ATVs out at my uncle's hunting camp near Kissimmee. One weekend when Tucker and I were sophomores and Jamie had just got her driver's license, we were racing four wheelers through the woods outside the hunting camp. Tucker and I were doubled up on one, and the weight must've made a difference because Jamie was well ahead of us, kicking up brown rooster tails of mud. We ended up reaching a meadow as green as I remembered the field at Ballard Park. We got off our ATVs and laid in the grass, staring up at the sky as it changed color with the setting sun. I started telling them about the skunk ape and how my Grandpa had seen it once on his back porch. Jamie laughed at me, saying shit like that didn't exist. Tucker said he didn't disbelieve in the creature, but he was skeptical of any stories he heard.

"Even from me?" I said.

"Especially from you, Clayton" Jamie answered for him, "any monster, or ghost, or alien out there, you'll either say you've seen it or know someone who's seen it."

"Tucker, didn't your dad see a UFO once?"

"Yeah, but he was doing plenty of drugs back then too. It was the '70s."

"My mom's seen them too, so have some of the other cops. You can't deny that, right?" I said.

"Aunt Susan also listens to a ton of Art Bell's Coast to Coast," said Tucker.

"I love you, Clait," said Jamie, "but I think you just want this shit to be real so bad that you'll latch onto anything that might somehow prove it, no matter how crazy."

"That's called 'confirmation bias,'" said Tucker.

“Whatever, guys.” They laughed and I rolled my eyes and changed the subject to cars and firearms. Stars materialized in the deep blue above us. Though it’d been almost six years since I’d seen the fireflies, part of me wondered if they might come rising out of the grass while we laid there.

In December of 2006 I found myself on the side of a crossroads at the Palm Bay Compound, an undeveloped labyrinth of paved and unpaved roads winding through twelve square miles of wilderness. Grassland and palmetto forests stretched out to the west, dead ending at the banks of the St. Johns. It was supposed to have been a whole suburb, but the developers walked away from the project in 1991. If you got deep enough in, where the cops wouldn’t go, it was a lawless, Mad Max-like wasteland. There were parties out here all through high school, but you had to be careful because there’d be drug deals and other dangerous shit happening in the big clusters of palmetto brush. Tucker, Jamie, and I used to race our ATVs and cars out on these endless roads. One night back in 2004 after downing a case of Yuengling between the three of us, we thought it’d be a great idea to stage a James Bond style car chase through the place, using automatic airsoft guns. We ripped through towering shrubbery, kicking up dust and flecks of gravel and burning smoldering black scars into the pavement. It was a hell of a time, but I’m surprised one of us didn’t roll their car. Especially Jamie – she was driving a top heavy Ford Bronco at the time. Standing there in the chilly silence of the wilderness, it was hard to believe any of those days actually happened. Like they were in another time, or were just ghosts re-enacting the past, like stories my Grandpa used to tell me about whole civil war battles materializing over the old battlefields on their anniversaries.

I was in Tucker's old '85 Camaro IROCZ. He and his dad spent three years restoring this car together. After Jamie left for the Marines last August, he ended up selling it to me so he could graduate early and move out to Arizona. He said this place was full of too many memories. I told him the rest of the family was still here for him, but he said he needed to leave Florida because it'd be the only way he'd find out if he ever wanted to. He talked like that a lot after Jamie left. They were like brother and sister from what I could see. He spent one last Thanksgiving with us, then we drove to Orlando International at four in the morning that Saturday. I drove the Camaro back by myself and it was on that lonely hour and a half ride that it hit me both Tucker and Jamie were really gone. I was glad to have a badass muscle car, but I missed having my cousins around. I didn't realize how much I'd gotten used to them being there. I felt like the whole world was moving on and I was just standing still here in Palm Bay. The sun hovered above the western horizon, and the sky blazed like a wildfire.

Knee high grass grew around the rusted remains of an old hot rod a few feet out from me. Overhead powerlines stood in sequence in the distance like monoliths. My mom said once when she'd been out on patrol, she'd seen a bolt of green light shooting into the sky from somewhere around here. She thought maybe there was some kind of portal to another dimension. I wondered if it had anything to do with this place called the Citadel that people talked about. Word was if you climbed to the top, you'd see your future. Jamie and Tucker said they found it once and saw some weird stuff inside, but nothing happened. A cold wind cut through my UF sweater and I shivered a little.

I was about to climb back into the Camaro when I heard the growl of a motor somewhere behind me. A bright orange Pontiac GTO came roaring up through the dystopia. It slowed down

the closer it got to me, stopping right in the middle of the crossroads. I stared, half in and half out of my driver's seat, and a guy got out. He was blond like me, but with longer hair and a leather jacket, an American flag sewn into the right arm. He wore dark, round sunglasses.

"Nice GTO, man," I wish I could've thought of something more to say about an obvious classic.

"Gnarly ride yourself. What's in that?"

"It's got a 5.0, so about 215 horsepower, I think. I just got it from my cousin a couple weeks ago, who knows what he did to it."

"I can dig it," the guy said, "wanna race?"

I chuckled a little, "that's an awesome car, dude, but that GTO looks like it came right out of the '70s. Unless you did some serious mods, it won't stand a chance to this one."

"I've got nothing to lose," the man said.

"Alright," I said, "where to?"

He pointed to a dense copse of palmetto and pepper bush, probably three miles out.

"Okay, man, but I warned you," I said. We both got into our cars and I let him roll up to me. He revved his motor, I revved mine. No formal start, no signal, I just gunned the motor and he quickly followed. His front end popped up a few inches and we were nose to nose, barreling down the worn out streets. The landscape shot by on both windows, hands gripping the gearshift and steering wheel, knuckles threatening to split through my skin. My heart thudded in my chest, the way it did when it was Tucker and Jamie out on the road and we were racing for the love of speed and adrenaline. I downshifted as a sharp turn rushed toward me, my opponent inches from my bumper. From what I knew, his GTO had about a thirty horsepower handicap against the

Camaro, but somehow he was keeping up. Pretty soon our front ends were aligned perfectly, palms and pepper tree bushes rushing past our windows in a blur. The guy looked at me, gave me a thumbs up, and then suddenly accelerated way ahead of me. I upshifted, but his front end stayed about a foot ahead of mine. Another curve came up, but we were too close. I hit the brakes and the back end fishtailed. I thought for sure I'd lose it and spin out, but somehow maintained control and gunned the motor forward. Spears of setting sun pierced through my windshield, blocking out the GTO, the barren grasslands, the cracked, uneven road. I squeezed the steering wheel and gearshift, grinding my teeth. I powered ahead of the orange GTO, the copse of bushes we'd determined was the finish line flew toward me. Suddenly the road switched from asphalt to gravel and I lost traction, spinning wildly three times thinking if I wasn't dead, the car definitely would be. The car came to a stop and I sucked in air, relieved to be breathing at all. I jumped out into the tornado of dust I'd kicked up, looking for this asshole, but neither him nor his car was anywhere to be found.

"What the hell?" I said. The dust gradually settled around me. I walked forward up the road, scanning both sides, but he was just gone, GTO and all. I jogged up to the paved portion of the road and looked for skid marks. Some appeared, but none of them led into the grass. A thicket of brush rose along the east side of the road, so I'd see if he'd gone into that, but it remained unbroken as I walked the road back to my car. I scanned the west side again, a few tire marks scarred the road, but nothing fresh. This guy had straight up disappeared.

"Holy shit," I said out loud and collapsed to the ground, sitting cross legged. I could write Tucker and Jamie about this, but they'd never believe me. Even though they'd both found the Citadel, they'd still doubt me. They always did. The sun sank below the rim of the horizon. The

clouds were the color of steel, their undersides a glowing pink. As I sat there trying to make sense of the vanishing car, little blinking lights began to rise out of the grasses, drifting and sparkling in the cool deep blue of the coming evening.

THE ART OF LETTING GO

I sat in my car watching people enter Path of Light Lutheran Church for Saturday night contemporary service. The idea of walking through those doors hadn't been this daunting since I came out as a lesbian when I was sixteen. I was never a loner, but tonight I didn't want to be around anyone. It took all my strength to even show up. I hadn't heard from Jessica in two months. Her blog entries on Myspace had become darker, more self-destructive. After one of her last posts, I messaged her, "*Jessica, I'm here, I've always been here. I've tried to call you but you changed your number. Anyways, I think about you every day and I care about you. Please just text me when you can and we can get coffee or something and talk about what's going on with you. Love always, Shayla.*" This week, Jessica deleted her profile. My hands began to withdraw my pack of cigarettes from my purse, but I stopped myself. I shut my car off and walked toward the face of the building. Amber floodlights dimly rendered the cross, the stained glass halo surrounding it, and a small statue of Christ with both hands raised.

When I met Jessica last October, Hurricane Wilma had swept its outer bands across Brevard County and left a cold front in its wake, the cooler temperatures lingering long after. For the first time since I could remember, it actually felt like fall. Jessica arrived at Spencer's Gifts where I worked a few days after the hurricane. She was a Puerto Rican girl with curly black hair that touched her shoulders and a kind, dimpled smile. She wore an Avenged Sevenfold sweater, a skull with bat wings divided by the zipper. I trained her on the cash register that night, showing her what buttons to press to bring up the day's total sales. I shifted my hip against her as I reached over her shoulder. A slight movement, I'm not sure I even intended it, but she didn't

move. Our manager Jake closed with us that night. He was about a year younger than me and would sometimes bring a 12 pack to drink in the back storage area after we closed. It was one of those nights. We sat against stacks of cardboard boxes, each of us holding a sweating can of Heineken. I looked to Jessica and said,

“How’s this for a first day?”

“I could get used to this,” she said and smiled. Her eyes were dark, but sparkled in the fluorescent light.

Later in the month we were in the back seat of Jake’s car driving down 520 from Orlando as dawn broke across us. We’d gone to see one of his and Jessica’s favorite bands, HIM, at the House of Blues in Lake Buena Vista. I held her hand throughout the show, especially when the throngs of people leaving between bands threatened to separate us. After the concert, we’d gone to a house party with some people and would’ve stayed, but we all had work the next afternoon. On the way back, Jake took an exit off 408 and didn’t realize we were lost until he’d been driving through the darkness of Alafaya Trail for half an hour. We stopped for directions at every gas station and CVS pharmacy still open before finally getting pointed east on State Road 50. Relief washed over us as the road split into 520 for Cocoa. Warm sunlight filled the car and the grasslands of the St. John’s River shimmered, stretching out from one horizon to the other. Jessica lay asleep, her head in my lap and I stroked her hair. I smiled while she sighed in her dreams, but wished she were awake to see the beauty in every direction.

LED searchlights accented the darkened sanctuary like a blue and violet aurora. Lyrics in cursive streamed across a projector screen behind the four piece band. My friend Bryan played

electric guitar while Justin, a music major, played drums. I had known both of them since youth group in high school. A man with a cast on his right arm sat at the far end of my row tonight. Normally, I liked to seek out people sitting by themselves because I knew how hard it was for some people to even walk through the doors. On a mission trip to Nicaragua a couple years ago, Bryan told me that if I hadn't sat with him at his first youth group meeting, he never would've come back. I kept my distance tonight. The man at the end of the row may have needed a friend, but I needed to be by myself.

Jessica and I were walking along a boardwalk through the live oak hammock of Erna Nixon Park. I'd put in my two weeks at Spencer's that afternoon, but made Jessica promise we wouldn't grow apart. The late afternoon air felt crisp, humidity residing in the coolness left by the hurricane. The last time I'd seen autumn had been when I was sixteen and visited my cousin Brady in Georgia. As waning sunlight glittered through the trees above us, Jessica told me a similar story, moving here from New Jersey after her parents divorced. Her mom had told her this was a land of sunshine and warmth, so she'd been surprised to see frost crystallized along the orange groves when they entered the state in December of 1995. I stopped to admire a verdant array of ferns disappearing into the hammock. Jessica kept walking, but stopped a few paces ahead and waited for me. I walked over and slipped my hand into hers.

"How about a game," she said, "two truths, one lie."

"Okay," I said, "sounds fun. You first."

She stared at the canopy pensively then said, "My favorite band is HIM, I've never been to another country, and I skate."

“You’ve been to a foreign country,” I said.

“How’d you know?”

“That one has a story in it, so you wouldn’t have mentioned it unless it was true.”

“Damn, alright,” she smiled at me, “I used to go to Puerto Rico with my dad in the summer. Before I moved here.”

“How long since you’ve been back?” I asked.

“Long time. I only saw my dad a couple times a year after the divorce, and we never really made it back down.” Her northeastern accent showed on the words “long” and “divorce”. She glanced downward at the boardwalk. Two squirrels chased each other along a moss covered branch reaching over us.

“I guess it’s my turn,” I said and gave her hand a slight squeeze, “I hate horror movies, I’m studying nursing at BCC, and I’m a terrible liar.”

“You like horror movies?”

“I can’t stand horror movies,” I said, “The characters are always really stupid, or the director is just going for the gross-out factor. I also don’t like seeing innocent people get killed.”

“Well if that’s true, you must be a good liar?”

“Nope, I’m working on my AA in Sociology, not nursing.”

“That’s awesome,” she said, “I wish I could go to college.”

“Why can’t you?” I asked.

“I’m working two jobs just to keep my place. I don’t think I can add college to the list. Shit’s expensive too.” I told her about night classes and scholarships.

“Maybe sometime. I wanna get my feet on the ground first, I guess.” We reached a pavilion on the boardwalk and sat in one of the benches,

“By the way, that was two lies,” she said.

“It was, wasn’t it?” My cheeks flushed, “I’m sorry.”

“It’s cool,” she laughed. The wind rustled the leaves overtop of us. A few brown ones fell around us like an actual autumn. I slid my arm around Jessica’s shoulders and we watched the amber light grow dim. We were deep enough into the hammock to only hear birds and the rustling leaves, and I imagined the forest stretched on for miles and it all belonged to her and me. I started to tell her this, but she was texting someone.

“Sorry.” She said and put her phone away, then rested her head on my shoulder. I kissed the side of her head.

I’d gone to Path of Light Lutheran Church with my parents since 3rd grade. The first time I went to youth group since I’d come out, I trembled as I walked in. I pictured terrifying situations; from micro-aggressions to outright shaming and expulsion from the group. I didn’t know what to expect. Yet nothing seemed to have changed. Justin even came up and gave me a hug, told me I was brave. Pastor Freeman worked with youth and young adults. I knew he knew, but he greeted me with the same smile and hug he always had. After a short devotional and some games, we were all sitting at round tables eating pizza and hanging out just as always. Relief broke across me like a strong wind.

Bryan was there that night for the first time, sitting by himself, back to the room and hunched over his plate. I walked over to him and introduced myself, Justin and others soon

joined us. Bryan gradually opened up to us and became our friend that night. He told us he played electric guitar, so Justin invited him to the band. All of us stayed up until eleven talking, laughing, and playing games. I knew I would love these people forever.

Jessica and I were at an abandoned marina in Melbourne late one afternoon when she showed me her scars. We came here because she'd seen dolphins swimming right next to the concrete embankment and knew they were my favorite animal. A speed boat cruised by in the choppy water. A family fished off the back of a truck parked at the edge of the embankment.

"Look," Jessica pulled her arm out of her jacket sleeve, "you're going to see this sooner or later." She extended her arm to show me diagonal lines of scar tissue on the undersides. "I take anti-depressants when I can, but I don't have insurance. I can't always afford them," she looked into my eyes, a searching look, like I would take off running and screaming. It took me a second to realize what I was looking at. I rubbed my thumb over one of the two inch long scars.

"How close have you come?" I asked.

"I never cut deep enough to hit the vein, except once. I was seventeen and my mom was at work. I panicked and called the ambulance and they came in time. Lotta blood though." She withdrew her arm and threaded it through her sweater sleeve. She looked out over the water. The sky turned pale, with a rosy diffusion along the horizon. A cool wind passed through my hair. I walked over and wrapped my arm around hers.

"It's best that you know about me," she said, "I come with some baggage."

"It's okay," I leaned against her, "I do too, we all do. I can help you."

We were quiet for some time. The sky grew darker. Down the embankment, the tailgate of the family's truck clapped shut, the dad called his two kids back to the vehicle. Jessica shifted closer to me, our bodies together.

“So this means we're a thing now,” I said. She chuckled and I pulled her in and kissed her. As we were driving back to her apartment, I suggested she come to church with me one night. She shook her head,

“You know I don't do church. I still find it weird you do.” She lit a cigarette at a stop light. I rolled down my window.

“They're very accepting where I go,” I said, “It wouldn't hurt you to come one time.”

“Maybe one day. We should see a movie or something after work tomorrow,” she turned the music up slightly. We turned onto Babcock from New Haven Ave. On the corner, surrounded by live oaks, the First Christian Church's roof sloped downward, its edges close to the ground like a bible that fell page side down.

Back when I was sixteen, I was sitting with my family at church one Sunday and we had a guest pastor. He was an older man, and for the most part friendly and his sermon was engaging, at least for a sixteen year old. I'd grown so used to Pastor Meyer's sermons I often just tuned them out. I didn't mean to, but ten a.m. was early on a weekend for me back then. This man spoke loud, paced back and forth across the stage, moving his arms with his words. He'd started talking about our part in the great commission – to go out and make disciples of all nations. Then he started fishing for not only examples of these lost souls we needed to witness to, but also how real God's wrath was. He proclaimed that Hurricane Katrina was the literal hand of God smiting

New Orleans because that week they were going to have a gay pride parade through Bourbon Street. His voice boomed from the pulpit how New Orleans' allowance and celebration of homosexuality and other debaucheries finally pushed God to His limits, just like Sodom when He rained fire from the sky down upon it. The words stabbed my heart. My mom's hand found mine and she gave me a gentle squeeze. I had come out to her, my dad, and my stepbrother Hunter two months prior. Mom asked me if I'd prayed about it, which I had. I spent a year begging God to change me if this was truly wrong. If it offended Him as bad as the church said it did, to please take it from me. But He didn't and that's what I told my family. They circled around me and hugged me at the dinner table that night as I cried. It had to be real then-- not only did my family shroud me in support that night, but that was the first time my stepbrother and my dad shared any intimate connection. My mom had divorced Hunter's dad before I was born, and Hunter had always harbored enmity toward my father. They'd fought my whole life, but in this moment, they came together to tell me I was loved, just as I am. Still, sitting in the pew that Sunday as the guest preacher inadvertently told me my existence offended God Almighty, a phantom of doubt whispered into my mind. Not about my favor in God's eyes so much as whether I was really welcome among other Christians. My parents didn't bring it up on the way home. I thought about it all week.

Jessica and I had been at a party for two hours in Melbourne and I wanted to leave. She and I had gone shopping and I'd left my car at her apartment. I had gone to parties before where I didn't know anyone, but usually I was outgoing enough to where it wasn't a problem. This one was different – located in a strange neighborhood near the Eau Gallie cemetery. The nearest

streetlight was over a block away and the house was only visible by its pale yellow windows glowing through a tangle of live oaks, Spanish moss, and palmettos. Jessica introduced me to a few people, then joined some others to do shots in the kitchen. A couple of the people here looked like they were in their late forties. A lot of them wore black clothes, chains, and hats cocked to the side. Everyone was smoking and drinking. I held a Bud Light and stood in a corner. The most normal person I met was a high school senior named Zack from West Melbourne. When I told him I was studying sociology at BCC, he told me about his aspirations to study electrical engineering at FIT when he graduated high school. He'd applied to both the Bill Gates and the Ron Brown scholarships and had his fingers crossed. It was a nice conversation, but when he left to get another beer, I didn't see him again until a chorus of laughter and shouting roared from the bathroom. I followed the crowd toward the noise to see Jessica in the bathroom puking her guts out into the toilet.

“Get the fuck outta here, people. Y'all's pathetic,” Zack said, lifting her to her feet and walking her into the hallway.

“Jessica!” I tried to look her in the eyes but her head rolled around.

“You know her?” Zack asked.

“Yeah, she's my girlfriend,” I said.

“Well, looks like someone spiked her shit, let's get her outside,” the two of us drug her through the throngs of people and out onto the sidewalk where she proceeded to empty the rest of her stomach contents into the street. Zach stood on the sidewalk, eyes scanning the road while I held Jessica's hair back.

“You guys got a way home? I ain't drank much tonight.” Zack offered.

“Thank you,” I said, “I can get her home.” I fished her keys out of her purse, then Zack walked us back to her car. I thanked him and sped out of the neighborhood. Jessica’s head rolled on her neck and she smiled while occasionally mumbling gibberish. I’d told my mom I was spending the night with her, so she wasn’t expecting me until morning. When I got Jessica up to her apartment, I undressed her, helped her shower, than laid her in her bed and placed a wastebasket on the floor. I climbed into bed and held her. Her skin was fever hot.

The next morning, I ran to the store to get her a PowerAde and some Advil. We sat in her kitchen and she told me she’d chased Xanax with three shots of Jack Daniels last night.

“Seriously, Jessica? You could’ve died,” I said. She glanced up at me with bloodshot eyes, supporting her forehead with her right hand. I called my mom and told her I was studying at the college and wouldn’t be home until late.

Jessica spent the day in her bed. I brought her water and whatever food she could stomach. She started feeling better by late afternoon, so I put a movie in and climbed into bed with her. We held each other, sitting propped up against pillows.

“I’m sorry about last night,” she said, “I get this way sometimes and just kinda lose control. It scares me, to be honest.”

“I’m scared too,” I said, “last night could’ve been bad.” I glanced at her right arm and saw two cuts scabbing over. Jessica looked up at me then pressed her head against my chest. I wanted to say something about the cuts, but I didn’t know what. Holding her against me, feeling her warmth, her breath in metronome with mine, I wanted to shield her from anything that could hurt her, but I couldn’t. I felt frightened and helpless.

“Come to church with me,” I said, “You can get away from this world, find people who can support you.”

“Shayla, I’m agnostic. That’s not going to change. Besides, you’re gay and I’m bi. That isn’t exactly a model Christian.”

“That doesn’t matter where I go,” I said, “the people there are family. They’ll accept you. We can help you with what you’re going through.”

Jessica sighed and pulled away from me, “Shayla, you may be safe there, but that’s still a religion that hates us for who we are. It’s not my scene and never will be.” She laid back against the pillows. The light streaming through her blinds dissipated and the blue of the TV flickered across the walls. Her hand slid out of mine.

“If it’s just the same to you, I’d rather we not go to parties like that anymore,” I said.

“Okay.” She laid her head across my stomach and I stroked her hair. My phone buzzed on the nightstand. My mom was calling. It was getting late and I hadn’t been home since yesterday afternoon. I told her I was studying in the library and lost track of time. It was ten p.m. when I kissed Jessica goodnight and left for Suntree. Something felt wrong as I drove the empty streets, like I had forgotten something behind at her house.

Pastor Freeman preached Saturday nights. He ran our young adult community group on Thursday night as well. Tonight, while these memories paraded through my mind, he spoke of what was happening in the world; the economy failing, the war in the Middle East that hadn’t let up since 9/11, victims of Katrina still homeless. All evidence of a broken world. I glanced to the man at the other end of the aisle. He wore a black shirt and dark blue jeans. The only part of him

not covered in shadow was the white cast on his right arm. I felt rude sitting so far away from him, like he smelled bad or something. A searchlight lit up Pastor Freeman on the pulpit. He told us how there were examples of this broken world in our own communities, people our age addicted to drugs, dealing with mental issues, with depression, with anger, people contemplating suicide. Hope rose in my chest that maybe this was the reason I was here. That after he got done listing all these examples of suffering respective to my generation, he'd drop that ultimate answer I was missing for how to help Jessica. Instead, he said,

“What they all don't know is what they need is JESUS.” I thought he would follow this up with something of more substance, but nothing came. He simply listed more examples of broken people, prescribing “Jesus” as the antidote for their brokenness. Words that mean nothing to anyone outside of the church. I shook my head. For the first time since I'd been coming here, I wondered if maybe the pastors who I loved, and maybe even these people I'd grown up around, were all just completely clueless. They believed in a God of easy answers.

I was leaving one of my night classes at BCC when I checked my phone and saw a text from Jessica, “*Shayla, Im at a party but dont wanna be here. Please come get me.*” It was forty five minutes ago and the address was somewhere off University Blvd at least fifteen minutes away. My heart started racing and I tried calling her. It went to voicemail. I texted her, “*So sorry, just getting out of class. OMW I promise,*” then jumped in my car and bolted down Post road toward US 1. I cursed at myself, I should've been checking my phone. She needed me and I wasn't there. I caught almost every red light, stopping at Lake Washington, at Eau Gallie Blvd, Sarno. Finally, I crossed the New Haven intersection and entered an array of buildings in varying

states of disrepair or neglect. I was rarely on this side of town, and this stretch of US 1 was completely foreign to me. I crossed the train tracks at the University intersection, trying to find the apartments she'd texted me but unable to make out building numbers on the poorly lit street. I passed a Quik Stop with at least fifty people hanging around outside cars in the parking lot. Clouds of cigarette smoke hovered over them like fog in the light of the sign. I was afraid to roll my window down. Finally, I found a set of single story apartments colored like a rotting tangerine peel in the single streetlight illuminating the entrance. I parked and tried to call Jessica again. Nothing but her voicemail. My heart thudded against my sternum, and I tentatively stepped out of my car. I walked toward an apartment with a porchlight on and voices emanating from behind the door. I knocked and a guy in a muscle shirt and tight cornrows opened the door, holding a bottle of beer.

“Wassup, girl?” He opened the door wider to let me in. Smoke trailed among jostling bodies inside.

“I'm looking for my girlfriend, Jessica. Is she here?”

“Tyrese – who's at the door?” A Hispanic girl appeared behind the man, pink streaks running through her black hair and a rhinestone skull grinning from the front of her shirt. She looked me up and down and said,

“You lost, homegirl?”

“She's cool, yo. We was just getting' to know each other,” said Tyrese. The girl glared at him.

“Beat it, Tyrese,” she said. He wandered back into the throng. She turned back to me.

“I’m just looking for my girlfriend, Jessica. She texted me and wanted me to come get her.”

“Jessica, who?”

“Lopez. Please, I just want to get her and I’ll be out of here,”

“I don’t know a Jessica Lopez, I’m sorry,” she said. Laughter resounded amid the discordance of voices and music inside. I glimpsed two people snorting lines on a coffee table.

“She has to be here, she texted me this address,”

“Well, if she did, she’s gone now. My best advice to you’s to get going. Not tryin’ to be a bitch, but I can tell you don’t belong here.”

“Trust me, I don’t want to be here either, but my friend needs help. She texted me this address and –”

“I ain’t gonna tell you again, girl. You need to get goin’ now. This ain’t your scene and your girl ain’t here.” She locked eyes with me and shut the door in my face. I slammed my fists against the door and shouted to let me in, but nothing happened. I walked back to my car just as someone from the Quik Stop parking lot yelled,

“Hey, baby! Where you goin’?” My hands shook as I pulled my door open. I was sure they were talking to me and I resisted the urge to look back and see if they were approaching. I sped out of the parking lot. As I drove down University, a police car appeared in my rearview mirror and followed me until I crossed the railroad tracks back to US 1. My hands didn’t stop shaking until I reached Wickham Road.

One Thursday night, I was at Cold Stone Creamery in the Avenue Viera with Pastor Freeman, Brian, Justin, and a girl named Sarah from the young adult community group. I'd finally heard from Jessica after that night. She had apologized and said she got home and fell asleep. When I suggested we hang out and talk, she didn't respond for six hours, then made another excuse. Sitting outside the white light of Cold Stone, I stared vacantly at the blue-green neon of Rave motion pictures across the brick road of the outdoor mall. Justin and Pastor Freeman debated the merits of denominational Christianity and I tuned them out. Brian touched my shoulder.

"You want to take a walk?" he said.

"Sure." We excused ourselves and wandered into the circular plaza. Bronze statues of children riding alligators and other animals sat on top of rounded patches of green AstroTurf.

"What's up?" he asked. He stopped and waited for me to make eye contact.

"Nothing, why?"

"You just seem distant tonight. I've kinda noticed you're acting different." We sat on the edge of a fountain in the middle of the plaza.

"Is everything cool with Jessica?" he asked.

I sighed. "I don't know, Brian. I'm sorry. She's going through some hard times right now, and I'm trying to help her."

"Anything I can do?" Brian asked. I shook my head. I started to reach into my purse for my cigarettes, but stopped. I smoked socially at parties, but I'd started smoking more once Jessica and I were dating.

"Well, I'm here if you ever need me, Shayla. You know that," said Brian.

“Thank you,” I touched his shoulder and smiled at him, “I really appreciate it. It’s something I’ve got to deal with though.” He hugged me around the shoulders. We sat on the fountain while the illuminated water splashed behind us. I wanted to tell Bryan everything, or even Pastor Freeman, but I still hoped Jessica would come to church with me and meet them. When she was ready, she could tell them herself what she was going through and I’d be holding her hand the entire time. We walked back to Justin and Pastor Freeman. They sat there, joking and laughing, as if all the world’s problems were solved. I wished I could share in their bliss.

The last time I saw Jessica, we were sitting on a concrete embankment of an abandoned marina in Melbourne, our feet dangling over unknown depths of the Indian River. The land sloped downward from US 1, and a five story building built towered above us. Jessica said cops would sometimes hang out in the parking garage of the first story, but not in the early evening. To our left, overgrown grass surrounded the crumbled remains of the marina, which looked more like a city block in Baghdad. Jessica wanted to go to a party tonight, but I’d talked her out of it. A black zip up hoodie covered her arms. It was a cool night, but I wondered if she’d been cutting again. The wind tousled her curly strands of hair. I stroked them out of her face. I hadn’t seen her in a couple weeks and her texts had been shorter and hours apart.

“I missed you,” I said. I slipped my hand over hers.

“I missed you too,” she said, “I’ve been busy, you know, looking for another job and everything.”

“It’s cool, I’ve been busy too.” I stroked her hand gently. Something splashed in the water, some kind of night bird. She leaned into me, resting her head against my neck. The scent

of her hairspray wafted into my nostrils like a warm, fuchsia cloud. I held her, but as I tried to pull her sleeve up to expose her arm, she pulled it away.

“I haven’t,” she said.

“I’m worried, that’s all.”

“I’m fine, Shayla. I’m taking my medication and sticking with it,” she said. I wanted to believe her, but she’d said this before. I asked Jessica one last time to come to church with me. I told her she was broken and she knew it.

“I know you’re scared, Jessica. You said so yourself.”

“Your church ain’t got nothing that can help me. Once I get a better job, I’ll be able to afford my meds.”

“Your meds aren’t the problem, Jessica. It’s the people you’re around. I can see it. It’s so painful to watch.”

“I’ll be okay,” she said. She walked away from me, to the edge of the embankment. The wind came across the water strong, and black waves splashed against the concrete.

“You texted me asking me to rescue you once.” I followed her to the edge. She looked out across the water. I waited for her to respond.

“I’m sorry I brought you into this, Shayla,” she finally said, “You’re a good person, you don’t deserve any of this. You need a less fucked up girl than me.”

“What are you saying?”

She chewed on her lower lip, eyes cast down toward the water. “You’re right. I am broken. I’m just going to disappoint you. I’m no good.”

I touched her hand, “Jessica, you are good. I love you more than I can put into words. I just want to help you.”

“You want me to come to that church,” she looked at me, “I’m telling you that’s never going to happen. I tried church once, before I knew I was bi. All anyone ever did there was make me feel bad for having sex, or drinking, or saying cuss words. It was all a bunch of uppity suburban white kids who’ve never had to suffer, but had all kinds of advice for people who have.” She took another step away from me. A two foot wake sprayed me as it broke against the concrete.

“I promise it’s different.”

She looked at me and shook her head. She didn’t believe me.

“Why do you want this so bad? Like, why do you care?”

“Jessica,” a tear rolled out of my eye, “I love you.” I stared into her eyes. She looked away. I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around her. I held her harder and tighter than I ever had that night, pressing her into my chest. I wanted to force feed how much I loved her right into her soul. Her hands wrapped around my body, and we held each other. Tears trickled down my cheek. Light shined through my closed eyelids, as if the sun was rising. I cracked my eyelids open to see white light illuminating us, like Pentecostal glowing. We must have shined bright enough to be seen all the way across the river. My fingers gripped into Jessica’s sweater, my heartbeat accelerated. I pictured us levitating, rising up above the destroyed shore into a blissful night. Then I opened my eyes wide and saw the source of the light – a pair of headlights from a parked police cruiser, idling in the building’s parking garage.

“We should go,” Jessica said. When we drove home that night, we said maybe two words to each other.

A day passed before I finally got tired of waiting and texted Jessica. She responded four hours later, said she was sorry, just busy and stressed out. I tried to call her and she didn't answer. I sat on my bed feeling an empty ache in my chest. I texted her again, saying I wanted to see her. Minutes dragged by and I resisted the urge to keep texting her. There was so much I wanted to say and it multiplied with each second that went by. I went for a run through my neighborhood, trying to take my mind off things. When I returned, I checked my phone, still nothing.

At dinner with my parents, I was quiet. I kept checking my phone under the table. I wanted to get away from the table, maybe call Bryan or Justin. Maybe just drive around Viera. Anything but being here waiting.

“You okay, Shayla?” My mom said I stabbed at my rosemary chicken with my fork.

“Yeah, just not feeling good, that's all,”

“We've just noticed you're becoming more distant, lately. I tried to talk to you this afternoon, but you walked out the door to go run. We figured you had your earbuds in.” I looked up to see my parents staring at me.

“I'm sorry,” I glanced downward, “It's just not something I want to get into.”

“You can always talk to us,” my dad said. “You know that.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I said, “I'll be fine. I promise. It's just something I'm going through.” I excused myself to my room then turned on my TV. I knew they knew something was up – I

never withheld things from them. I don't know why I thought this, but part of me was scared of how they'd react if I had told them Jessica cut herself and did drugs. I still sometimes felt I was pushing my luck dating girls, even though they accepted me. The first channel that came on was Fuse, parading rock videos that I normally watched with Jessica. My heart throbbed like an open wound. I wanted her here even more. I shut the TV off and paced, finally breaking and texting her again, telling her to please call me. I sat and waited. I took a shower, brushed my teeth, and climbed into bed. I stared at my ceiling for an hour before my phone finally buzzed. Just a text, *Going to sleep, call u tomorrow*. She never did.

Pastor Freeman's sermon ended. Brian, Justin, and the female singer resumed their positions for the closing song. The blue and violet lights panned across the cavernous ceiling.

It is well... The singer's mezzo-soprano voice crescendoed with Bryan's guitar and the increasing, bombastic beats of Justin's drums. I wanted Jessica to hear this – for the words to wash over her and bring her to her knees. I knew it would. Tears climbed down the scaffolding of my eyes.

It is well... Fragments of us returned to me – late nights at Starbucks where we'd play “two truths, one lie” over coffee. Sleeping late into the morning together. Walking through the mall hand in hand after work. She'd spend too much time in Hot Topic looking through chrome studded collars and band shirts. I'd get her back at Macys, trying on colors of light blue and green.

It is well, with my soul... I wanted to believe these words. I wanted them to be about me, about her. I pictured her meeting Brian and Justin, going to movies with us, going to concerts,

spending weekends away at beach retreats. I could see her at my side with them, wandering the Avenue Viera under the brilliant white lights, talking and laughing because we were at peace, we were all the same. Just twenty-somethings trying to find our purpose while the world collapsed around us.

It is well, it is well with my soul. The singer belted into the cavern of the sanctuary. Hands raised among the dark bodies, the atmosphere filled with rapture but I couldn't handle it. I shoved past the man in my pew and left.

I walked out of the sanctuary, hands to my eyes. I stood on the edge of the pond in front of the church. In the middle was an island with a single cabbage palm. When I was young and we were building this church, my dad took me to that island in a small paddle boat a couple times. I withdrew the pack of cigarettes from my purse and lit one. My relationship with Jessica felt like a fleeting dream. I guess part of it was. The part where I could save her. The part where all I had to do was get her in the doors of my church and she'd stop hurting herself. Therein was the dream, and I didn't want to wake up. That would mean letting her go.

Footsteps crunched on the grass behind me. I looked back to see the man with his arm in the cast approaching. He walked with a wide gait, like some kind of gunslinger, his left arm in a loose fist at his side. Backlit against the parking lot, he looked intimidating. I stayed put. He walked up, stood next to me and just stared at the water. After a few seconds of silence he said,

"Got a light?" Confused, I lit his cigarette for him. He took a drag with his left hand and just stood without saying a word. A night heron strutted through the marsh along the opposite shore. I waited for him to say something. A chorus of frogs resounded from hidden places.

"You were the guy in my row, right? By himself?"

“Yeah,” he said.

“Sorry, normally I would’ve said ‘hi’ to you,”

“It’s cool,” he took a drag of his cigarette. A bullfrog snorted from within the brush. I used to think the noise was an alligator.

“It’s not cool,” I said, “It’s...never mind.” I shook my head and stared at the wakes in the water, “I’m not myself tonight, I shouldn’t even be here.”

“That might make two of us,” he said. His voice sounded like a growl, I wondered how long he’d been a smoker.

“I’ve been going to this church since I was a kid,” I told him, “I still come even though I’m a lesbian. Everyone says they’re cool with it, but I still feel I have to be that much stronger to be here.” I looked at the man. I didn’t know why I was suddenly opening up to him. I was able to make out blue in his irises despite the low light. Razor stubble coated his chin. He glanced at me, imploring me to continue.

“I have a friend,” I said, “Had a friend. She needs a place like this, a community of people that love each other and aren’t just destroying themselves with drugs and alcohol. But I wonder if I had been able to convince her to come, would she have even been welcomed here?”

“Weren’t you?” He said.

“I grew up here. Before people knew I was gay. It’s different when someone comes in from the outside.”

He took a drag of his cigarette. “Probably not a shred of my business,” he said, “but if you’ve had faith in this crowd your whole life, why’s it gone now?”

I wiped a tear out of my right eye, “The last time I saw her, we were talking about the stuff she deals with. I told her if she would just come with me, I could show her a world where she doesn’t have to turn to drugs and alcohol. I told her I’d be here every step of the way.”

“What’d she say?”

“She refused, said she’d never feel comfortable here. She said she didn’t understand why I would associate with them.”

“And?”

“I told her it wasn’t that way here. She wouldn’t believe me.” The man grunted and slowly nodded his head.

“Thing was, I didn’t have an answer for her. In most cases, she’s right. And when Pastor Freeman says things like, ‘the answer to everything you’re struggling with is ‘Jesus,’ I just wonder if everyone here really is clueless when it comes to stuff that actually matters.”

“Yeah, that was a bit oversimplified for my taste too,” The man said. A car passed by on Viera Blvd on the other side of the pond. “Ain’t talked to her since, eh?”

“She deleted her Myspace, changed her number, everything. I don’t even know if she’s alive anymore. She used to cut herself.” I dried another tear. I never cried in public, this was new to me. The man stood silent and still, but his presence was consoling.

“So, why are you out here?” I asked. He grunted and looked up from the water.

“I don’t know. I usually come here on Sunday morning and look for the exit right after the closing hymn. Kinda at a spiritual crisis point, I guess.”

“How so?” I asked. He shook his head and dragged on his cigarette. I thought he wasn’t going to answer.

“Just trying to do this Christian thing right, and for some reason I felt I needed to come tonight.” He took another drag of his cigarette and dug at the grass with his boot. “I used to do enforcement for a chapter of Hell’s Angels out in Tucson, Arizona. I’ll let you fill in the blanks there. But I ended up meeting someone, a girl. Not too different from you, I guess. Name was Samantha.”

“Yeah?”

“Yep, she was a good girl, came from a good home, active in church, you know.” He scratched at his short, dark hair.

“She did what you were trying to do for your friend, told me there was something more beautiful than I could imagine, and it wasn’t totally out of reach. I told her she was crazy, that if she knew half the horrible shit I’d done she’d eat those words. But being around her and her people, the difference between her life and mine was the difference between Heaven and Hell.”

“What happened with her?” I asked.

“Our worlds ended up crossing. Long story short, she got hurt. Some people tried to get back at me for something through her. Burned her house down, shot her folks. It was all my fault. At first I blamed God, but really I brought all that down on her.”

“That’s horrible.” I didn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry.”

“The night I left Arizona,” he exhaled a cloud of smoke, “I dedicated my life to Christ, said I’d walk away from all this. I didn’t know how he could forgive me, but I’d start by trying to do right. It was the least I could do for Samantha. I came to Florida for that new beginning, but I’m still doing so much of the same shit. I feel like I haven’t changed at all.”

“You came here hoping to start over,” I said.

“Yeah, well, like you said, if all the preacher’s got for us is overgeneralized non-answers, I’m starting to wonder if I’m looking in the wrong place too.”

I nudged a small rock with my foot. The man tossed his cigarette onto the ground and mashed it with his boot. The fountain in the pond sputtered to life, a light bulb glowed at the base of the jetting water. Windows glimmered from the neighborhood across Viera Blvd.

“I didn’t get your name,” I said.

“Gabriel. Friends call me Gabe.”

“I’m Shayla.” We stood and watched the tiny wakes in the water. Low grey clouds sailed toward us from the west, their undersides rust colored from the city’s light. Animals rustled in the palmettos behind us, probably an armadillo or feral cats.

“Everyone talks about forgiveness and unconditional love in these circles, but I wonder if they’d still be talking like that if I told anyone what I’ve actually done.”

“You don’t feel you can truly be yourself?”

“Most people’s compassion ends when the sins you confess are illegal.”

“It takes courage and strength. I know that much,” I said. A cool breeze blew from the west and the clouds towered over us like ghostly ships. I wondered if it was clouds like these Ezekiel saw when he had his vision in the Old Testament. I looked over at Gabriel, this person who came to church because he didn’t know where else to turn. I thought of how I almost let him walk into and out of this place alone. I was so caught up in my thoughts of Jessica, someone who didn’t even want the help she desperately needed, I couldn’t see this person right here in front of me. With his eyes fixed in a scowl, the rough texture of stubble across his face, his wide stance and the way he loosely cupped his good fist at his side, he was probably used to people avoiding

him. That wouldn't help him in trying to feel comfortable in a church community. If he was anything like Jessica, he'd return to the life he was used to, no matter how dangerous.

"Let's give this place a chance, Gabe," I said to him.

"Ain't we already?"

"Let's stick with it. Those people inside may have no idea what you've gone through, but maybe that's a good thing," I said.

"What do I do then?" he asked.

"Keep coming. You'll make friends, friends you'll be able to open up to one day," I turned to face him, "In fact, you already have one."

He looked at me and grinned with a corner of his mouth. Voices began to reach us from the sanctuary doors.

"Looks like we missed the service," he said.

"I don't think we missed anything," I said. I touched his elbow. "See you next Saturday?"

"Sure thing." We walked together toward the parking lot. Before we parted he stopped me.

"Just my two cents, but about your friend, you never know what kind of impact you did have on her. She may not have heard your words now, but that doesn't mean she won't hear them later down the road when they make more sense."

"Thanks Gabe," I said, "I guess that's something to hold onto." The armada of clouds overhead passed on across the sky, revealing a few stars amidst an indigo canvas. I gave Gabe a hug, then walked back to my elantra. My headlights lit up the palmetto underbrush and pines at the edge of the parking lot. It looked like a deep, endless forest, but I knew just a few feet into

the brush, a mud pit sat where another building for the church would have been completed this year before the money ran out. I thought of Jessica and how she chose to wander the dark and desolate places of the city because in her mind, sanctuary in the church didn't exist. I had done all I could do for her, though, and there were others like Gabriel who actually made the step she refused to make. A fresh bolt of sadness panged my heart – I knew I'd never see her again. I would go to sleep tonight, and when I awoke she would be a memory, at least to me.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Brian texted me, *we're all going to Cold Stone at the Avenue. U coming?* I put my car in reverse and left the parking lot, driving west toward the white light of the Avenue Viera. Shadows stretched for miles in every direction.

“Make this moment last like the deepest sleep you never wanted to leave.”

“814 Stops Today” by Underoath