

The Whole Headlight-colored Night

2009

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THE WHOLE HEADLIGHT-COLORED NIGHT

by

MATTHEW BRYAN

B.A. University of Central Florida, 2006

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
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ABSTRACT

This collection of short fiction probes the lives of characters trying to make their home in the flat, unchanging landscape of the small towns that make up central Florida. The largely static environment reflects the rigid patterns of behavior and domesticity the characters find themselves so easily falling into. Seemingly ordinary items—a shotgun, a t-shirt, a paper bag—and the small moments that make up everyday life are imbued with significance as men and women painfully aware of their own ordinariness struggle to hold onto those fragile instances of connection, happiness, or even their own self-constructed sense of identity. The struggle becomes one of opposing forces: as characters yearn to connect to the people, places, and objects around them, they find themselves more and more attracted to the idea of escaping their own lives, even if for just a moment.

Stories range from two pages to over twenty and introduce the reader to a diverse population of characters, from an out of work construction worker cum wannabe philosopher to an amateur historian writing a history nobody cares about to the one man who actually did escape—a cockfight organizer who made it big in Georgia before blowing himself up at a gas station. Characters fight over toothbrushes, puzzle out whether a father is just drunk or beautiful, and look for space stations they may or may not be able to see at all. As in life, in these stories, it's the small, quiet moments that come to define who these people are and demonstrate their pursuit of something bigger and more important, even if they don't have any idea what that may be.

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I would like to first thank Toni Jensen for her guidance and encouragement throughout this process. I will always be grateful for her taking on my thesis even when she barely knew who I was, and also for finding a gentle way to say that, yes, there just might be something sappy about two brothers crying into each other's arms while listening to Alice in Chains. Thanks also must go to Terry Thaxton, not only for reading and inspiration, but also for being a model of the teacher that I'll always want to be. I would also like to thank Lisa Roney for her advice and feedback, particularly in the formative stages of this project. This thesis was born in her class, and for that I'm very grateful. I have to also thank all of the wonderful UCF MFAers past and present whose work I've had the pleasure to read and whose company I've been lucky to share. Without them, this work would not be possible. Special thanks goes to Writing Group—Pamela Baker, Diego Rincón, Jessica Ryan, and Lydia Sanchez—for being such talented writers, such incisive critics, and such good friends. It has been a joy to discuss writing with them and to follow their progress, and I look forward to seeing what great work they do in the future. And finally, thank you, Florida, for being you.

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RECESSION

Four o' clock on a Thursday afternoon with Steph and nothing to do but talk about hair. This was a few years before she began counting to infinity. We'd both called into work so we could spend the day together, even though we just ended up sitting on the couch all day. It was a Skynyrd-colored afternoon, an afternoon when grown men and women everywhere could happily listen to "Freebird" on their way home from work and not feel an ounce of shame or corniness, instead just hearing the lyrics sans kitsch and thinking to themselves, "This is totally me. This is my life." Then they'd arrive home and try to tell somebody about it, about how they felt like a bird—in the metaphorical sense—and of course by the time the words touched the back of their lips they could only ever form a joke, or maybe a mumble, some half-hearted deterioration of that thing they felt during the car ride home when hearing a solo for the millionth time seemed to mean something or other, when they drove over the bridge and actually noticed the water and the sky and the little fishing boat beached on the shore and the power plant a few miles down the river that glistened with lights they'd never understand and was the closest thing they'd ever know to magic. That was lost, even though it was the billionth time they'd noticed all these things for the first time. So they moped into the kitchen to crack a tray of ice cubes, or maybe fill up the water filterer jug, and stood probably under a long fluorescent bulb whose sister had burned out a few months ago, likely positioned facing the faucet, watching the water pour out over the few dishes that never got washed the night before—the too-fancy ice cream scooper that broke on its first use, the pizza pan, an anonymous white ceramic bowl—not

wanting to be the one to turn it off.

Hair: there's just so much of it in this world. Hair in the drain, hair on the carpet, hair on my new black shirt. Dog hair under the bed that you didn't want to be the one to get rid of, since, after all, it had been her dog and maybe it meant something. Hair in the back of your throat that sticks and you waggle with a finger. That's the worst. After we're all gone, I bet there'll still be tangled clumps of anonymous hair gathering in the corners of our houses, and about the legs of our furniture, even as everything else rots away. What is it about the afternoon that bends thought towards the end of the world?

My father was a barber. When us kids, my two sisters and I, were little and Mom was away, on Saturdays and summer days he'd keep us in the shop with him. He said we drew in customers, but my oldest sister said it was because he didn't have anybody to leave us with. We'd grin in the spinning chairs and make faces. Then, once he'd finished with a customer, we took turns getting out the big broom and sweeping the hair into the pan. Since I was the youngest, I got stuck holding the pan. My sisters enjoyed sweeping in big rough strokes that sent the hair flying around and on me. My childhood is full of strangers' hair. That's what I told Steph that afternoon.

"That's absolutely fucking beautiful," she sighed. She looked me in the eyes—her eye sockets always struck me as elongated, but in a good way, like they just had more room to open and take everything in—and we kissed. That was when we still talked about interesting things, still tried to make each other feel good. She told me I should write it down. And I did. So began THE CHRONICLES OF ILLACA COUNTY: A Brief, Personal History of Twenty-odd

Years. It was something to do on weekends.

Research consisted mostly of calling up old school friends I'd lost contact with, a surprising number of which still lived in the county or just one or two over, and telling stories over drinks. I'd take a few notes. Then, later, I'd take those notes and whatever I could remember and draft a few pages. Steph always proofread. I never meant for it be anything, never thought about getting it published in anything other than a chapbook I would give to a few friends and family. It passed the time and made me feel like I was doing something with my life. I was the recorder of history in our little community.

For my thirtieth birthday, my mom got me a shirt printed that said those exact words, "Recorder of History in Our Little Community." It was all white and had red print, with red around the collar and the sleeves. I wore it once, that same day. That afternoon, Steph came and stood over my shoulder as I typed. She picked up the latest draft of the manuscript, thumbed through a few pages, and set it back down. She rubbed my head, pried up a few strands of my thinning hair, and frowned. As she walked out of the room, she said, "Shouldn't you change the title to A Brief, Personal History of *Thirty-odd Years?*?" This was well after the point we had stopped talking about interesting things, stopped trying to make each other feel good.

I went into the bedroom and took the shirt off. I thought about giving it to the Salvation Army but couldn't bear the idea of someone else walking around in my shirt. It was my title, ridiculous as it may have been, so I just buried the shirt in the back of the closet.

I shouldn't have interrupted her. It was one of those quiet weekday evenings—really it was

absolutely stone dead silent—when the sun sets two hours early. The light’s all funny and hazy, too, while it does last. And on that night Steph was lying on the couch, sucking on a Fla-Vor-Ice and counting to infinity while my friend Ryan and I talked about trading baseball cards. I’d known Ryan since elementary school, though we stopped talking in middle school because he started going through a good ol’ boy phase like so many of the other guys that age, talking about the historicity of the Civil War and pinning up Confederate flags everywhere. They got them from their dads or older brothers. He also developed a taste for country music, which is what really had done in our friendship. The CHRONICLES was as good a reason to get back in touch with him as any.

Steph had been getting closer to infinity every night, I knew, since she’d become quieter and quieter and kind of stared past me and the decent-sized living room and all the stuff we’d accumulated over the years we’d been together: televisions, videogames, movies, little statues of cherubic children—hers—playing in glaze, and bookshelves, bookshelves, bookshelves full of nothing but holding the 7.1 surround speakers—mine—in just the right spot.

With the new highway being planned, I had to work later at the office, so she had more time free from my distraction to count. I guess I should clarify here that I don’t really know that she was counting. But it seemed like it. And when I asked her, “Steph, have you seen my baseball card collection?” I could practically see the numbers blinking out in front of her face. It was like they were right there and I could grab them if I wanted.

“Baseball cards?”

“Yes.”

“You collect. . . baseball cards?”

With that one, Ryan tottered out of the living room back to his beer and the spread of Cincinnati Red rookie cards he’d laid out on the kitchen table.

“Don’t say it like that.”

She looked me in the eye and slurped the last of the blue syrup from her Fla-Vor-Ice. It was unnerving. “Honey, collecting baseball cards is like dancing the Charleston, or proposing on one knee—nobody does it anymore.”

I took her hand and got on one knee. If I had seen even a hint of a gleam in her eye, I would’ve proposed right then and there just to get the damn thing over with. Because there was nowhere else for this to go. Because when I was on top of her, I was half afraid I’d float away if she wasn’t there to grab me, like I was made of straw or papier mâché. Because I didn’t want to be thirty and alone and wearing a white shirt with red letters that said, “Recorder of History in Our Little Community.” Because she had elongated eye sockets and hair like water. Because I wanted her to stop counting and look at me. But her eyes didn’t do anything, and the best I could come up with was a favorable comment about the condition of the carpet.

“I vacuumed it today,” she said, kicking her feet up on the coffee table atop a pile of bills and junk mail from two months ago.

“It smells nice.”

“It’s the Febreze.”

I nodded and the moment receded back behind a tangled clump of due charges, diversions, and watered down memories shared with strung out old buddies who pretended to look for the

meaning of something or other, like most all the good stuff.

Ryan heard the quiet and came back out from the kitchen, huffing himself down onto the floor and crossing his legs around his beer. He saw me on one knee and laughed an ugly laugh.

“Hope I,” he said, “didn’t interrupt anything.”

We gave him a couple’s smile and he told us about an exchange he’d had with the cashier at the grocery store the other day. He’d been buying some Advil for his caffeine headaches and the cashier (“a pretty young thing with sunburnt hair and freckled,” he called her) recommended he try some other brand if he was having back and body pain. She told him what had worked for her dad.

“Now, do I look like I’m old enough to be having back and body pain?” Ryan said. He did.

There was a silence where we all enjoyed each other’s company. Then, I chimed in to detail the dream I’d had the night before. I was driving down the street to our house when that fat white cat with the black patches, the one with the death wish (Steph snorted in approval at this), slid out in his catlike way and motioned for me to stop the car. I pulled over and stepped out.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hello.”

“Dude,” he said to me. “You’re literally covered in demon’s blood.”

“I am?” I looked for it on my pants and sleeves, but couldn’t see anything.

He cleared his cat throat and wiped at his face with a forepaw. I wiped at my own face. He shook his head. “Here.” Then, he crawled up my body and perched on a shoulder before

licking away at my cheeks. After a bit, he jumped down. “There, that’s better.”

“Thanks.”

“Sure, no problem. Just be more careful next time.”

“Roger that.” Then I woke up.

“How. Absolutely. Interesting.” Steph didn’t look at me when she said it, but instead out the window. She’d resumed her count.

I fired back. “Well, my little Ms. Thursday Night Freud, do you care to explain it for us all?” She’d only gotten a third of the way through her psychology degree and hated to be reminded of it because she was a few years younger than Ryan and I and still had ambition.

“Do you really want to do this?” She’d gotten better at her counting— more focused— and could keep it going even while she talked to me. Her eyes looked at me but her mind was gone. She was all numbers. 1,567,892. 1,567,893. And so on and so on. They made a film on her face, a light plastic sheen, like she was covered in saran wrap and stuck in the fridge. She wasn’t there. I nodded.

“It doesn’t mean a thing,” she said. “Not a damn thing. None of it.” She twisted her Flavor-Ice package absentmindedly, but not viciously. Never viciously. Then, as an afterthought on her way out of the room, she turned to Ryan and wished him a good evening.

Ryan decided to leave after a few more beers. We hadn’t really talked about anything but the baseball cards. It’s funny how easy it is to fall back in the rhythm of a friendship even when it’s been more than a decade. A simple, meaningless relationship then would be a simple, meaningless relationship in the present.

He took his baseball cards in a stack of a half dozen notebooks under his arm, paused at the door like he wanted to say something. Then, he did the most amazing thing I think I've ever seen a man do. He dropped the baseball cards onto the floor, the plastic sleeve pages slapping against each other, making a tiny crowd's-worth of applause. A little cloud of dust escaped from a pair of notebooks, the two we hadn't had a chance to go through that night. He patted his jacket, a worn gray number I could have sworn he wore in middle school. Exposed threads ribbed the edges of the collar, the rims of the cuffs. After a moment of searching, his hands lighted on a bulky object in one of his pockets. He withdrew a wooden pipe. It was a dark brown, sensually curved. Its shape and coloration reminded me completely of a duck's head.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Listen, man, I don't want to tell you how to run your life or anything." He spoke with the pipe between his lips and it jumbled his words together, saliva eddying around its bit. "But you've got to keep your woman in line." After pulling a tin out from another pocket, he pinched some tobacco into the bowl and lit it. He took a few puffs.

"We don't smoke in here," I said. I thought of the drapes, the carpet, my own clothes and hair, all the things I'd never get the smell of smoke out of.

He ignored me. He gestured with his hands, which was frightening because he was not normally a gesturer. He explained what had happened to his parents, to his brother's relationship. He told me about his own marriage. They all ended in ruin. They all ended in a woman getting ideas and running off. He took out a little piece of metal and tamped down the tobacco in his bowl. The smoke from his pipe encircled him, blotted out the lights in the street

behind him and the aura of our lights in that living room. And he was not of this world. He was not Ryan. He was a man in my living room smoking a pipe and telling me how things worked. A man I didn't know. A man wearing the jacket of an old once-upon-a-time friend and carrying his baseball cards in a half dozen ratty notebooks. I had no reason to listen to him, and I asked him to leave. Finally, he complied, and thanked me for the beers. We both knew we would not see each other again.

I walked him out and stood on the stoop as he drove off. I stood for a while, drank a few more beers myself, and looked at the moon. It seemed like the thing to do. As Florida moisture seeped back into my smoke-dried eyes, I felt more awake.

After a while, I went back inside. There was Steph, standing over the faucet just watching the water filter jug fill up. 1,568,493. 1,568,494.

“What are you staring at?” she said. The light from the one fluorescent bulb that hadn't burned out cast long and awkward shadows. I barely recognized her.

I walked into the bedroom, dug out the “Recorder of History in Our Little Community” T-shirt, and put it on. I wanted to make a point. In the mirror, I pressed my hair flat against my scalp. It was going backwards, crawling away from my face.

Back in the kitchen, Steph cracked a tray of ice cubes. 1,568,902. 1,568,903. She turned to look at me, her face strained from the dual effort of twisting and counting.

“You look ridiculous,” she said. She sighed, put the ice cubes down by the sink. She looked at her hand. It shook. She didn't recognize it. I wanted to hold her then, because I knew that feeling, too. She said, “You're absolutely fucking ridiculous. You're the punch line to a bad

joke. You all are.”

She leaned against that sink, pressing her whole body into the wood cabinets, or pulling them towards her. I couldn't tell which and it didn't much matter. Because when she put her hand up to cover her eyes, when her whole body started to ripple with sobs, I knew that she'd lost count.

SHOTGUN

I couldn't believe Torrie was going to sell our dad's shotgun. It'd only been two months since the heart attack—the one we'd all been expecting for twenty years. He'd smoked three packs of cigarettes a day since he was fifteen, drank, ate like crap and lived to seventy-seven. It gave me hope for the males in our family, even though just last week the doctor told me to lose sixty pounds and cut the sweets out of my diet or I'd be dead in five years. I wanted to tell him about my father and how he'd outlived our vegan mother by more than a decade. She'd been hit by a truck while biking twelve years ago. But how do you talk intelligently about something like chance and how a life of healthy living can be tossed away in an instant, let alone to a doctor? They don't buy into that stuff.

Torrie and her husband Cliff had already gotten the larger items out of our parents' old house—the couches, the chairs, the beds, the tables— and either put them in their own home or into storage. She'd asked me if I wanted anything. I said no, since I barely had room for just myself and my own stuff in my cramped little apartment. Torrie suggested for a while that the juxtaposition of our parents' mismatched eight-different-types-of-wood-or-wood-finish rattan and vinyl furniture would set off her and Cliff's own carefully selected brown leather living room set. Her daughter, Mary Belle, a thirteen-year-old smirker slipping day by day closer to not caring about anything, knew her mother well enough to roll her eyes. Within six months, everything that had belonged to our parents would be gone, either sold dirt cheap at a yard sale or quietly carted out on trash days in the predawn hours by a yawning Cliff, just so Torrie

wouldn't have to stare at her father's favorite chair tattered and propped up on her own front lawn like he might very well come back and sit a piece. She said it was too hard, too hard to remember and miss him, but I knew better.

The day Torrie had been planning to sell the shotgun, to tie up a few last odds and ends of the house, I came by and asked how I could help. I even wore a faded old t-shirt, something commemorating an art festival I'd been in during high school. It practically screamed, "Look at me. I'm a caring brother, willing to get my hands and even my art festival shirt dirty to help his little sister clean their dead parents' home, even if the thought of entering this house does freak me out a little." But I was too late. When I showed up, Torrie had the screens off all the windows and was hosing them down in the front yard. She nodded at me, told me I could look around inside. Instinctively, I hit a light switch, but the lights had been removed. They'd already piled old photos, records, and knickknacks on the floor in the living room, leaving the walls and shelves empty. It made the house look bigger and smaller at the same time.

I'd never lived here. This was the cheap two-bedroom on the east side of Dummetville that our parents bought after both Torrie and I had moved out and they didn't need the extra space. I tried to visit at least once every couple of weeks, but the place still felt foreign and I never ventured much past the living room. So, walking down the halls to their bedroom, the spare, the tiny little den by the garage, I felt like I was some kind of burglar prowling around, but everything had already been taken. A solitary dresser had been left in the bedroom and I pulled out the drawers hoping to discover something interesting I could impress Torrie with, some dentures, an old pair of glasses with the lenses knocked out, but everything was gone, even the

dust I would expect to find. My father's housekeeping habits had mirrored my own, I knew, based on the plastic wrappers that drifted underfoot after mom died and the half-dozen cups of water he kept scattered around every possible surface, containing little more than a few sips.

Disappointed with finding nothing, not even a scrap with which to recreate or imagine some aspect of his life (“what was he thinking when the sun would hit the mirror just so?” or, “why would he leave a bar of soap here?”), I went back into the living room. There, set apart from the photos and records, in a corner I hadn't noticed when I first came in, was Dad's shotgun.

Dad was a card carrying member of the NRA. He went on hunting trips late every fall, packing jackets, red-and-black-checkered flannels, and funky cold-weather caps in trash bags to go to places we'd never heard of with friends we'd never met, outside of the occasional wave over the rim of a partially lowered car window or a too-eager grin once across a smokey table in a greasy restaurant downtown. The guy had a lot of guns, most of which Torrie and Cliff had already sold. He collected them. I remember being fifteen and home alone one afternoon. Mom and Dad were somewhere, maybe the store, and I was looking for something, probably alcohol, like most kids, so I went snooping into their room. They usually kept the door closed so I rarely saw its interior. It was nice and neat, the bed always made, the clothes always hung, but there were guns everywhere. Rifles, handguns, antique revolvers. Every corner, in the closet—guns. I don't think he was crazy or stockpiling a militia or anything like that, and I never did. It was just his hobby, like others might collect stamps or build model airplanes. It was innocent. Every so often, he'd pull all his guns out and clean them. He'd lay them all out in the living room (the old

living room in the house I grew up in), scattered here and there on the sofa or on the card table, withered little boxes of ammo, water-soaked with fading paint, peeking from around the room like curious squirrels paralyzed by their own wonderment. He ran the cloth up and down the too-slick black barrels, ragged some wood polish onto the stocks, slid the cleaning rod up and down, all while doling out some bit of perceived wisdom in the fading light of a Saturday afternoon. “You know you never point one at somebody, even if it isn’t loaded,” he might say, heaving a rifle up to his broad lap, its barrel a scrawny arm next to his enormous thighs and belly, or he might just point to some part of one, some piece of metal or wood that I was never meant to fully understand (he never even bought me a BB gun, he was so damn paranoid and overprotective) and say, “Feel that heft. That’s quality.” And I’d hold the piece in my hand, wondering how it fit together, marveling at the weight of a real tool, something real men used. Most of the guns he never even actually fired more than a few times at the range. But the shotgun was different. That he kept, loaded at all times, beneath the bed when he was home, behind the seat in the cab of his truck when he wasn’t. It was part of him.

Once, he told me a half-story about the shotgun that didn’t make any sense, but he told it with all the passion in the world, like there was something wrong with me for not getting it. I was maybe eleven or twelve at the time. In the afternoons after I got back from school, I’d sit in the living room and watch the cartoons I was too old to be watching under the guise that I was spending time with Torrie. She never really wanted to, but I was her older brother, and I could make her. So we watched shows about pixies and talking animals, all silly things, but still somewhat comforting in a way. After a while, she’d leave to go play outside, or up in her own

room, and I'd be left with the television flashing wildly sparkling purple horses or dragons or something, and Dad would come home and ask me what the hell I was doing.

"Torrie left the T.V. on," I'd say. "You know how she is."

And he'd nod slowly, ease himself into his chair at the card table, and rub his eyes until with his thumbs until his shoulders sank further and further down and I silently left the room.

But one afternoon was different. He came in wild-eyed, looking from side to side and all around him, shaking his head like a dog after it's had a drink from its bowl. He threw down his lunch box and slapped himself into his chair. Its metal frame squeaked and the rusted feet peeled against the hardwood floor, spastically zigzagging back a few inches from the sheer momentum of his bulk. He ignored the cartoons.

"You will not believe what just happened," he said. He placed both forearms on the table in a way I'd never seen him do before, in a way that looked entirely uncomfortable but sort of pleading, and stared at the space between them. "Don't tell your mother about this."

And then he proceeded to tell me about the encounter he had with a man at the gas station where he always filled up on his way home. Apparently, Dad was climbing into his truck when this guy came over and asked for some money for gas. Dad told him no, but the guy kept coming. Dad said he smelled entirely of alcohol and licorice. The guy was at Dad's window when he started the engine. He opened his jacket and flashed something that looked like it might've been a knife, or it might've just been a shiny buckle, Dad admitted. He wasn't sure. Then, Dad pulled the shotgun up from behind the seat and put it next to him. And then he drove off.

“Could you believe that?” Dad was sweating at this point, his eyes still not quite settling on anything, his hands clenching and then unfolding back to palms. He shook his head again and put his thumbs to his eyes, so I knew it was time to leave him alone. He never mentioned the story again, and I never asked about it. It just didn’t seem like a reasonable topic for conversation.

Without curtains, the windows in the living room let in all of the bright morning light and the bare house that had belonged to my parents could’ve belonged to anyone in the whole wide world. Torrie wrapped the shotgun in a couple of towels she’d brought and carried it out to her car. I followed her, locking the door behind me.

Climbing into the passenger seat, I sighed. It was a sigh for all that we’d lost: Mom, Dad, our childhoods. I’m not ashamed to say I’m a bit sentimental.

Torrie looked at me before starting the car. “What?”

“Nothing,” I said. I hadn’t yet articulated the thoughts behind the sigh.

She started the car and drove a bit. It was a weekday, so all the children were in school and most people were at work, leaving the streets peacefully empty and clear of other cars. We didn’t talk.

After a few minutes, I broke the silence and asked, “So where do you plan on taking it?”

“AAA.”

“That’s the pawnshop downtown.” I’d been to AAA Pawn, Jewelry, & Firearms a couple of times. The owner was a big biker-looking guy with tattoos all up and down his arms, and the whole place smelled like wet carpet.

“Yeah.”

“Oh.”

She quickly turned to look at me. “Is that okay?” She pronounced each word very deliberately, slowly, like she might’ve asked Mary Belle—when the girl was younger— what she had done to the broken lamp in fragments on the floor.

“Sure.”

“What is it?”

I fidgeted with the lock on my door, prying it up and pushing it back in. “That place is just a little grungy, don’t you think?”

“So? Cliff said they usually give a pretty fair price.”

“Yeah, but can you imagine our dad’s shotgun sitting in there?”

She inhaled. “Alex, we’ve been over this.” She was referring to the first, brief discussion we had about what to do with the gun a week earlier. I said it should stay in the family. She didn’t want it, what with the kids in the house and all. And I didn’t particularly know what to do with it. I guess I could have kept it under the bed like Dad did, but I wouldn’t have felt very safe with it there and would’ve had little occasion to pull it out. That just seemed like an ignoble end to something so tied up to the spirit of the man. What do you do with a gun if you don’t intend to use it? I don’t know.

“It just doesn’t seem right,” I said.

We stopped at a light on First Street. It had rained early in the morning but the sun was now out and unobscured, so all but the puddles under the shaded awnings of storefronts had

dried up. A few people in suits, lawyers I guessed, meandered around the courthouse steps.

“You always did idealize him,” Torrie said. She was shaking her head.

“I *idealized* him?”

“I said, ‘Idolized.’”

“Well,” I said, trying to gather up my thoughts. She’d always been the quick one. “What’s the opposite of ‘idealized?’ Because you did that. You *idealized* how bad you thought things were for us so you could become the heroine of your own childhood.”

She parked the car in the municipal lot just down the road and we got out. “Let’s not do this now, please?”

“Of course. Wouldn’t want to cause a scene.” I rolled my eyes but she ignored me and grabbed the towel-wrapped shotgun from the backseat, carrying it out in front of her with two hands like a wobbly tray of drinks. She told me that she made Cliff check the gun a half-dozen times to make sure it wasn’t loaded.

“Do you want me to take that?” I asked.

“I got it.”

Inside, AAA was cool and damp and dim. The place was big, two full stories, and cluttered. Every wall held some sort of display, and narrow, improvised aisles had sprung up between stand-up spinner displays and cardboard boxes littered around the floor. The several paddle fans buzzed erratically.

We went over to the gun counter, where a lanky young clerk read a magazine in front of a wall of all shape and size of guns. Above them all, next to the rooster wall clock, hung a

manatee skull. I'm not sure I would've recognized it as a manatee skull if there hadn't been a sign next to it that said so. It looked so alien with the long curve of its bleached mandible, the sunken and warped eye sockets. I tried to picture the fat and gray skin layered over this hard framework, tried to imagine the button eyes poking through creases of flesh, but couldn't. I wondered where they got it and how much they'd charge for it.

Torrie set the gun on the table, still wrapped in its towel, and greeted the clerk. She asked how much he'd give her for it. He took the gun in his eyes, hefted its weight across his forearms, peered down the sight.

"Fifty," he said finally.

"That's it?" I reached to take the gun from his hands, to put an end to this deal, or to at least look like we were going to negotiate.

Torrie patted my arm and I backed off. "Is that really all you'll give us? We know it's old."

The clerk rubbed his hand on the wood stock. He had shaggy hair and a face that bent up at weird angles, like his nose connected with the dots of his eyes to make a "V" shape sharper than just about everybody else's. "That's exactly it," he said. "It's old but it ain't quite antique. It's just not worth much. And," he wave to the overflowing glass case of rifles, shotguns, and pistols behind him, "we're not really in a position where we need to haggle for another shotgun."

I was about ready to walk out and try some place else when Torrie nodded, took the money for the gun, and left. The door slammed shut behind her. On the wall, the manatee skull shook, its long mandible sliding from side to side. I pointed to it.

“How much for that?” I asked.

“It’s not for sale,” the clerk said.

I turned and left.

Once I caught up to Torrie, I said, “So, what do you think we’ve lost?”

Torrie stopped and turned to me. “Do you know what your problem is?”

“What?” I was genuinely curious.

“You’ve always got to be so damn high and mighty.”

I’d attended seminary, briefly, in my early twenties. I hoped she wasn’t going to start bringing that up again. I waited for her to continue.

“Do you think it’s easy for me to have to be the one to sell all of their stuff? Do you think I enjoy it?”

To some extent, I thought she did. She always liked being in control and now she was in control of even their memories. I kept quiet though.

“And do you think you make it any easier? You could’ve had that damn gun, Alex, I really didn’t care. But, no, you’ve just got to stand back and try to hurt me after the fact. And now, you’re standing there judging everything I’m saying. . . I don’t know why I bother.” She climbed in the car and checked her eyes in the rearview mirror. “This is why you’re alone.”

That seemed like a low blow, I thought. “God, you’re selfish,” I said, buckling up. “This isn’t about you. Or me. Or even the gun, is it?”

She kept her eyes trained on the road. “I’m sorry, Alex. I didn’t mean that,” she said softly.

“Sure you did. Now, that Mom and Dad are gone, I guess I’ve got to be the one to oppress you. Poor little Torrie, of the dysfunctional family and the crappy childhood.” I hated getting mean, but so often the words came quicker than the thoughts behind them.

“That gun,” she said slowly, “was just a gun. There are so many more like it. If you want, I’ll get you one for your birthday.”

“Shut up,” I said. We didn’t say anything else the rest of the way back to my apartment. I told her I’d see her later and she nodded and drove off.

The following weekend, I went downtown to AAA with a wad of cash in my pocket. I scanned the wall behind the gun counter for Dad’s shotgun. The clerk recognized me immediately.

“Welcome back,” he said. “That shotgun you brought in this week sure didn’t last long. Sold it yesterday.”

“Is that right?” I felt a spreading emptiness in my chest.

“Yep. Can I help you find something?”

“No, I don’t think so. Thanks.”

“You sure? You must have come here for something.”

“I don’t remember.” The yellow yellowing light cast by the incandescents hanging from the rattling paddle fans flickered and jerked like a sheet you might snap to get the wrinkles out. That never works.

“You don’t remember?”

I walked back out towards the door, catching my distorted reflection in the spherical

security mirror just above the entrance. How much I looked like him, but an incomplete, less finished version, with the flabbier arms, the patchier beard, the eyes maybe too close together, and, of course, everything all twisted on the mirror's curve.

But then I thought of the cool winter nights of every childhood year I could remember, when I would follow him into the backyard after he thought we were all asleep, on nights he and Mom had fought over things so trivial I can barely remember them (a bill that wasn't paid on time, a burnt plate of ribs) and watch him stumble across the flat, trim grass as though it were on an angle. Bent with whiskey, the shotgun in his hand, he'd kneel in the dew and fire into the air a couple of times, throw the gun to the ground, and collapse into a lawn chair. How frightening this must've been to those inside the house being jarred from sleep by a shot so near and without reason. But for me, now I saw the man as the man, not as the father. But for me, how wonderful.

TWO AMERICANS AND A RUSSIAN

The day we ran out of things to talk about, there was a technical mishap on the International Space Station. Maggie and I were sitting at the table, looking at each other over a cooling dinner, a bit of disappointment washing over her face that a few months earlier was the prettiest in the world, doubt curling around the upward curvature of her otherwise pudgy nose, when we heard the news on the television. It was a failure in the air filtration system. And its backup. Then the backup's backup had failed. What are the odds?

There were two Americans and a Russian onboard. Normally, they'd just climb into the Soyuz and fly back to Earth. But it had failed, too. The man on the news, a trusted and serious anchor with tired eyes, tried to remain objective, but his voice shook when he talked about it all. The people at NASA put on a brave face and released statements. They even went to the trouble of prepping a shuttle, getting it onto the huge tank-like mover and crawling it to the launch pad for a purported rescue mission. It was a nice show. But everybody knew, even though nobody said, that the people at the station wouldn't last long enough for a shuttle to matter, and that it wouldn't be worth it to rush a launch and put even more lives at risk. A couple of hours earlier, word had leaked that the two Americans and a Russian had put on their spacesuits and that it was only a matter of time. The analysts and experts talked around that and filled the time. Maggie and I just watched it all, because we really did have nothing to say.

At about ten till eight, the news anchor with the tired eyes came back on, his head lowered and his eyes closed. Before he could speak, I went outside. The night sky was clear and full of

stars. On clear nights like this, you could see the space station, they said. It looked bigger than the stars, they said, second only in the night sky to the moon. It was an accomplishment. I'd never seen it. I scanned the sky. If it was up there, it was beyond my capabilities to see it.

Across the street, the neighbors had their lights on and one of their windows was open. It was a yellow-orange square in the darkness. Inside, I could see a lamp on a desk. I watched and waited to see if maybe a person would cross by the frame, to see if maybe a man would sit at the desk, and a woman approach behind him, their faces softened to two dimensions by the dim orange light. To see if he might hold her hand, press it against his chest, and say something that disappoints her. To see her recoil in disgust and shame. Then to see her come back to him, smooth his hair with her free hand. To see him kiss her other hand and have it all be okay.

After a few minutes, nobody came to the window and I turned to go back inside the house. My neighbor to the left, an older man named Roberts, was standing outside, staring at the sky and the unblinking stars. I'll admit my heart skipped a beat, just because I wasn't expecting to see him there, and I wasn't sure if he'd noticed me looking in our neighbors' window. He started to say something—but no. He just had to sneeze. I waved and walked from the cool-quiet-dark outside to the cool-quiet-dark inside, each step falling slowly on the carpet, my breath still recovering from the shock of seeing Roberts, wondering if he'd seen the space station or just the same blank and meaningless field of stars that I had, and jealous of all the possibilities.

PART OF THE FUN

Jim discovered the grave in his backyard on a bright blue Sunday morning. He'd been looking at a section of collapsed fence in the left corner, where the tree had fallen last spring, and taking advantage of the free chance to spy on his neighbors. They looked so young and happy: both parents, a girl, and a boy. The kids splashed around the pool. The parents read the paper, sharing and exchanging sections every now and then. Sunlight scattered on the surface of too-blue water in the pool and reflected onto their smiling faces. He was starting to remember a time that his own family had looked like that when he stumbled on the little mound.

A few twigs formed a small cross, or maybe just an "X" depending on which angle you were coming from, pressed into the dirt atop a tiny pile of loose earth. He kicked the mound and uncovered, barely buried at all, a bundle wrapped in a napkin, half open. With the toe of his sneaker, he slid the napkin off and revealed two burnt biscuit bottoms and an unpainted ceramic figure in the general shape of a dog. He shook his head and blew the dirt off it. Its eyes were wobbly round circles scratched into the clay. On its underside were the letters, "W.S." William Schumacher, Jim's nine-year-old son.

"Well," Jim said to himself. Their dog Paczki, a sixteen-year-old terrier, had been put down earlier in the week. She had cancer, they knew, for a while, but hadn't eaten anything at all for four days when Jim called in sick to work to take her to the vet. He had stroked her head as the vet inserted the needle, afraid because he felt nothing—no sadness, no anger, no guilt. She didn't look at him or lick him, like he heard they so often did at the end. He had to watch his

hand to make sure he was still petting her. She just stopped breathing. The vet left him alone with her for a few moments, “to say goodbyes,” and he couldn’t touch her. He thought maybe he should hug her to him, hold her as close as he ever did in life, kiss her, show some sign of affection for all the years of dumb but passionate animal love she had given him. But it all seemed forced and insincere, and when, in the moment he heard the vet gently tap the door, he willed his hand to run across her midsection, he felt as connected to Paczki as to the fabric he ran his hand across when he closed the curtains in the living room every night.

He left her with the vet and arrived home just as William was coming back from school. They had been close, so he told his son the news as gently as he could, and then they each went to their own rooms. Paczki was one of the first things his wife, Leslie, and he had bought when they moved in together. Now they were both gone.

Jim put the little clay dog in his pocket, filled in the hole and scattered the twig-cross. On his way inside, he stepped on a gnarled and dirt-covered old dog toy in the shape of an alligator. It squeaked and he dumped it into the trash can in the kitchen. He’d spent the past three days trying to get rid of dog toys. He knew it must be painful for William to see them lying around, and he knew how incredibly pointless it would be to keep them. Jim had thought he’d removed them all, but the toys continued to pop up in unexpected places: buried beneath a pile of laundry, tucked behind some old shoe boxes in the closet, half-sticking out of the dirt behind the AC unit. They just never wanted to go away.

William had spent the night at a friend’s house and wouldn’t be getting home until late

afternoon, so Jim helped Kathy unpack the last of her things, many of which were still in carefully taped cardboard boxes in her car. He hauled one large gray bin through the house and heaved it onto the bed.

“What the hell have you got in there?” he said, massaging his forearms.

Kathy hung a blouse on a hanger before coming over. She examined the bin and thought for a second. “Oh, that’s just a bunch of photos. I’ll sort through them later.”

“How many have you got?” He pried off the lid and she went back to putting away the piles of clothes that erupted from the black trash bags. On the top were photos of scenes and people he knew—last Fourth of July at the lake (murky black squares of sky with pinpoints of light barely visible and a few upturned heads at the bottom of each picture), William’s birthday party with all the kids at the park, Christmas and so many shots of the tree with its ridiculously tacky purple and green star topper that Kathy had found at the flea market and instantly grown attached to, office parties, family reunions, a wedding thrown in here and there, Paczki rolling in the grass, newborn babies from the families up North, their older siblings (“look how tall this one is!” “this one made the Honor Roll!”), and then places and people he didn’t know: a snow covered tree in front of a cabin, a few kids gawking at a red convertible, a coast he didn’t recognize, Kathy’s husband and her daughter, both gone for over three years, and Kathy, active and fun and happy in so many different rectangles. And below them were even older pictures, wearing down into indistinguishably muddy browns and yellows, colors deader than the black and white of the oldest photos, shots of people Jim had never even heard about, but pleasant with all of their smiles.

“I told you I’d sort through them later,” Kathy said.

“I know.” He stroked the tips of her graying crimson hair.

She didn’t say anything else. Their relationship was easy like that. They’d met shortly after the accident that took both Jim’s wife Leslie and Kathy’s family. It was one of the worst pileups in Florida history—twenty-eight cars jamming into each other as they crossed a bridge on a foggy January morning, half a dozen fatalities. Kathy had seen Jim’s name in the paper and called him up a few weeks after the accident, just to talk. She cried into the phone that first time, and it scared and fascinated him. They’d started dating a little later and now she was moving in.

“So why would he bury the biscuit bottoms?”

“He used to feed them to her.”

She nodded. “Paczki was a good dog.” Truthfully, she barely knew her. But Jim knew the sentiment was genuine. Paczki and Kathy had fallen in love at first sight, though Kathy was, as she often admitted herself, not a dog person, preferring instead the easy, laid back companionship of cats. But she knew just the right way to scratch Paczki’s ears, and Paczki knew just the right semi-quizzical, semi-needy look to give Kathy in order to earn that scratching.

“So you really don’t think I should be worried?” he asked her. He took the ceramic dog out of his pocket and fingered the small indentations of William’s own fingerprints in the clay.

She shook her head. “It’s normal.” Jim trusted her. As a teacher, she worked with kids every day. As a mom, she’d been up to date on all of the best parenting techniques, had all the newest books. She straightened the sleeves of a jacket, gave it a tight half smile when she

finished, and hung it in the closet next to his clothes.

William came home and went to his room after saying a few words to Jim and Kathy. About an hour later, Jim stood outside his closed bedroom door and practiced mouthing the speech he would give to his son. He would sound caring, but fatherly. Understanding, but in charge, emanating the sort of leadership and wisdom the boy would need. He would be William's lighthouse. This was Kathy's metaphor, and it was all Jim could do to keep from snickering at the thought of himself as some sort of grief-beacon, the death of a dog as the rocky shoals that threatened to destroy William's perky-eyed childhood-schooner. How many pets had he lost as a child? Just off the top of his head, he could remember three dogs, a pair of hamsters, a potbellied pig, and a whole armada of fish. He turned out fine. His father never needed to have gentle talks like this. His father would've given him a black eye if he'd been caught digging up the lawn to bury some clay effigy of a pet. Jim shook these thoughts out of his head, knocked twice, and entered his son's room.

A small wooden plaque honoring William's second-place finish in the potato sack race at last year's Black Bear State Park Staff Picnic and a number of crayon drawings hung haphazardly on all four walls. Many of the drawings were of Paczki. Several more were of himself. And still a few more, Jim thought but couldn't be sure, were of Leslie.

William sat on his bed sketching in a notepad. Some show about Bigfoot was on the TV. Jim sat down on the bed beside him and patted him on the knee. William put the notepad face down.

“You sure like drawing, don’t you?” William had always enjoyed drawing. It was a hobby Jim had shared when he was a boy, sketching pirate ships and soldiers and house plants that his mother kept in a drawer in her dresser. He found them one day when he was fifteen and snooping, looking for money to go see a movie, well after he’d lost all interest in drawing. He was stunned that she would keep them all, afraid to think of what she might possibly do with them. Before the image of his mother taking out his old drawings, spreading them across the bed, and smiling over them, or maybe even crying, could fully develop, he slammed the drawer shut and never went looking to steal money again. Still, he was glad to see his son picking up his old interest. It made him feel connected.

“Do you want me to show it to you?”

“Only if you want me to see it.”

William clutched the notepad to his chest. “When it’s finished.” He smiled.

“A work in progress, huh?”

On the television, a lonely looking man stood in the middle of the woods talking to the camera. He had a thick beard and his eyes, rolling in every direction without seeming to focus, were set deep in his head. The show seemed old.

“What are you watching?”

“I don’t know. Whatever’s on.”

Jim found the remote buried in the covers and turned the TV off.

“How are you doing? Really?”

“I’m fine.”

“Are you sure?” Jim ran his fingers along the rough surface of the clay dog in his pocket. He was ready to confront his son with this evidence.

“Yes. Dad, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. You know, if you’re ever sad or upset about something, you can come talk to me? Right?”

“Okay.”

Jim stood up, walked to the door, and paused by William’s dresser.

“Oh,” he said. “I found this in the yard today. Figured it was yours.” He set the little orange dog on the dresser and turned to William. He’d already resumed drawing.

“Thanks,” William said, not looking up. “I must’ve dropped it.”

“Dropped it. Right.”

Jim walked out and closed the door behind him. William really did seem fine, he thought. Perhaps he’d buried the statue in a moment of intense grief. Jim leaned against the wall at a cool spot right where the AC vent blew and wondered why he hadn’t had his own such moment before remembering what Kathy had said, after Leslie’s and her own family’s deaths, that grief takes all forms. Then, he had thought it was only in defense of her having papered, literally papered, from corner to corner, every wall of her living room with pictures of her family, which he had thought to be the first step towards her losing her mind. She took the photos down after two weeks, and she gradually returned to normal. A few months later, he’d asked her why she did it, what drove her to pull out all those photos. They were sitting on her front porch, watching the summer rain fall, its coolness feeling like the release of the bloated midday humidity that had

been hanging between them and everything else in sight.

“I don’t really know,” she said. “It just seemed like the thing to do. It felt right.” Her jaw trembled a bit over this last word, and she lifted her hair slightly, exposing the beautiful neckline that was the first part of her he fell in love with. “What did you do?”

He told her that he cried for nights, that it had been hard, but having William helped him get through it. His parents had left thoughtful messages on his answering machine, too. He just got through it, he explained. This was all a lie. This was what he thought he was supposed to do. He didn’t cry, then, and he didn’t know what to do with William then, that young boy convulsing alone in his room. Jim tried to comfort him, but had no idea as to what to do with his hands, and so for weeks they’d simply floated in front of him or at his sides as though he moved through water.

In the living room, Kathy watched the same show on Bigfoot. He sat down next to her and they didn’t say a word; instead he just groped for her hand. Their relationship was easy like that.

After dinner that night, Kathy wanted to go to bed and read for a while, tired from having moved so much in the past couple of days. She kissed Jim and William goodnight. William adored her, Jim knew. She taught first grade at William’s school and, though he never had her, she exuded warmth and a hip attitude that little kids just clung to, even if after a few more years, maybe when they reached middle school and became more conscious of their place in relation to each other and adults, her cool factor would seem stale, desperate, or if they still felt kindly to her, a bit passé but sweet. She wore big bangles and hoop earrings to school,

meticulously matched with too-colorful blouses and skirts. Now, in sweatpants and T-shirt, with her hair bunched up behind her neck and her edging-towards-middle-age skin splotchy on her upper arms, she didn't look so in vogue. She looked exhausted.

William also wanted to be excused. He wanted to go out back and practice wall ball. Jim told not him to play for too long, since it was already after dark and he didn't want his son to get chewed up by mosquitoes. On his way out the door, William flicked the patio light on.

From the kitchen, Jim could do the dishes while watching his son through the window over the sink. The screen had begun to tear at the corners and he made a mental note to replace it when he got the chance. He figured he might as well change out the whole handle, as well, whenever he decided to work on it. It had rusted out a few years ago, but they never opened it much anyway.

The tennis ball thumped against the wall, loud enough for Jim to hear it from practically any room in the house but not quite loud enough to be annoying. Every now and then the ball got by William, but he quickly chased it down. The glare from the fluorescents in the kitchen bounced off the window, so whenever he stepped off the patio, he disappeared. After a few seconds, though, Jim would hear the ball bounce off the wall again.

And then it stopped. The patio was empty. Jim turned the water off and listened for a few more seconds. Nothing. He switched the kitchen lights off and tried to see into the darkness of his own backyard. He waited for another minute or so before turning towards the living room to get his shoes. Before he could move, however, he saw William out of the corner of his eye, trudging up to the patio with the ball clenched in his fist, followed by the giant's shadow cast by

the flood lamps. He bounced the ball a few more times before coming in and going to his room.

After all the dishes were put away, Jim slipped on his sneakers and went outside. It was clear and even a little cool. The stars were actually visible. He tried to remember the names and shapes of some constellations, but couldn't. Brown mud dots spotted the yellow brick wall where William had practiced. He headed in the direction that William had walked from after the minute-long pause and came to the orange tree.

Now he wished he'd grabbed a flashlight, since as much light as the moon and the stars put out, it couldn't get through all that brush. He groped around underneath the tree with his foot and after a second hit something hard. It was the clay dog. He picked it up. Right beside it was another small cross, made this time with twigs evidently broken off the orange tree. He snapped both sticks in half and threw the pieces away from each other in the grass.

He went inside and sat in front of the television for a few hours. Later, he wouldn't remember what he watched. He thought of Paczki, who would normally get up on the couch and snuggle into the crevice between his thigh and the sofa when he watched TV, licking his pant leg furiously, full of laughable abandon. When she was older and couldn't quite make the leap anymore, she'd rest her chin on his feet until he picked her up and sat her beside him. But she had lived for sixteen years, a good life span for any dog. They'd had good times together. And he didn't feel sad at all. No tightness in his chest. Certainly no tears. Just nothing. The room around him did not spin. The lights did not seem to dim. He did not feel empty. The pictures of Leslie, William, and himself at Amicalola Falls, hung in a descending angle on the wall, stirred nothing. He pulled the sofa away from the wall. There, clumped together like roaches avoiding

the light, were several knots of brown fur. Jim scooped them up with his bare hands and dumped them into the trash can, then took the trash out to the road. Before going to bed, he switched off the television and threw the clay dog at the wall behind it.

“What was that?” Kathy asked as he entered the bedroom.

“I dropped a plate.”

“Oh.” Her breathing leveled out.

He climbed under the covers beside her and began hating himself. He imagined throwing a hundred dogs at the wall. He thought of tearing down all of William’s drawings, in front of him, and ripping them in half one by one. He created a bonfire in his mind and tossed all of Kathy’s pictures into it. He watched the ones on the edge of the fire slowly melt and twist up into nothing. Then, he would throw in the framed picture of her dead husband and daughter that she’d placed beside them on the night stand. Finally, he’d shovel in pile after pile of knotted brown fur, letting the oily scent of burning hair soak into all of his clothing until, at last, he took off his pants and shirt and threw them in the fire, too, or just dived headfirst into the flames himself.

“What’s wrong?” Kathy turned over and laid an arm across his chest.

“Nothing.”

“You’re breathing fast.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.”

He took a few deep breaths. It went against his nature, but he decided to try to talk.

“William did it again.” He explained what had happened and what he found.

“What’d you do with the statue?”

“I threw it out.”

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

“I know. I didn’t want to. It just happened.” He remembered the weight of the clay dog in his hand, how right it felt in his palm, how easy it’d been to throw it against the wall. And nothing changed once he had thrown it. The television was still off, the lights in the kitchen still needed replacing. Only now, he hated himself with an intensity he could not explain and from a source he could not locate.

She went on to explain the various stages of grief (he’d heard it all before), from denial to bargaining, how it took everybody a different amount of time to get through this process, how William was just a kid and he should be allowed a little imaginative eccentricity.

“I just don’t want his friends to think he’s weird,” Jim said.

“Because he loved his dog?”

“Because he buried a statue and some biscuits in the backyard.”

“If they’re really his friends, they won’t think he’s weird. Didn’t your mom ever tell you that?”

“You and I both know kids don’t really work that way. They’re wired different.” From a distant somewhere, the whine of a motor rose and fell across the constant hum of traffic. It wasn’t heavy, or enough to keep Jim awake, but the interstate was close, and he felt that most keenly at this time of night, when everything else wanted to be quiet.

“Hmm.”

They were silent for a few moments. Jim thought Kathy had gone back to sleep. Then she said, “Jim, how’d you do it, you know, after Leslie died?”

“I don’t fucking know,” he said, not impolitely. He thought of William huddled in a corner of his room, shaking with tears, and himself towering over him. This was a week after the accident, the first night the two of them had tried to have dinner alone. Jim’s parents had left earlier in the day and he didn’t know what to do with William or the time they had. They mostly watched TV, walked around outside. At dinner, William refused to eat the macaroni and cheese Jim had prepared for him, saying he only wanted it if his mother or grandmother made it. Jim persisted, finally yelled. Paczki buried herself under the couch. William bolted to his room. Jim stood over him, trying to find the words to apologize, trying to figure out something to do with his floating hands. They felt like they’d fallen asleep, like they weren’t a part of him. Finally, he’d bent them around William and hugged the boy. William did stop crying after a few moments, but Jim had suspected it was more from discomfort than anything else.

He grunted, turned over, and fell into sleep. In the morning, he woke up early and plucked the shards of orange clay dog out from the tangle of cables behind the television.

The next night, Kathy phoned from school to say she’d be late and to start dinner without her, so Jim bought some fried chicken from the store and made biscuits. He put them on the table and waited for William to wash up. In the meantime, he silently practiced what he’d say to his son over dinner, gesturing his hands and pointing into the empty space. He took a deep

breath and tapped the table.

“Did you wash your hands?” Jim asked as William sat down at the other end of the table.

William nodded.

“Did you have a good day at school?” Jim opened the box of chicken.

“Yes.”

“What did you do?”

“Nothing. We played wall ball at recess.”

They ate in silence for a moment or two. “William,” he started, “I was out walking last night, and—what are you doing?”

William pried apart a biscuit, put the fluffy golden top on his plate and stuck the dark brown bottom into his napkin. “Nothing,” he said.

“Are you going to eat that? Are you saving it for later?”

“I don’t like the crusty parts.”

“You don’t?”

William shook his head.

“Well.”

“I used to just give them to Paczki.”

“I know.” Two sets of two fluorescents lit the kitchen. One of the bulbs in the nearest set was dead and its partner flickered. You get used to the dimness, Jim thought, when it comes gradually, but when you change the bulb, the white brightness can be shocking. William buttered his biscuit top, heavily, and pushed it in his mouth.

Jim would go buy two new bulbs this weekend. Might as well get four while he was at it, though, and replace them all. “William, will you please just eat it?”

“But I don’t want it,” William said, his mouth half full.

Jim sighed. “Fine. Then give it to me.”

William seemed puzzled.

“I’ll eat it, I said.” Jim reached out for the biscuit bottom.

William looked down at his plate. “That’s okay.”

“Are you going to eat it?”

“No,” he replied softly.

Jim set his fork down and began the speech he’d practiced. “William, it’s not polite to waste food and—”

“You didn’t call it a waste when I gave them to Paczki.”

“That’s because it wasn’t a waste then, was it?”

William moved his fork around his plate.

“William, you’re not a little baby anymore. You need to stop acting like one.” Jim’s voice shook.

William took another bite of his biscuit, a very small one.

“It’s time to move on now, son. Please.”

William set his fork down. “May I be excused?”

Jim nodded. William left his plate on the table and walked out. Jim dropped his head in his hands and wondered if he had said the right things. After several minutes he cleared the

plates. William's napkin and the burnt biscuit bottom weren't there.

"He did it again?" Kathy took off her heels and kneaded the soles of her feet.

"Yes. I just don't know where he buried the biscuit. I looked all over the backyard but couldn't find anything."

"Then how do you know?"

"I know. He's just gotten clever about hiding it, that's all."

"Do you want me to talk to him?" She looked serious.

"He's my son. I think I can handle it."

"Just trying to help. Why are you so defensive?"

He turned the TV on and turned up the volume. It didn't matter what was on.

"You know, I've noticed that you don't have many pictures up in here. You hang some more on that wall over there, and I think it'll really open the whole place up."

He turned up the volume some more. "I'm trying to watch this, if you don't mind. Can we talk about this later?" She was quiet. They had an easy relationship.

The next day at work, while pressure washing the metal swim docks at the park, listening to the calm, constant, and reassuring drone of the motor and rushing water, Jim had an idea. He decided to try it out as soon as he got home.

"William," he called. "Put your shoes on. We're going for a ride."

The two of them climbed into Jim's pickup and left. They drove down the tree-lined

streets, through the center of town, past the high school football stadium, where, even on a Tuesday night, kids gathered in small clumps. A few miles down the road, Jim pulled over onto a rough patch of dirt and grass next to a chain link fence that overlooked the green fields and hills of the city dump.

They got out of the truck and walked through the high grass to the fence. Jim laced his fingers through the wire and tried to remember the speech that had sounded so profound earlier in the day. But all he saw was one big green hill in the middle of his vision. Some machinery churned a little ways off in the distance and he heard metal scraping against metal.

“Dad, this place smells.”

“Yes, it does.” Some white birds landed on the hill and fluttered around for a bit.

“Can we go home?”

“William, do you know where we are?”

“Yes.”

“Then, do you know what I’ve done with all the things you’ve buried in the backyard? Where they’ve ended up?”

He looked up at Jim for a split second and then gazed out over the landfill. “Yes, I think so.”

“And do you know where Paczki’s gone, her remains?”

William was silent for a moment. He pressed his whole body up against the fence. “Yes.”

“Good.” This had all been easier than Jim had expected. “Then do you want to stay here? Do you want to stay here at the dump with them?”

The sun began to set behind Jim and William, sending their long shadows across the ground. A car passed behind them. William whirled around to look at it.

“William,” Jim put a hand on William’s shoulder and turned him back towards the landfill. “I said, do you want to stay here with them?”

“No,” William finally said. The word barely even came out. But it was still an answer. Jim was satisfied.

“Good. Then let’s go home.” They drove back in silence and the sun reflected harshly off the smooth pavement and into their eyes.

That night, Jim felt proud of the lesson he had imparted on his son. But he decided not to tell Kathy about it. She wouldn’t understand. Instead, they made love and went to sleep quickly. The sky was clouded, so with the lights out, they enjoyed complete and total darkness.

It rained hard most of the following day, drenching the trees and soaking through the grass, leaving sloshy mud puddles here and there. It finally stopped around four. Jim came home from work to find Kathy in the kitchen watching William play in the backyard with two friends from school, Tim and Chris.

Kathy leaned over the sink. Without even saying hello first, she said, “This is a violent game, Jim.” They were playing wall ball.

“It’s all in good fun.”

The ground was wet and slippery, and all three boys fell and skidded into the concrete patio

with some frequency. The once yellow tennis ball had acquired a thick coat of mud and left a brown spot wherever it hit the wall and a crumbling trail of dirt followed it as they whizzed it through the air. It looked like some comet that had flown through a planet and retained all the muck and grime from its passing.

Tim caught the ball, hopped on one leg to build momentum, and chucked it using his whole body. It bounced, hit the patio, and William ran to catch it. It slid through his fingers and dropped into the grass. He raced to tag the wall, but Chris zinged the ball at him before he could make it. William put his back into it, absorbing the blow, and the ball popped off of him and jumped ten feet in the air. The game continued.

“Jim, it’s mean.”

“You worry too much.” He splashed his face with water from the sink. “They’re just playing.”

Kathy shook her head. “No, I’ve got to say something.” She went outside. Jim followed her.

William was about to throw the ball at a ready Chris, but caught himself in the middle of his motion when he saw his dad and Kathy. All the boys muttered hellos.

Kathy asked the boys what they were doing, why they were playing such a mean game. “Doesn’t it hurt?” she asked.

Chris lifted his shirt, revealing a number of red circle welts across an otherwise pale midsection. “That’s part of the fun.”

“Yeah,” Tim said. “You just can’t let them know *where* it hurts. Then they really get you.”

He shrugged and grinned.

“See, I told you they were just having some fun,” Jim said. Kathy shook her head, shuddered, and went inside, letting the door close behind her. Jim sat on the step and watched the boys.

“Okay,” Tim said, marshaling the other two. “Everybody get back the way you were.”

Chris walked back up to the wall and turned to face it. William tossed the ball between his hands a few times and looked to his dad. Jim nodded. William grimaced, wheeled back, and threw the ball at Chris with all the power he could muster. It hit him square in the back and he collapsed to one knee. Every one of them laughed, but only Jim thought about how easy it all was. Throwing something at a wall, or a person, destroying something—that was all pure. That was communication. That was happiness, sadness, hate. Even after all of the boys went inside and a light mist started to fall, he sat on the step and bounced the ball, waiting for the evening darkness to come and swallow up the entirety of the world around him.

RETROGRADE

He found his hands to be the exact texture of the paper bag. Even the slight snag of the pulp—that characteristic threat of static that went up his wrist—and even the warmth and condensation of steam slowly escaping from the plastic-covered tins within matched perfectly with the skin of his palms.

It was sunset. The parking lot to their favorite Chinese restaurant was not full. Walking to his car and eyeing his free hand, turning it over back and forth, he did not notice the pulsing thirty-sided blossom of evaporated water leaking up the eastern sky.

“Is it supposed to look like that?” a boy asked to nobody in particular. It was the first question they always asked about a shuttle launch. They’d been conditioned to failures that looked like fireworks playing over and over again on loops. This looked like fireworks, too. But the star kept climbing air and the white-orange trail, a twisting limb now, like something on the drawing of a tree, kept following. It bent at roughly the angle of a good morning wave.

The man set the bag in his car and went over to the boy. “I’m not sure,” he said. “I think so.”

The boy’s mom was inside paying for their dinner. He knew neither of them. Still, it was hard not to feel connected to everything in the natural world while standing on the outside of a fluorescent glass rectangle labeled, in shimmering neon letters, “BEST CHINESE.” In there, customers frowned in lines, little girls in braids punched at cash registers and bit their lips, lanky

men in caps smacked grills with spatulas and looked scared if they caught somebody watching them. Or maybe just tired.

“I want to be sure,” the boy said. He was maybe eight. “My fish died the other day, and I couldn’t handle anything else like that. I just couldn’t.”

The boy would have a house full of fish bowls in every design: long boxes full of castles, scuba divers, and pirate ships; gum ball machines; glass sculptures in the shape of fish. He would have more fish than he could possibly care about. His mother would’ve told him to care about the fish that died. It would be twenty years, the man knew, before the boy ever really had to care about a dead fish.

The trail throbbed with the yellow glow of the boosters. It painted and unpainted the surrounding patch of sky in much the same a way a television in one room casts a wobbling glare of unsure light on the wall of another. The boy’s mother came out and they all watched it together for a moment more. Soon, the fading star of the orbiter disappeared completely, leaving only the graying trail, its curls of smoke flattening out and dispersing over the horizon.

Then came the second question they always asked.

“How long does it last?” the boy said. “The trail?”

“I’m not sure,” the man said. He tucked his hands into his pockets firmly, with a sense of finality. “I don’t think you should watch it for that long, to wait for it to disappear. There’s something just not right about that. Don’t ever do it.”

MANATEES IN THE NIGHT

Last Christmas, my sister Deb and I drove south with her five-year-old son, Dakota, to visit our parents in Merritt Island. She was teaching at an elementary school in Savannah at the time and had three weeks off for winter break. I was still trying to pull everything together to start my portrait studio but figured I could take a few weeks off. Along the way, Deb wanted to stop by and see Glen Jones, who was back in Florida living with his parents. A few nights before we left, I'd asked her if that was such a good idea.

"Dakota's got to meet his father some time or other," she'd said. She was carefully folding Dakota's tiny T-shirts on the bed and didn't look up. "Might as well be now." We left it at that.

After a couple hours of driving, we stopped for brunch at an IHOP just outside of Jacksonville. Deb went to the restroom while Dakota and I sat down at a table. It was a Saturday morning and, though the restaurant was quiet now, signs of the earlier slam still littered the tables. I picked the cleanest one I could but find but it was still a mess of dirty dishes and silverware. I set my hand in a pool of syrup while trying to get Dakota to quit playing with a leftover straw wrapper. He tore it into shreds and made three neat little piles on the table.

"Dakota, why are you doing that?" I asked him.

He didn't look up. "I don't know."

"Then why are you doing it?"

Before he could answer, a waitress came over with a rag, removed the dirty plates, and wiped up the table. "Well, aren't you a little cutie," she said, eyeing Dakota. She handed me a

menu. “Is he yours?”

“Yes.” When Dakota was first born and people asked me that question, I’d explain that I was actually his uncle, that his mother had left an abusive and angry man to come live with me, and that I just stepped in to play the father role as best I could, which, admittedly, probably wasn’t that great of a performance. It didn’t take me long to realize that it was just easier to say he was mine. He looked enough like me to pass. I figured that in a couple of years, Dakota might start objecting or wondering why I called him my son. But for now, he seemed more than willing to play along.

Deb came back a moment later and slid into the booth next to Dakota. She tousled his dark hair. He beamed up at her.

After a quick meal, we got back on the road. It was near noon and warm. We rolled the windows down and it only took Dakota a few minutes to fall asleep.

“It’s weird coming back here,” I said. Neon-colored billboards lined the highway, advertising fresh oranges and cheap souvenirs. “It’s only been a few years, and it’s not really that far, but it’s still weird, you know?”

Deb didn’t answer. Her arm stuck out the window and bounced on the air currents sliding past the car. Her eyes were closed and for the first time in many years she looked pretty again, seeming less like the over-stressed single parent and more like the effervescent teenager of my youth who had four dates for her senior prom. It must be the Florida sunshine, I thought.

“Deb?” I said it softly, not wanting to wake her up if she was asleep.

Her eyes opened and she looked at me, a little startled. “What?” she said. The smile that

had nudged up her lips only a moment before had disappeared. The lines at the sides of her mouth ran deep. She was a mom again. “What’s wrong, Martin?”

And then I discovered the real reason why she looked different. For the first time in five years, Deb had put on makeup.

“Nothing,” I said, trying not to stare at the smear of red lipstick that ran off the corner of her mouth. I turned on the radio and kept driving south.

We arrived at Glen’s parents’ a little after two in the afternoon. It was a small two-bedroom house nestled in a quiet neighborhood a few blocks from the highway. All of the houses were older and the Joneses’ in particular looked like it could use a little work. Paint chipped off the siding and the front jalousie window didn’t quite close all the way, so it had been sealed with duct tape. It looked like the lawn could use a mow, too. But I figured I shouldn’t judge. I wasn’t much of handyman myself. That’s why we lived in an apartment.

I held Dakota’s hand as we marched up to the front door. Deb knocked, and almost immediately Mrs. Jones answered the door, Mr. Jones towering over her shoulder and grinning. I’d never met or even talked to either of them before, but they were pretty much exactly as Deb had described them. They were friendly enough, even though I got the distinct impression that Mrs. Jones’ amiability had been carefully practiced over years of working as a deacon in her church and that Mr. Jones was never quite all there, his mouth smiling and laughing while his eyes wandered around everywhere but to your own. He was quiet, though, and I can respect that. And, in the case of Mrs. Jones, I don’t necessarily think sincerity is all that important when it

comes to friendship. Being friends is like dancing. If each person knows their part and sticks to it, you can have some fun regardless of how much you really care about each other.

Mrs. Jones gave us each a hug and pinched Dakota's cheeks. I'd never actually seen anybody do that before. "Aren't you just adorable?" she said.

"I can't thank you guys enough for letting us stay here for the night," Deb said.

Mr. Jones shook his head and patted her hand. "Nah, ain't going to make no grandson of mine sleep in a motel. No sir."

Everything he said had a hoarse, mumbled quality that made it difficult to understand him. I wondered if he had had some kind of throat surgery. He slapped me hard on the back.

"Ain't that right?"

He used to be in construction like Glen and was a big man. His slap sent me reeling forward. He chuckled a little too loudly before leading the way inside.

"Where's Glen?" Deb asked.

"He stepped out to go to the store, but he should be back any moment," Mrs. Jones replied sweetly. Then, she pivoted and knelt down to Dakota and looked him right in the face. "Do you like doggies?"

Dakota nodded his head. Deb smiled at me. Mr. Jones opened a bedroom door and the biggest, blackest labrador I'd ever seen came bounding out. He must have been close to 120 pounds but he covered the fifteen feet to where we stood like a black flash, leaping as much as sprinting. Dakota ran behind me and clung to my pant leg. The dog jumped at me. He splayed his paws across my torso and frantically tried to reach at my face, scratching my chest several

times in the process.

“Heel, Chuck!” Mr. Jones shouted. It didn’t work. He just laughed and walked into the kitchen.

I wrapped my arms around Chuck to see if I could pry him off. It was like trying to hold onto a spring. I finally threw him to the ground and picked up Dakota, hoisting him high up over my head.

“Relax, Chuck,” Mrs. Jones said, rubbing the back of his head. “He’s just a little hyper today, ain’t you boy? But he really is good with kids.”

Deb nodded at me and I put Dakota back on the ground. Chuck sauntered up to him. They stood practically eye to eye, sizing each other up. Dakota moved a hand to pet him but Chuck licked him in the nose before he could. Dakota started bawling, both fists thrown angrily to his sides. Chuck just cocked his head quizzically for a second then started barking. Deb, Mrs. Jones, and I tried to calm Dakota down but he wouldn’t stop crying. The front door slammed. I figured Mr. Jones had gotten sick of all the noise and had left. I couldn’t blame him. Then, before any of us really knew what had happened, Chuck was being dragged away across the carpet back to the bedroom, his brown eyes pushed wide open as his head swam wildly from side to side. He let out one last yelp before being thrown into the bedroom and having the door shut inches from his nose. Chuck howled, but from the other side of the door it made only a muffled echo.

A tall, muscular man with a complexion the color of rusted tin walked over and shook hands with Dakota. “You must be Dakota,” he said. “We’ve talked before. I’m Glen.”

Glen and Dakota had in fact been talking with one another on the phone for the past couple of years. They never really had much to say, the one being a quiet, serious adult without any experience talking to kids and the other a five-year-old without the ability to initiate a conversation on his own. Glen would ask Dakota how he felt, Dakota would say he felt fine, and then they'd usually spend a couple of minutes just breathing into their respective receivers and listening to their breaths travel across the staticky lines. Then, Glen would say how nice it was talking to Dakota and that he loved him, Dakota would say he loved Glen, and then they'd hang up. It turned out nothing much changed when they met in person.

Glen's parents left to go Christmas shopping, leaving the house to us. Once Glen reintroduced Chuck and Dakota (he had Dakota feed the dog a treat to distract him at first), the three of them got along famously. Glen and Dakota must've spent an hour that first afternoon just sitting on the couch, staring out the window, and stroking that dog's head. I can't imagine Chuck ever had it better and I swear it looked like he was smiling. Deb smiled, too, as she sat next to me on the love seat across from them. We didn't say much, but Glen explained how he'd been out of work for the past six months and that was why he had to move back in with his parents, how it was only temporary and he had a feeling some more work was coming up (he didn't elaborate), how much he was looking forward to Christmas, and how happy he was to get to see Dakota and Deb, and that it was nice to finally meet me. I looked for the signs of the angry man that Deb had left, the man who she claimed could be set off by anything: the flickering of a light bulb, dead batteries in the television remote, the sound of change rattling in

the dryer. I looked for the man that had thrown a plate at my sister the night she left him, but all I found was a somber man of thirty who seemed earnest about getting his life together.

At one point, I went up to Chuck and rubbed him on the muzzle. He started, but Glen and Dakota maintained the steady rhythm of their strokes on the back of his head so he soon lay back down. I knelt to get face to face with him. He was a beautiful dog. Just a hint of gray showed around his whiskers. It made him look wise. I wanted to go out to the car and get my camera so I could take his picture.

“Don’t do that,” Glen said.

“What?” I replied, wondering if he had read my mind.

“Look him in the face like that. He’s a good dog, but you shouldn’t never trust a dog that much.”

I backed away slowly and stood up.

Glen didn’t stop petting Chuck. “He’s an animal. Shouldn’t never trust an animal. They don’t act on reason.”

“And men do?”

“I never said you could trust men neither.” Glen grinned over at Deb, who let out a sharp little laugh.

“Then who can you trust, Glen?” I said. Deb shifted in her seat. Dakota just kept petting Chuck and smiling slightly, happy and irreverent. I envied him when the silence settled on the room for a few seconds too long.

“God.” Glen looked up at me with beady inset eyes buried beneath dark bushy eyebrows.

He looked exactly like Dakota, maybe even more than I did. “God and myself.”

I rolled my eyes and sat down next to Deb. She let out a loud laugh. “God?” she said. “*God* you guys are too serious!” She patted her stomach. “I don’t know about you all, but I’m starving. Dakota, are you hungry?”

Dakota nodded.

“Let’s go then,” Glen said. “I know a great place.”

Dakota stood up. He had clumps of black dog hair all over the front of his khakis. Deb guided him back to the bedroom so he could change. I wanted to get cleaned up a bit myself, so I followed her. She closed the bedroom door behind us.

Glen was staying on the couch so we had his room for the evening. His parents had set up a small cot in the middle of the room for me and it left little room to walk, with the bed, the desk, and the empty bookcase. Glen had apparently been staying here for a few months but the room showed no sign of use. I asked Deb if she thought this was strange.

“Not really. Our old place was the same way. He never let me decorate.” She dug through her suitcase for Dakota’s pants. “So what do you think, Big Dog?” The previous Father’s Day, Deb had gotten me a card with a photo of a puppy sitting on top of a grown dog’s back, the message saying, “Happy Father’s Day to the Big Dog.” She and Dakota signed it.

“What about?” I asked.

“Glen. Do you think he’s changed?”

“I didn’t know him before.”

“Yeah, but do you think it’s possible he could’ve changed in five years?” She pulled out a

pair of small black pants and handed them to Dakota.

“I guess anything’s possible. But let’s not try to read too much into one afternoon.”

Deb took a deep breath and forced it out quickly. “He’s coming up to Macon.”

“What?”

“They’re building a paper mill in Macon and he thinks he can get on the job.”

“So?”

“He wants to come by the apartment on the weekends. Just to see what happens.”

“What do you think is going to happen?”

“I don’t know.” She smiled and shrugged her shoulders. “But I have hope.”

Glen hadn’t had a chance to tell Deb this since we’d arrived, so I knew he must’ve told her over the phone at some point. I felt a little betrayed. She hadn’t told me her real reason for stopping down here was to give Glen a trial run at fatherhood before letting him become a bigger part of Dakota’s life. But I didn’t have much of a chance to think about it since Dakota needed help buttoning up his pants. Normally, his mother would help him, but now she was too busy preening in the mirror, admiring the gentle smoothing effects of the single dim incandescent bulb on her aging skin.

We met Glen’s parents at a sports bar called *The Later Gator*. It was a nice enough place for a sports bar. Being Saturday, though, it was loud. Nobody said much of anything outside of how they liked their meal. Glen made a toast to family, and it got a little awkward, so I think we were all relieved when we finally piled back in his pickup, Dakota sitting in between Glen and

Deb in the front and me in the back seat by myself. Glen's parents headed home and we waved goodbye, but it wasn't even eight o'clock yet.

"Where to now?" I asked, half-joking. I had assumed we'd just head home. I was tired from a long day of driving. Deb and Glen both checked their watches and started to speak before insisting that the other go first. Dakota just bounced. Since it was a special occasion, Deb had let him have a Coke with dinner and he was acting a little hyper.

Glen spoke first. "You guys want to go around and look at the lights?"

"That's a great idea," Deb said. "Dakota, do you want to go look at Christmas lights?"

He nodded his whole body.

Nobody asked my opinion, so I just slumped back in my seat and tried to stay awake.

We drove past house after house with roofs lined by strands of light-up icicles while the oak trees overhead were as fresh and full of leaves as they would be any day in the spring. Animated snowmen waved and Santa guided his sleigh perpetually up and down a foot off the ground. It was early in the evening and several houses still had their curtains open so we could see every shape and size of Christmas tree framed in their windows.

Glen switched on the radio and played with the dial until "Jingle Bells" came through. The reception wasn't very good though, and a discussion about the upcoming Presidential primaries kept cutting in and out. Deb made a few halfhearted attempts to sing along before giving up and just humming the song in between oohing at the lights.

No matter how tacky or extravagant the decorations, however, you can only look at Christmas lights for so long. After about thirty minutes Dakota was bored and started to play

with the radio, switching from Christmas music to static. Deb told him to stop but he wouldn't listen.

"Dakota," I said. "Why are you doing that?"

"I don't know," he replied. He kept turning the dial, picking up bits and pieces of sound, not even whole words but just single syllables amid static.

I waited for Glen to explode. His fingers tightened on the wheel.

"Then why are you doing it?" I asked.

Glen reached over and turned the volume all the way up. If I had been near sleep only moments before, the auditory chaos that erupted from the speakers slammed me back into full consciousness. "Because it's fun, right?" Glen said.

Dakota laughed a loud, crazy laugh I'd never heard before and Glen matched it with his own. After a moment and without saying anything, Glen switched the radio off and turned the truck around back in the direction of his parents' house.

A few turns later and we were on the highway going fifty, a lake on our left and a line of trees to the right. Nobody talked. The only sound was the air rushing through the crack in Glen's window where he held out his cigarette. It was cold air coming in, but it felt great in the otherwise stuffy cab. I had just about nodded off again when I heard Dakota.

"Whose lights are those?" he said, pointing to the cluster of bright yellow lights across the lake. There were a lot of them and they cast a dim haze up in the surrounding sky, causing the whole thing to look like a miniature sunset.

"That's the power plant, sweetie," Deb said, running a hand through his coarse black hair.

There was silence for a moment.

“You know, I worked on that plant.” Glen flicked the remainder of his cigarette out the window.

“Really?” Dakota was wide awake now and so was I.

“What do you say, Mom?” Glen asked. “Think we have time for a detour?”

She nodded. Glen and Dakota grinned at each other.

A short drive led from the highway up to the plant’s main gate. It was closed. There was an empty parking lot just beyond it and service roads and more trees beyond that. The plant itself must have still been about another half-mile ahead since all we could see through the forest were the four smokestacks sending plumes of orange-tinted smoke up into the night sky. Glen parked beside the gate and grabbed his flashlight from the glove compartment. He got out and we followed him. Dakota grabbed his hand and they walked side by side to the gate.

Glen walked over and laced the fingers of his free hand in the chain link fence next to a “No Trespassing” sign. He pressed against it and stared into the empty parking lot.

“Did you build the whole thing?” Dakota asked.

Glen smiled. “No, just helped them convert it from oil-burning to natural gas. The plant itself is over thirty years old.”

Dakota nodded his head knowingly and looked up at the smokestacks. “Can we get any closer?”

Nobody said anything. After a moment, Glen turned the flashlight on and pointed it to a narrow dirt trail in the woods that had previously gone unseen. “Follow me,” he said.

The trail weaved and bent through a thick, overgrown collection of scrub pines and saw palmettos. Crickets chirped, but the further we walked, the more their chirping was drowned out by a low humming.

After several minutes we came to a break in the woods. It gradually expanded and we were at the water. From here, we had a clear view of the power plant less than a quarter-mile away on the opposite bank. A tall fence surrounded the perimeter but it was otherwise unobstructed. There were floodlights attached to everything. The four smokestacks still dominated the scene and another set of shorter gray structures surrounded them.

“It’s beautiful, ain’t it?” Glen said.

Dakota, still holding his hand, simply nodded.

“Look here,” Glen said. “There’s something I want to show you.” He waved Deb and me over as well.

We walked up to the edge of the bank, our shoes sinking slightly in the sand and mud. Glen shined his flashlight over the still water. Several large gray blobs floated just beneath the surface.

“What are those?” Dakota asked.

“Manatees,” Glen replied.

I’d seen them before in aquariums, but never this close and never so many at once.

“Why are they here?” Deb asked the question this time.

“The plant uses water in its cooling system. It discharges the heated water right here, so when it’s cold on the river, the manatees come here to warm up.”

Glen moved the beam across the water. There were dozens of them.

“How many are there?” Dakota asked.

“Want to try to count?” Glen grinned down at Dakota. He shifted the light from spot to spot as Dakota called out the number he saw. Deb laughed. Maybe it was just the dim lighting, but she looked truly happy for the first time in a long while. I took a step back.

And as they stood together, laughing and pointing on the bank, the yellow blaze of the power plant turned them into two-dimensional silhouettes cut from black construction paper and they looked like a family for the first time. Deb came right up behind Glen and Dakota and put a hand on each of their shoulders. Glen shined the flashlight in their faces instead of on the manatees, causing them to first wince from the bright light, and then burst out laughing. I stumbled my way back down the dark path.

Then, just as Dakota had reached fifteen for the fourth time, I heard Deb gasp. I turned. The three of them huddled around the flashlight and watched its dying light turn from white to yellow to orange to light brown to nothing. Glen clicked the switch off and on. A brief, dim light came on for a couple of seconds and then fizzled out.

“Cheap ass motherfucking batteries,” he said, uselessly shaking the flashlight.

Dakota looked blankly up at his father. Glen threw the flashlight to the ground. It landed in the mud and sank. This was it. Glen had finally lost his cool. I walked back to them, to stand in between Deb and Dakota and Glen. Not long after Deb moved in with me and told me about Glen throwing the plate at her, I told her if he ever tried to hurt her again I’d kick his ass. She told me I wouldn’t stand a chance but thanked me anyway. Now, here in front of him, I agreed

with her but decided to do my best to stick to my promise.

I couldn't see much but his big frame lurching towards me in the darkness, hands extended. I didn't know what he was going to do. He took a step closer and my whole body tightened.

"Sorry," he said and bent down to pick up the flashlight.

Deb mumbled, "It's okay," before she grabbed Dakota by the wrist and dragged him past me back down the path towards the truck. She moved quickly and I could hear her running into branches and thickets, twigs snapping all around her.

Glen stuck the flashlight in his pocket and scratched the back of his neck. "Women."

I didn't say anything. It took me a second to realize I still blocked his way back to the path. I relaxed, but he turned to face the power plant instead. In the darkness, he looked old and broken, crooked even. He walked with a slight limp towards the water. His hair, jet black in the light, only appeared frayed and torn in silhouette.

"They're still there," he said. "The manatees. Even if we can't see them, they're there."

I didn't know what to say.

"What's it like?" he said.

"What?"

"To have a family." A manatee breached the surface and expelled air from its nostrils.

"It's a lot of work."

He nodded.

"And you're always afraid of losing them."

He turned to me. "Really?"

“It’s terrible.”

He let out a deep breath.

“It’s so damn terrible,” I repeated, as much for myself as for Glen.

He came over and patted me on the shoulder. “You’re a good kid.”

And together, we stumbled our way back down the dark, narrow path to the truck.

As planned, Deb, Dakota, and I left early the next morning so we could get to our parents’ house by lunchtime. Only Glen’s parents and Chuck saw us off. We tried to wait for Glen to get up but it just wasn’t happening. We were on a tight schedule and he knew when we were leaving. We waved goodbye and continued south.

The first week of the following February, when we were back in Savannah, a package came addressed to Dakota. I looked at the return address. It was Glen’s parents’ house. I thought it odd since we hadn’t heard from him since Christmas. I immediately threw it away. A few minutes later, curiosity got the better of me and I opened it. Inside, was a Christmas card. There was no writing on the inside other than Glen’s signature. In the box itself was a small manatee stuffed animal. Curiosity sated, I threw it all back in the trash. Then, a few minutes later, I decided that just didn’t seem right. I pulled the manatee out of the trash and left the card. When Dakota came home from school that afternoon, I told him I had a surprise for him.

THE WHOLE HEADLIGHT-COLORED NIGHT

I went into the small bathroom to wash up. I did it in the dark since the fan was connected to the light switch and its rattling gave me a headache. When I finished toweling off and my eyes adjusted, I noticed the embroidery in the corner: there was a little palm tree next to a cursive “Florida.” It looked cheap, worn out, and thin.

Meredith was still lying on the bed, still naked and half under the covers. In the dim orange light of the bedside lamp, its color spilling over her red hair and pale, never-hardly-seen-the-sun back, she was beautiful. Something clicked softly every second or so and I wondered if I was actually hearing the ticking of my watch from the pocket of my jeans on the floor, the moment being so quiet and tranquil, or maybe I just had superhuman hearing. I wonder about stuff like that every now and then, but just for half a moment. Then I saw Meredith playing with my pocket knife, pulling its blade out a quarter of the way and letting it snap back in.

“Where’d you get this, Goat?” she asked.

“What?” But of course I knew she meant the knife. I’d bought it at a pawn shop in Davenport for thirty-five dollars before we left. I shouldn’t have. I had just drug up from the power plant so I could come back down here to Florida and get on the books. I’d heard a bunch of work was getting ready to start up at the Cape—my dream job—and my brother Tom said we could stay with him. But these construction jobs sometime took a while to get going, and I knew we needed to save every penny. I was feeling a little depressed and the knife had a cool hilt with a snake and a skull. It was something a biker would carry, a big man with big arms and big sunglasses who didn’t take anything from anybody. I couldn’t resist. The sales clerk had called

it an investment.

Meredith gestured at the knife.

“Oh, that,” I said. “It was my dad’s.” The lie came easily.

She nodded solemnly, and by solemnly, I mean slowly and with her eyes closed. “I guess he had it with him in Vietnam, right?”

“Yep.” My father hadn’t been to Vietnam, but I told her that so she wouldn’t think all us DeGroats were losers who didn’t amount to anything and that maybe there was still some hope for me. He was in the Reserves, but the war ended just before he could ship over. I told her he was a Lurp. I saw it in a movie and figured it sounded cool. “That knife was probably in Charlie’s throat at one point or other.”

She shuddered a little, then shook her head. “Goat, I found the receipt for the knife in your pocket.” She twisted the covers around her.

“Oh.” I was really surprised by this.

“How do you justify it?” She was up on an elbow now. “How do you justify spending thirty-five dollars for a pocket knife when we can barely afford to eat?”

This was one of those times she was asking me a question but wasn’t planning on letting me really answer it. It was usually best just to let it blow over, so I waited. She still didn’t say anything, so I finally said, “I guess—”

“How do you justify it, Goat, when we can’t even afford to put a roof over our heads?” That bedside lamp made long shadows on the floor out of the cups and keys and wallets laid out on the dresser. “Thank God your brother Tom’s willing to take us in. But why, Goat, are you out

spending all of your money on pocket knives when we have to rely on charity for everything else?”

“It’s not charity,” I said. “I told you I’m going to pay him rent when I get the money.” I had told her this before.

The room, not large to begin with, just room enough for the one bed, a night stand with a lamp, and a tiny dresser holding up a television, collapsed inward on me and I swear I could’ve reached from end to end of it if I’d just held out my arms. The carpet, too, dry and brittle from either under- or over-cleaning, wanted to bunch up around my feet. Meredith pretended not to notice, instead giving me her thoughtful look, tilting her head and catching it in the palm of her hand, brushing her back behind her ears, and scrunching her face up. This was also her “I hate you” look.

“Please don’t cry,” she said. She scooted down the bed to get closer to where I stood, reached for my hands. The sheets rubbed over the mattress and the whole bed made an uncomfortably quick snort.

I wasn’t crying, or close to it. She just liked to pull that card out whenever she wanted to ace an argument. I pulled on my jeans and stepped outside, leaving her on the bed, arms outstretched. Just before the door closed, I heard her fall back against the twanging mattress springs.

The night was cool and quiet. The moon hung up in the sky, looking about the size of a pupil. We were on the second floor and had a good view of the whole place, if we’d wanted it. Our building had about two dozen rooms on two floors. Two more buildings just like it, yellow

and plain as old sofas, sat around the simple square pool. I liked looking down at the water, its still surface reflecting all the clear night sky.

I checked my watch. 1:33. Meredith would probably come out here looking for me after a little while. That's how these things usually went. She would be overly harsh, apologize, then we'd be friends again. She wasn't a bad person, just a little nervous, anxious about money, which maybe didn't make her all that different from a lot of people I knew. In Davenport, when I was working and we used to go to restaurants, she had this annoying tendency of looking at the bill and sizing up the tip I left.

"That's too much," she'd say. "You're not singlehandedly trying to put our waiter's kids through college, you know." She said she was being prudent. Maybe she was.

I stood there for a while, rapping my knuckles on the railing and waiting and watching that pool, because there really wasn't anything else to do. Nothing was happening. The chairs by the pool, a dark green plastic coated with a light sheet of rainwater, reflected the dully white gleam of the spotlights overhead. One of them was tipped over, its legs sticking out at angle not unlike an artillery cannon. Had the wind done that? Or maybe someone had tilted it in a moment of released rage. The blue of the pool was perfectly still, revealing nothing, leading to nothing. It just sat, unnaturally placid, in its perfect rectangle container. I got bored with the water after a few minutes and walked over to the stairwell. A dark-haired girl was sprawled out across the bottom two steps, face down.

"Shit." I think I actually said it. I hoped she wasn't dead. The stairs all vibrated a bit on my first step down, but it didn't jar the girl at all. Her legs trailed behind her like they'd meant to

keep up with her body, but could only collapse and fold beneath her, and, in their exhaustion, had heaped themselves together like a bunch of tired runners. They looked separate from her body somehow. They were so tan, smooth, and perfectly shaped that they couldn't possibly belong to this mess of a girl passed out on the stairwell in a cheap motel.

When I was about halfway down, I called to her. It came out as a whisper, but it was so still and quiet all around that it felt like the appropriate level. She didn't respond. I went down the rest of the way. The girl wore a plaid skirt and a rough gray jacket about three sizes too big. Her dark hair looked like it smelled really nice. I prodded her with my foot. She raised her head and mumbled something, but I couldn't make out anything. At least she wasn't dead.

“What'd you say?” I knelt down beside her.

She lifted her head again slowly. Her eyes were red and didn't ever open more than halfway. They never did focus on anything in particular. And she was young. She couldn't have been more than nineteen and was maybe even as young as fifteen. She spoke a bit more, and before the words fell into mumbling, I picked out what I thought was Spanish.

I shook my head. “No comprende, sister.” I only knew a few words. I took some classes in high school and heard some of the guys speak it at the power plant. Sitting down on the step beside her, I resisted the urge to touch her hair. But it was right there. It would have been so easy to run my fingers through it, just to see what it felt like. To pretend as though I could wake her up just by rubbing her hair. The more I thought about it—her—the more I wanted to kiss her. It was almost two a.m. and I'd been up all day and it did just feel like the right thing to do, like maybe it would wake her up, or maybe Meredith would step out right then and see us and get

jealous. I don't know why I thought that. It would've been messy.

A green junker with an unpainted passenger door drove through the parking lot slowly with its lights off. It groaned. Its brakes squealed as it mounted and overcame the speed bump in front of our building. Then, it was gone and we—the girl and I—were alone again. It was just us, the moon, and the whispered gurgling of the pool. I hoped nobody noticed us. I didn't have a good explanation for any of this. At the same time, part of me hoped the girl herself wouldn't wake up. I didn't know how she'd react to being cradled by a stranger.

I wondered what she was on and how much she'd taken, how'd she gotten it or who'd given it to her, who'd left her here, and most of all, what to do with her. The police might have been able to help, but I didn't want to get the girl in trouble if she'd been doing something she shouldn't have. I didn't particularly feel like going through all that hassle either. It was past two already. Meredith had yet to come out looking for me, so I figured she'd already fallen asleep. Sometimes things went like that, too.

“Hey, señorita.” I tapped her shoulder. “Donde es your room?” She didn't move or say anything, so I decided to sit with her for a few more minutes. When a breeze came through, I envied the girl her heavy jacket.

The green sedan drove by again and slowed as it passed, its brakes whistling. Rock music came softly through a crack in one of the windows. It looked ominous, like the kind of car only bad things could happen in. The front quarter panel had been stripped of its paint, showing only the dull gray primer. I watched it until it was out of sight, its brake lights bending around the next curve in the parking lot. The girl still slept, not making a sound.

“Señorita, I think it’s time you get up.” I pushed her shoulder, gently first, then harder, again and again, so hard her head shook. She mumbled something in Spanish and looked up at me. “Let’s go,” I said.

I took her arm and hauled her to her feet. We made it up three steps before she slid through my arms. I didn’t know where to grab her so she fell, banged her side into the rail and landed again on the concrete step. I thought I heard her laugh.

“I don’t think this is going to happen,” I said. She didn’t respond. Even if we had gotten up the steps, there was really no place to go. Meredith wouldn’t appreciate me bringing her into our room. I just wanted to get her out of sight of the road. It wasn’t safe, not with green car circling around us. I lifted the girl back to her feet, tried to get a grip around her waist, had to slide my arm beneath the too-big gray jacket to get a hold of anything. There, she was so soft and warm. I didn’t realize how cold my hands were from the chilly night air until I felt the small of her back. My hand didn’t want to leave that spot. I also realized I was terribly, terribly lonely.

The green sedan pulled in front of the steps one more time. It idled. The windows were tinted and impossible to see through. After a moment, the passenger door opened and a squat man with a piggish nose stepped out. He approached the steps, eyeballing me the whole way. The driver, a slim young guy in a beanie, got out and leaned over the hood of the car.

“What’s going on, man?” the squat guy said. He thumbed at his nose.

I heaved the girl over my shoulder and carried her up the steps, feeling the whole staircase shake with each heavy footfall. My steps echoed in the narrow stairwell. We lurched back and forth and it seemed certain that we’d fall one or the other any second.

“Hey, man!” the first guy said. “Where you going?”

“She’s my girlfriend,” I said. “We’re tired.” And I waited for the bullet to enter my back.

I was so sure it was coming, even if I would never understand why.

“Bullshit!” I heard him thud across the pavement and up the first few steps.

“Leave us alone!” My voice shook.

“You put her down, man, or I’m calling the cops.”

I swiveled. He had his cell up to his ear. He was sweating. Behind him the slim guy was snickering.

“Let’s just get out of here, Tommy,” the slim guy said. “It’s getting late. Besides, maybe she really is his girlfriend.”

Tommy didn’t turn around. “She’s barely even sixteen. You think she’s with this creepy old guy?” Tommy and I were probably about the same age, but I didn’t feel like getting into that at the moment. “And I saw him come down the stairs and start messing with her.” He nodded at me.

“Who is she?” I asked.

“The fuck should I know?” He put his cell away. “We were just driving by and saw her laying there. I didn’t know what to do with her so we just kept circling the parking lot to keep an eye on her. Then you show up.”

I placed the girl back on the steps as gently as I could, leaning her up against the wall. She looked peaceful.

“I think this is a misunderstanding,” I said.

I sat back down and so did Tommy. I explained that I had found her, too, and was worried about what they were doing, just circling the parking lot.

“You were worried about *us*?” He raised his eyebrows further than they should’ve physically been able to go, giving him an unnaturally small forehead to accompany his piggish nose. He was truly ugly. “You were the one feeling up underneath her coat.”

We laughed nervously.

“Rob, park the car!” Tommy called. Rob did so and joined us on the staircase.

“So what do you think happened to her?”

The two of them shook their heads. We discussed the possibilities for a bit. The fluorescent bulb at the top of the stairwell hummed and the light made everything seem washed out and thin. The two guys, the girl, the building itself. We all existed in a two-dimensional world. To try to move forward or back would only result in pain or frustration; we slid along the surface of reality like ice floes on a river, or bugs trapped between the window screen and the glass. It was almost three. I can’t be held responsible for what I thought.

“So what do you think she’s dreaming about?” Tommy asked, half-smiling.

Rob grinned and started to say something, then stopped. He adjusted his beanie and stared at his shoes. We were all silent, going deeper into ourselves. We tried to imagine what anybody might dream about, what we might dream about if given the chance. It made conversation difficult, since we were thinking about the galactic issues and ideas that are so beautiful in the mind but fall apart when they’re actually spoken. Stuff like love, wonder, rhetorical questions. Compared to that, any chitchat is unbearably dull and pointless.

Several minutes later, I said, “So where does this end?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do we just wait here till dawn? Till she wakes up?”

“I guess so.”

“Fuck that. I’m getting hungry.”

“Rob. Shut up.”

“You guys can go, if you want,” I said. “I’ll watch her.”

“Sorry, man,” Tommy said. “But I don’t think so.”

“You don’t trust me?”

“Do you trust me?”

I didn’t. We sat for a while longer and talked. I told them about my job, how I couldn’t wait to work at the space center. Rob thought it was really cool. He said he was actually going to school to be an engineer and one day work for NASA. I wished him luck.

Tommy asked if I had a wife. I explained my situation with Meredith. “That sucks, man,” he said.

“It’s probably not as bad as I make it sound.”

It was getting close to four. I’d been up since six the previous morning and could barely keep my eyes open. Seconds of time and conversation disappeared. I said some things I couldn’t even remember the moment after I said them.

“Tommy, look,” Rob said at one point. He motioned at the girl. She was still sleeping.

Tommy pressed an ear against her chest. He looked at Rob and the two of them bolted

down the stairs and jumped in their car. The tires squealed as the car sped out of the parking lot. The dead girl didn't look all that different than she did when she was alive, I remember thinking in amazement, before I was fully awake.

I didn't know what to do. I assumed calling the police at this point would be a bad idea. That would arouse some suspicion. I could practically hear the operator's nasally voice in my head already, "And you did what for the past two hours?" I looked around the motel parking lot to see if anybody was around. It was quiet. The wind rustled the tops of the trees, then stopped. The birds would get to chirping soon, and I thought I could see the first hint of daybreak to the east, over the highway and its neon billboards for oranges and T-shirts. It might've just been the light pollution, or maybe it was all my imagination.

I touched her cheek. It was still warm, but there was no doubt she'd stopped breathing. I pressed my ear against her chest to be sure, looking up about every second to make sure nobody saw us. I didn't know what to do with her. I didn't feel particularly sorry for her. I didn't know her, so how could I? I was sorry she was so beautiful, that she had eyes that curved up and hair that looked like velvet, since that's probably what led to all of this for her, but beyond that, she wasn't all that different than any dead girl you might see on the news or in the paper. There were so many, how could you even begin to care about each one? I just needed a plan, something I could do with her.

The too-blue pool caught every glimmer. It was the center of everything. So I carried the girl there and dropped her in. Her black hair fanned out around her calm, still-sleeping face as her body sank a few inches and rose back to the surface of the water. It looked mystical—her

hair—like something you might see on the painting of an angel on the stained glass in a big church. I didn't watch for long. Then, I ran to my truck and drove away from the motel and onto the interstate.

I'm not saying I'm proud of that, or that it was even the right thing to do. But it seemed so at the time. I couldn't imagine just leaving her crumpled up in the stairwell for the cleaning staff to find in the morning. And anybody could've dumped her in the pool. Still, there was something magical about seeing her float there in that water, the ripples spreading around her. I did think for a second that maybe the water would wake her up. That was pure fantasy. But the taut gauze reflections did pattern her face and skin with a movement that hinted at something alive. She was truly beautiful there in that water, more than she ever was under the flattening lights of the stairwell, and I hoped somebody else would see that, too, before they just saw another dead body.

I don't remember much of the drive. There were trees and gas stations and stoplights. A few other cars now and then. After about fifty miles, the steering wheel, the road, and the whole headlight-colored night in front of the windshield slipped away, and a second later I was on a different stretch of the highway and in another lane. I decided to pull over, and I slept the two hours until dawn before driving back.

The motel buzzed with activity. The police had the pool blocked off and spoke to who looked to be the manager. A number of onlookers gathered around, half dressed in shorts and yellowing white tank tops and stained baseball caps. In the too-white morning sun, everybody seemed rugged and dirty, in need of a shave. Somebody had a dog, a little brown and white

terrier, and even it looked pissed off and in need of a shower and a cup of coffee.

“Just a girl,” someone said. “Not yet even sixteen.”

“There’s some sorry elements in this world. Sorry elements.”

“I can’t believe anybody’d want to raise a child in this.”

“Did you see her?”

“She was beautiful.”

A cop stopped me on the way up to my room. He told me not to plan on going anywhere anytime soon, that they’d need to ask everybody some questions. I climbed the stairs and went into our room. Meredith was taking a shower. She had left the bathroom door open with steam just pouring out of it. The whole place smelled like moisture. The water slapped off her body and onto the rubber mat, the drops echoing and sounding heavy and distant. There was no rhythm to it all.

She came out about ten minutes later and didn’t look the least bit surprised to see me.

“Where you been?” she said.

“Out driving.” I sat on the bed and rubbed my eyes.

“Where’d you go?”

“Nowhere in particular.” This was all true.

She bit her lower lip and looked serious. “Did you hear about the girl?” she asked.

“I did. It’s horrible.”

“Horrible.” She walked over to the window and looked out at the pool. “Goat, I’m sorry for what I said last night.”

“It doesn’t matter.” For once, I really meant it.

“You know, you can really see the whole place from this window. Everything.”

“Yeah, sure is quite a view, huh?” I walked over behind her and rubbed the back of her neck. “Beautiful Florida, with its highways, billboards, and boring green green trees.”

She shook her head. “No, I mean this place. The pool. The stairwell.”

I looked out the window. She had a great view of everything if she really wanted it.

“Meredith—”

She pulled me over to the bed, curled her legs up beneath her, grabbed the back of my neck and kissed me. It was nice, but I was sorry that we could never really know what the other was thinking. But then, when she looked me in the eyes, she seemed sad, and I wondered just how much she really did know. I wanted to explain the girl, tell her what it was like holding her, how beautiful she was in the pool, but how it all slipped away from me: the girl, Tommy and Rob, the road, time itself, and how—and I didn’t understand this until I felt her knees up against mine, her forehead resting on my own, the red hair falling in my eyes, across my ears and all around me—I didn’t want her to slip away, too. But how do you actually say that to somebody? We kissed again, and I held her, held her for as long as she let me. Then we went downstairs, talked to the cops. Then we continued driving south.

THE NOTHING AT THE END OF THE WORLD

The winter I crashed with my brother Tom's family, their washer broke. Something with the agitator just snapped. There was a laundromat just down the street, but it was a pain hauling the trash bags full of clothes in and out of the house.

Fortunately, Tom knew a man named Mink Dickinson who had a junk palace in the middle of the woods. He was a friend of our father that I'd met once or twice as a kid, an old redneck who'd hit it big as a contractor, Tom said, and married a little French girl name of Marie LeCroix or Claire Moreau or something. He retired at forty-five and began constructing his palace in the woods. He was, in Tom's words, a man we should all admire.

Mink, it was known, had some kind of loose connection to the Klan, but nobody really talked about it. He was just an all-around good guy, and frankly, Tom worshipped him. If you wanted to hear Tom talk, just drop Mink's name into the middle of a conversation, and he'd go off about how good of a businessman he is, or how he knew the true value of another man's trash, or how much fun they'd had just drinking and messing around with some beat-up old car the previous weekend (or, if Tom's wife came in the room, they were "looking into salable scrap").

One afternoon, Tom asked me if I wanted to go help him get a washer from this guy Mink. Apparently, it only had a broken lid switch and Tom figured he could fix it on the cheap. I said sure—and I should also say that I didn't really have a choice, even if Tom presented it as one—so, when his son Shelden, known as Shellie, came home from school, we piled into Tom's truck

and drove off. This was also the winter when Shellie had the nightmares about the end of the world, so he was often skittish.

He'd told me about one of them. We'd been home alone, the rest of the family out grocery shopping. We were doing a lot of nothing in front of the TV. In the dream, some scientists were building a big rocket just outside his house. They collected all the smart people and cool kids and cute animals and put them in this rocket. They asked Shellie if he wanted to join them. He said no, because their rocket didn't look particularly stable and the driver had forgotten to roll up the windows (why are dreams like this?).

I laughed. "The windows weren't rolled up? Why didn't you just tell him to put them up?"

"I don't know," Shellie said. He was a wire of a kid, all bone wrapped up with skin stretched too tight around his elbows and shoulders. "Anyway, I didn't join them, so they took off and left without me. Then, the world just ended." He clapped his hands together for effect. "Like that, see? Just like that."

"Then what happened?" I asked, genuinely curious.

He rolled his eyes. "What can happen when the world's ended, Uncle Goat?"

I didn't have an answer for him.

Mink Dickinson's house was in the middle of the woods, in a community just north of Dumettville called Sherwood—like in Robin Hood—that the Audubon people had designated as a bird sanctuary. I never saw any birds out there, just a bunch of signs with a bespectacled cartoon owl warning us to watch out for them.

Mink's house, however, did live up to the hype. It was a junk palace—Tom's words—or, really, a junk fortress—my words. The home itself was unremarkable: just your normal two or three bedroom single story butting up against a mess of trees and scrub. Around it, there must've been at least thirty cars of all make and condition. He even had an old school bus tucked into one corner, all its windows busted out for some reason or other and half its wheels gone missing. There were boats, too. And ovens. Bathtubs. Bookshelves and cabinets rotting back into the ground. Of course, there were plenty of washers and driers, some looking to date back to the 1960s. It was all, in its own way, beautiful, the work of a man dedicated to trash, to fixing, to wheeling and dealing (there was a reason his friends called him "Tricky Dickinson"), and to holding back the woods and maybe even all of civilization too with a barrier of rusted steel, cracked vinyl, and chipped paint.

Mink himself was a small man with hurried eyes which looked to have half leaked out from behind his oversized Transitions lenses. He greeted Tom with a warm handshake and showed him the washer. His wife, Matilda, who it turned out wasn't the least bit French herself but rather taught it at the elementary school, did a crossword puzzle on the back porch, all curled up like a cat in a plastic lawn chair, and, also like a cat, she kept herself out of the way.

"This one here," Mink said, thumping the lid to an almost clean and almost new GE washer. "All's that's wrong with it is that lid switch I was telling you about. Shouldn't be a problem for you guys to fix."

Tom opened it up and looked around inside, even stuck his head in, as though the washer was going to tell him something if he just listened close enough. It didn't. "How much do you

want for it?" he said at last.

Mink just raised his eyebrows and scratched at the graying moss around his chin. To say it looked like moss isn't enough. His beard *was* moss. He decided, since he was close to our father (before he got into contracting, the two of them had gone up to Illinois to work on a power plant), he'd give it to Tom for free.

"I can't let you do that," Tom said.

"Sure you can. What else are friends for?"

On the way back, Shellie volunteered to sit in the bed with the washer. Keep an eye on it. Make sure it didn't rock or slide too much. Heavy as it was, it shouldn't have been a problem, but Tom agreed to let the kid have his way.

The wind mussed Shellie's hair as he sat with his back pressed against the washer, stared at the woods running by. Tom and I never were big talkers, so it was a quiet ride back. I did ask him about Shellie's dreams, even told him about the one with the rocket. He said he hadn't heard that one yet.

"It's normal though," he said. He guided the truck around the shallow curves that bended the road round the ancient oaks. "Isn't it?"

"I don't know, Tom. Seems like an odd preoccupation for an eleven-year-old."

He didn't say anything for a while, but looked like he wanted to. Finally, he said, "Why do you think the sky's always got to be red?"

"Pardon?"

“In his dreams, he says the sky’s always red.”

It was true. Shellie’s dreams varied: alien saucers, asteroids, blood rain, anything else you might catch in a summer blockbuster or the Book of Revelation. But the sky was the one consistency. The sky was always red just before the apocalypse.

I nodded. “The kid’s going to develop a fear of sunsets.”

Tom smiled, and then slammed on his brakes. We jerked forward against our seat belts and the washer fell, skidding across the bed before crashing into the rear window, sounding for all the world like thunder scratching its nails on a chalkboard. A car had run the stop sign in a cross-street, almost killed us all. He was gone.

Tom pulled over to check out the damage and I half expected to see my nephew crumpled beneath the machine, the truck’s bed covered in his blood. Instead, he’d been able to grip the sides and curl himself into as small a shape as possible to miss the incoming washer.

“You okay?” Tom asked.

He nodded.

“Why don’t you sit up front for a while?”

He nodded, climbed into the cab and sat between the two of us on the way home. Nobody talked, and we all paid more attention to the side streets than we’d ever possibly need to.

There is nothing fun about getting a washing machine inside a house. We lifted it off the truck all right, positioned it in front of the door, which Shellie sprinted to open, and then stopped and tried to figure out how to get the damn thing through when it was about six inches too wide.

Tom went inside to pull from that way while I twisted it and pushed from the outside.

“Lift,” he said.

“I am.”

“Not enough.”

The corner scraped against the doorframe and took a long strip of white paint with it. Tom cursed and dropped his side, sending it bouncing off of the hardwood floors just inside the doorway. He cursed again and said he’d be back after he got something to drink.

Me and Shellie sat on the step, stared at the afternoon. The sun was starting to settle in behind the trees, and I wondered what that meant for him.

“You okay?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Can I ask you a question?”

He looked up at me.

“Why’s the sky always red just before the apocalypse?”

His eyes wandered into the distance above all the houses across the street, above even the trees, and likely through the thin clouds that, as we waited for Tom to come back, began to tint and turn and seemed to me to resemble clumped up balls of beautiful red hair, and for him, for all I know, looked only like God’s vengeance. He didn’t answer me, so I chalked it all up to the things I’ll never know.

Here’s the truth of the matter: Tom’s always been a collector. As a boy, he collected

stamps, coins, baseball cards, but also whatever else that he could get his hands on at least two of. Who could expect the adult to be any different? So he had goldfish, shot glasses, toasters he could never throw away, dried up ballpoint pens, and all the usual clutter that nobody minds. Jamie, Tom's wife, only began to care when she noticed that her husband had begun to collect washing machines.

"No," she said, shaking her head at the washer we'd, after an hour or so of manipulation and the decision to finally remove the door, gotten inside and hauled into an empty corner of the living room. "No. No. No."

"What?" he said. "It's just temporary."

"Get rid of the other one first, Tom."

"But what if we can get it to work?"

"But what if you can't?"

"Then we'll get rid of it."

"How many times have I heard that?" Jamie sighed and left the room.

Tom played with the lid, just raising and lowering it, testing its hinges, not saying anything else. He knew how to be proud of himself when he didn't lose an argument, even if he never won it, or never would.

The washer had bigger problems than the lid switch. Something with the pump itself. It sat in the corner of the living room for weeks, gathering dirty clothes, jackets, and mail atop its almost clean and almost new surface. Jamie hated it, and often told me as much. When she'd

clean, she'd run the vacuum right into it, hoping to make a dent but satisfied with the clatter.

Tom would just come out and shake his head. Shellie, still having his dreams about the end of days, didn't say much at all, but he finally did answer my question.

I was searching through the bags of dirty clothes for a clean-enough shirt to wear when he came up behind me. He didn't even give me a chance to say hey.

"It's the color of lust." He smiled.

"You want to help me look for a shirt here, Buck? Did you say something?"

"The red sky in my dreams. It's the color of lust."

He said it so matter of fact, as though that was the only possibility and as though I should've known right away what he was talking about. Maybe I should've.

"Where'd you hear that?"

He pointed to the TV. It was on some soap opera. Made sense, I guess.

Over time, the sacks piled higher and higher. Their plastic stretched to the point of being transparent and clothes spilled from all sides until the stack of bags turned into a ramshackle mountain of laundry that had to be reformed once a day. It grew to the point that nobody wanted to even begin tackling it, to the point where we all just said screw it because going to the laundromat would be too big of a pain.

Tom called Mink, who apologized about the bum washer, but said he'd just gotten another one in with Tom's name on it, if he wanted it. We planned to pick it up later that week. Jamie demanded we take at least one of the old machines out of the house first.

"Why are we going to be getting rid of washers before we know we got one that works?"

Tom replied.

“Why are you going to be taking one in before you know *it* works?”

They talked like this, just twisting each other’s words a bit to say what they wanted. It made me think they were perfect for each other. Jamie just shook her head and went off to their bedroom. Tom started his normal night routine.

First, he’d spin all the dials on the stove to make sure they were off. He’d do the same to the handles at the kitchen sink. Then he’d come into the living room and pull the already closed curtains to, readjusting them like you might shrug your shoulders in a coat, not really doing much but creating movement and reminding you that it’s still there. Finally, he’d rattle the doorknob, make sure it couldn’t be opened, and look through the peephole at who knows what he thought he could see when it was pitch black outside. After a few seconds, though sometimes going on upwards of a minute, he’d turn around, scuff his foot at the same lightening spot on the hardwood floor, and go to bed, his eyes tracking the steps in front of him. I like to think he then shared the same armageddon dreams that shook his son (he’d never admit it) and this little routine he’d developed eased those dreams, gave some regularity to his night. But I have an imagination. For all I know, he was just like the next guy, worried about fires, leaks, and break-ins. I wanted to ask but never did.

This night, he paused, looking at the pile of swollen trash bags. He prodded one with his foot. “What’s all that remind you of?” he said.

I thought and then remembered. Whenever Dad had to go out of town or had just come back, he’d leave all his clothes in the trash bags by the door, as though he’d never be able to stay

too long. Eventually, Mom'd unpack them when she got tired of looking at the black bags and things then settled back into a normal routine. But the trash bags always meant something was going on. "Dad," I said.

He smiled. "Goodnight, Goat."

"You know, Shellie told me what the red skies meant. The ones in his dreams."

He raised an eyebrow.

"He said they were the color of lust. Can you believe that?"

"Rust?" Tom paused and considered. "I get that." He waved and walked off to bed.

Rust? Who had said anything about rust? Though, now that I think about it, maybe that is what I had said, or what Shellie had said, or maybe it was what he had meant. Rust made sense.

More sense than lust.

Just to check, I went and looked out the peephole, curious finally to see what Tom saw every night. The metal was cold against my eye. And I saw absolutely nothing, just a complete utter nothing that couldn't be kept in or kept out. No lights, no traffic. I knew there were other houses, but their lights were out, or their curtains drawn, or they were obscured by shrubbery that in the dark could not be seen. No moon, no stars. No sound other than the whispered rustle of my eyelashes against the peephole. I wanted so badly to hear a dog bark, or a car to go by, just something. But nothing happened. The static nothing just continued on and on. As I turned away, blinking at the light of the lamps in the living room, I felt I knew the meaning of that look Tom got just before going to bed, and figured out the answer to Shellie's question, "What can happen when the world's ended?"

LIFTS

When my brother Tom and I were boys, our father would often drink and tell long, rambling stories that started nowhere important, ended up someplace completely different, and sounded just about like the wisest words any man had ever said. He'd arrange us and Mom on the floor around his chair like you might move your soap and mouthwash and toothbrush around the rim of the sink so it's all in the right place. The one time Mom refused to climb off the couch he growled a curse and flung his dinner plate at the wall right above her head. I swear to you that woman did not blink, and I wanted to kiss her on the mouth before I remembered again she was my mother. But most of the time, we'd sit on the floor and listen to him, and he'd tell us something about cows or cable that cracked the whole universe like a safe. Then we grew up and realized he was just a talkative drunk and the stories didn't mean anything and probably weren't the least bit true.

When my father was sober, he had exactly one joke: what's the funniest thing about an alcoholic? He'd say it to anybody patient or foolish enough to listen. They'd smile, shake their heads and he'd repeat, "What's the funniest thing about an alcoholic?" They'd shake their heads again and Dad would again repeat the question. This would go on for a few minutes before the other person would finally say something to the effect of, "Goddamnit, Mac, where's the damn punch line?" Dad would blink, nod, and say, "What's the funniest thing about an alcoholic?" As the other person walked away in a huff, usually, Dad could no longer contain the laughter and he'd wheeze and laugh himself red, laugh so much his chest hurt. He'd then need a drink to ease

the pain.

In those moments, Tom and I looked at each other and we'd both be wishing we lived in Chicago or New York or Philadelphia or any of the big cities from the movies and not some dinky little town south of the South where we'd have to forever stand in a mildewy antique store downtown with big glass windows nobody ever wanted to look through or some old redneck's garage in the woods listening to our father chuckle himself to death over a joke that barely made any sense. But we mostly got over it. Tom especially. He never even left Florida once.

I tell you all this not because you have any reason to care, or because it's particularly important, but as a warning, since I'm afraid this story falls somewhere in between these two kinds. Bear with me.

That Tom's son, Sheldon but known as Shellie, turned out nothing like his father surprised no one and pleased almost everybody. Instead, he took after his mother, Jamie, a sane and largely uninteresting woman who wafted from room to room like the hum of the AC, folding shirts and removing dust. The winter I spent looking for work, my girlfriend Meredith and I crashed with Tom and his family, and I was shocked one morning to find my socks all folded in a drawer and matched and the scum ring gone from the bathtub.

"Did you do this?" I asked Meredith.

She pulled the drawers out, saw the neatly stacked clothes, and turned as pale as though she'd seen a ghost. After that, we made sure to always go to sleep dressed. Eventually, Meredith started taking credit for the cleaning. Maybe she helped out. I don't know.

Shellie was like this: quiet, just kind of slipping around you without you knowing, mostly easy to miss, even all his bones seemed to shrink into themselves when you did look at him. A funny kid, sure, but not loud or kind of annoying like his father could often be. They did, however, share a certain obsessive quality that turned them both into collectors. Neither could ever get rid of anything. Tom kept burnt out light bulbs, used up batteries, and three broke washing machines, plus anything else he thought might be salvageable at some later date. Shellie held onto four-year-old school assignments, shoes, and every single toothbrush he'd ever owned. Those he left in a ratty looking cup beside his bed, their bristles flayed out in every possible direction and their handles caked with dust and grime. When I asked his mother about it, she just rolled her eyes and went back to sponging some soap onto a dirty plate. When I asked him, he said he'd never know when he'd need them.

So, when one morning Shellie came out of his bedroom in a panic, still in his pajamas with his hair and eyes wild from dreams only recently cut short, and shouted, "Where's my toothbrush?" I knew we were in the middle of a full-blown crisis. It was a Saturday, and both his parents still slept. Meredith sat in the living room listening to TV news she didn't care about. This was how she liked to spend the mornings before she went to work at the diner. She'd only recently started but seemed to be enjoying it for the most part; the TV just helped calm her jitters. I was in the bedroom getting ready to drive her there. It was one of those mornings when nothing fits together, when I don't even want to climb out of bed, when I look in the mirror and I'm surprised my eyes don't slide right off the glass. To top it off, none of my clothes fit either.

"Where's the last place you saw it?" I called.

He mumbled something about his cup, wandered back to his room, and slammed the door.

“You see this accident on 95?” Meredith said from the other room.

“No.” I rifled through the closet looking for a shirt to wear, but they all seemed too small. The pants as well, their cuffs squeezing tight against my skin and riding up above my ankles. I picked the best fits and went into the living room.

“They say it’s bad. Flipped semi. A few people dead already. Traffic backed up for— what are you wearing?” She finally turned to me.

“What do you mean?”

“Are those Shellie’s clothes?”

“No, they’re mine.

“They don’t look right.”

“You don’t say?” I tugged at my sleeves and cuffs for emphasis. “I don’t know what it is, but nothing wants to fit this morning.”

She turned back to the television. “Maybe it’s a growth spurt.”

I sat on the couch beside her. “A growth spurt? I’m twenty-seven.”

“Stranger things have happened.”

“It’s a real jam,” the news anchor said.

“Looks bad,” I said.

“We need to do laundry,” she said.

Ever since Tom’s third washer had broken a couple of weeks earlier, we’d let our dirty clothes pile up in black trash bags by the door, waiting to be hauled off to the laundromat down

the street. It drove Jamie crazy, I know, but she had enough to do to keep up with her own family's clothes to be too bothered by it.

"Any idea when it's going to be clear?" the anchor asked.

"Yes, we do," I replied.

"Think you can get to it today?" she asked.

"No telling, Bob," the reporter in the chopper replied. "I mean, did you get a look at that fire? Zoom in there so they can see the fire. Yeah. Take a look at that. No, to the right. Other way."

"If I get a chance," I replied.

"What else will you be doing?"

"I don't know." I didn't. "But it might be important."

"Yikes. That is a shame," the anchor said. "Keep us updated?"

"Maybe it's that damn dryer," I said, yanking my shirt sleeves down to cover as much of my arm as possible.

"Will do, Bob."

"I'm sick of this," Meredith said at last, just before turning the TV off.

"It does get old after a while, doesn't it? All of the racket."

She smiled at me, then let her head fall into her hands, making her smile look all cockeyed and wrong. She pressed all the skin on her forehead way back to the sides of her skull, not even really looking much like herself, but only for a second. Then she was her again, her head hanging low still, her hair falling around it like a veil, or like water, and I felt sorry for how

beautiful she was, is, and always will be. I sat beside her on the couch and stroked her shoulder for a moment. And for that moment, I felt domestic and normal, the two of us sitting there watching the morning sun roll through the blinds like velvet. I could forget about undersized clothes, toothbrushes, and traffic jams. But it was so much more than that, too. For that moment, everything really did fit together, the sky touched the ground and clicked in like two puzzle pieces snapping together. But I'm starting to sound sentimental.

I should say here that this was the same week I found out Meredith had been sleeping with one of the short-order cooks from the diner, a seventeen-year-old high school dropout name of Billy Maker who had a knack for bringing out just the right silly expression at just the right moment to make himself sound profound and deep—"You're the boss, apple sauce," was his favorite—and eyes like honey, or so I've been told. To me, they just looked sort of brown. But that comes later and isn't what this story's really about. Rather, this is a story very much about toothbrushes and gasoline.

After I dropped Meredith off at work, I returned to a house in turmoil. Shellie, still pajama-ed, ran about from room to room, frantic and near tears, asking if anybody had seen his year-seven third-quarter toothbrush. They, being his mom and dad, of course, hadn't, so all had begun to tear the house apart to see if maybe the toothbrush had somehow fallen behind a dresser, scooted beneath the desk, or slipped between the couch cushions. Jamie fumed under her skin and I thought she'd pop any second. Tom held the two couch cushions uselessly in either hand like he might just start flapping them and take off.

"Have you seen a goddamn toothbrush, Goat?" he said as I came in.

I shook my head.

“Didn’t think so.” He pretended to look around the couch some more. “You know, the kid’s eleven. We shouldn’t be doing this.”

I shrugged. If we allowed Tom his eccentricities, might as well allow his son this one, I thought.

“It’s not here,” Jamie chirped, wiping dust from her brow. “It can’t be.”

“I told you it was a waste of time,” Tom said.

“Why not just buy him a new one?” I asked.

By this point, Shellie had curled himself into a ball in the middle of the floor and was kicking his feet against the carpet to spin himself slowly around and around, wailing all the way.

“What do you think, Turtle Shell?” Tom asked, nudging his son with the toe of his boot.

“Don’t call him that,” Jamie said. “You know I don’t like it when you call him that.”

Shellie wiped his nose. “It wouldn’t be the same,” he said.

“But it would be a start,” his mother added.

Shellie nodded.

“Goat, can you take him?” Tom looked at me. “I’ve got to meet Mink in half an hour. He needs my help with some plumbing problem.” Mink Dickinson was a friend of our father’s, an old redneck who hid out in a junk palace in the middle of the woods. Whatever story Tom made up, I knew he and Mink just sat around drinking beer and looking through the wreckage of things that used to work for something they could salvage and tell themselves they might one day get to work again.

“And I’ve got choir practice,” Jamie said. This was likely true.

So I agreed to give Shellie a lift to the grocery store so he could finally replace the lost year- seven third-quarter toothbrush. He perked up, but not by much. It took some convincing on his mother’s part to get him to put on a real pair of pants, and, even though I would never mention this to Jamie, I think he just threw on a pair of jeans and a shirt over his pajamas, since all his clothes kind of poofed out at odd angles.

When we got to the store, I asked him what the toothbrush had looked like. They had a whole aisle of them, all sizes and colors. Some electric. Some with bendable necks. It was almost too much, but then I figured this wasn’t anything new; they’d always carried this many toothbrushes, but I never had to pay attention to them before.

“Red,” he said.

So I pulled the first red one I saw and showed it to him.

He shook his head. “Shorter.”

I pulled another.

“Seriously?” he said. “That one’s pink. It’s for girls.”

I looked at it a little closer. “It’s kind of red,” I said. He was right, though. There was a picture of a little girl on the box. She seemed excited to be brushing her teeth.

He kept going down the aisle, playing with toothbrushes as he saw them. I thought he was going to reach the end and have to turn around when he finally grabbed one he liked and showed it to me. It was bright blue and orange with a cartoon character on the box, like a talking hat or something. I’d seen him watch it on television before.

“Is that the one you want?”

He nodded.

I took it from him and paid for it. On the way back to the truck, I asked him what was so special about a toothbrush anyway.

“Nothing,” he replied. “It’s just a toothbrush.”

“Then why’d you throw such a fit earlier?”

He played with the plastic bag containing his new toothbrush, looping the handles round and around his finger and pulling them tight until his skin turned blue.

“Quit that,” I said. And he actually did.

It was a bit after one o’clock when I dropped Shellie back off at his house, so I still had about four hours before I needed to pick Meredith up from work. Tom was still at Mink’s and Jamie hadn’t come back yet, so I decided just to drive around for a while. It was a nice day, blue skies, fine temperature, and all that. But, more than anything, sometimes you just need to get away from the sound of your own shoes clicking off the ground under your feet and pretend like you’re not wearing clothes about three sizes too small. So I drove.

After about thirty miles, I noticed I was running low on gas so I pulled into a station off the main highway. The place was empty except for the clerk behind the counter and an old guy with an exceptionally dark tan hanging out by the pay phones. The old guy watched me fuel up, kind of shifted from foot to foot, and came over when I was about to leave.

“You got a sec?” he said.

“Sure.”

“Can you give me a lift? My car broke down and I need to get some medicine to my dad.”

“Where you going?”

“Illaca Springs. Hope that’s not out of your way.”

It was the next town over, taking me away from Dummetville, where Tom lived and where I was heading. I checked my watch. There was, of course, plenty of time to kill. “Not at all,” I said. “Get in.”

“I do appreciate it,” he said. “My name’s Peter, by the way.” He extended his hand.

I shook it. “Goat.”

“Hm.”

And so we drove. The road was empty and straight. I could’ve driven a hundred miles an hour if I wanted to, but I didn’t. That was the kind of afternoon it was. Every now and then we’d pass some little store, maybe a gas station or a liquor place, but we were mostly surrounded by trees, a few swollen oaks and a lot of long and dainty pines. After Peter told me a few more things about himself (he was born in Ohio, had a brother who did post-storm cleanup work for the state, once had a loyal part-labradoodle mutt named Mary Sue, never said what happened to her), we were quiet. It was just a lazy afternoon. Even the power lines looked lazy, like they might just keep sagging and sagging closer to the ground until they could touch it and finally come to rest after years of suspension.

“You know where you’re going, right?” Peter said after a few minutes. “How to get to Thornton at least?”

“Of course,” I laughed, not having a clue where or what a Thornton was but figuring I’d

probably run into it eventually. It had been a few years since I'd been out this way.

"Turn right here." He pointed to the next intersection. "Thornton will be just up ahead."

The street narrowed as it got further from the highway. Some houses started to peek through the trees, but they were dark and well off the road. The street curved a few times and we eventually came to a four-way stop at Thornton Road.

"Lead the way," I said.

Peter directed me down a few side streets. I drove slowly, expecting him to tell me where to pull in, but he never did. We finally circled back around to Thornton.

"Hm," he said. "I thought it was right around here." He slid his white cap off his head and rubbed the top of his scalp. "I sure am sorry about this."

"No problem," I said. "It happens."

He chuckled.

We drove around for another twenty minutes or so, but no luck. I drove slow so Peter could check the numbers on the houses, but it didn't work. He couldn't find it. We passed the same brown dog behind the same chain link fence at least four times. The first two times he barked at us. The third time he still looked kind of angry. The fourth time he didn't even get up.

"Well, shoot," Peter said at last. He squinted towards the falling sun. "Tell you what, just drop me at that light up there." There was an intersection up ahead, a gas station on the corner.

"I'll see if I can't get ahold of Dad on the phone. I've wasted enough of your afternoon."

"It hasn't been a problem at all."

"I'm sorry."

“Don’t apologize.”

I dropped him off by the gas station. He climbed out and leaned through the window.

“You don’t have the time do you?” he said.

I checked my watch. “A quarter till four.”

He nodded. “What time’s the sun been setting lately? About five?”

“Probably about half-past, I’d guess.”

And then he did one of the strangest things I think I’ve ever seen a man do. He kept nodding and started to walk away, like he was going, then he just real quick turned right around and said, “You know it’s the dust, right?”

“Pardon?” I was clueless.

“The sunset,” he said. “It’s the dust that makes it beautiful. Makes it all the different colors. In the atmosphere.”

I did know this but had forgotten. I probably learned it in some class as a kid, or read it in some magazine. But it’s not like I ever thought about it. Who does? “Oh, right.”

“Wanna hear something else?”

“Okay.”

He leaned back through the window and rested his chin on the frame, his gray whiskers rubbing against the plastic. For the first time, I noticed how gray his eyes were. Frighteningly gray. Unnatural like.

“You know what causes the nighttime, right?”

“The rotation of the earth.”

“No,” he growled and shook his broad head angrily. “Well, yes. Partially. But do you know what makes the night even possible at all?”

“What?”

He smiled. “Our location in the galaxy. We’re on one of the Milky Way’s outstretched arms, see? Away from the real center of things. If we were too close, all we’d see, all night and all day, is the bright light of a billion stars just outside our windows. Who could sleep? Life as we know it wouldn’t exist.”

I was intrigued. I had been pretty sure up until this point he was just a homeless guy looking for a ride and somebody to talk to. But now I thought there was a chance he was an unemployed astronomer. Who else wants to talk that much, that openly, about the stars? I figured there was about an eighty percent chance he was homeless, about twenty percent he was an unemployed astronomer. I suppose they could have overlapped, too.

“Where’d you learn all this?” I asked.

“Saw it on TV the other day.”

“It’s fascinating.”

“Isn’t it?”

So I left him there by the gas station, wandering around by the pay phones, probably waiting for the sunset or another ride. I drove back to Dummetville and killed a bit more time just doing circles around the lake before I picked Meredith up from work. When she climbed in the truck, she looked tired.

“Long day?” I asked.

“You don’t want to know.” She took off her sneakers and sat them beside her before she went to rubbing her feet.

The sun had begun to dip behind the trees and everything turned all to shadow before the streetlights came on. Just ahead, two police cars had the road blocked. Looked to be some kind of accident, though nothing too bad. The cops donned neon yellow vests and directed traffic off to a side road. The red and blue light filtered through the windshield and Meredith tried to blink it away.

“Do you want to hear something interesting?” I said.

“What?”

“Did you know that if we were closer to the center of the galaxy there wouldn’t be any night?” It came out all wrong and didn’t mean anything.

She rubbed her eyes. Her red hair, so perfect when pressed against her skull earlier that morning, had frayed and frizzed under hours of sweat and steam. “You didn’t do the laundry today, did you, Goat?” She said it to the window.

There is, truthfully, not all that much more to tell. When we got home, Jamie admitted to having thrown out Shellie’s toothbrush in the middle of the night—to us, not him. She’d wanted to get rid of that cup for years, said it was a weird habit for a kid his age, and she was probably right. Shellie seemed content with the replacement, but he did say it would never be the same. He said a part of him was now gone that could never be replaced, or something along those lines. I don’t know where he’d heard that kind of talk. He was a weird kid, though he was close to the end of that phase. Soon, weird would no longer be cute, but just weird. But this story isn’t really

about Shelly growing up.

Later that week, I found out about Billy Maker, the kid Meredith had been sleeping with. He called the house looking for her, and I picked up the phone. He explained his situation, then said, “You can take a horse to water but you can’t make him drink,” and hung up. But this story’s not about him. Or her even.

I did find out something else about Meredith that is relevant: she’d given up on the laundry and had been spending a good chunk of her paycheck on brand new clothes each week for me and her instead. I figured it out when I found a tag still hanging off one of my shirts. When I confronted her about it, she said, “I was sick of it. Just sick of it.” And that was that. I did, however, write down my sizes for her.

There is just one last thing I failed to mention. And it might be the most important. It happened when I dropped the old guy off at the gas station. After telling me about the galaxy, he turned to leave, tossing a little wave behind him. I put the truck into gear and started to pull out of the parking lot when in the mirror I saw him running back towards me. I stopped and rolled down the window.

“I’m sorry,” he said. His voice shook. “I didn’t even think to pay you for your trouble. Or your gas.” He patted around his pockets.

“It’s fine,” I said.

“Here, all I’ve got is a dollar or two, but you take it.” He passed the money through the window.

“No, it’s fine. Keep it and don’t worry about it. It’s no problem.”

He smiled. “Thanks.” He grabbed my hand in his and shook it. “Thank you.”

His hand was cold, his grip tight, the touch setting off a million tiny explosions along my forearm. His unnatural gray eyes did not blink. For one moment, all the light from the sun not yet setting shone through dust or smog or smoke or whatever else it took to get to us in that parking lot and just sparkled. Off of everything: the other cars, the pavement, the pumps, those gray, gray eyes. I know you don’t believe me, but right then and there I felt a little like Jesus, and I didn’t want that feeling to ever go away, or the moment to end.

I grinned. I said, “Do you know what the funniest thing about an alcoholic is?” I waited for his response. And I waited, knowing just the way to draw this particular moment out, how to keep this old man here by my window, even as everything else kept rushing by and away from me.

THE END OF THE WINTER OF ORANGES

I woke up mid-morning and didn't especially feel like doing anything. It was only eleven but already hot. A mid-February push sent the temperatures into the low 80s. Everywhere, people talked about the heat. It was nothing new. This was about the time of year it always warmed up. Kids switched from jeans to shorts. That was the biggest change. Still, it was exciting to think that maybe something had happened in the atmosphere, that this was all some kind of a sign. Muggy Florida heat in February resonated differently with each person. It meant the visored woman walking her dogs would have to switch into a tank top and expose her arms so the whole world could see the perspiration glossing her arms and dripping off her like syrup. Her whole face and neck strained to keep up with the two darting collies, a yelped, "Heel!" intermittently escaping her lips, but now she couldn't be too loud for fear of drawing attention to her sweat. It meant the aimless old men on the benches in front of the courthouse would have to come an hour earlier to avoid the midday heat and still have time to talk about the personalities of birds, and so they would miss waving to the lawyers, clerks, and secretaries who came out to share their lunches and remind the men they were real. It meant the days would start to get longer again, and all the people driving home would have to find more and more creative ways to kill time at work or miss the perfect angle of sunset skipping off the old potholed highway leading in and out of town. But none of this was new.

My brother Tom, who I was staying with at the time while I looked for a job, didn't like to run the AC in February. "A waste when it's so nice outside," he said. He kept it shut off and

opened the jalousie windows that still worked. About half of the handles had rusted off over the years, leaving exposed holes where they'd screwed in that looked like how I imagined amputees' shoulders would after the surgery. Tom's wife, Jamie, a distressingly grounded saint of a woman—she sang in the choir; she raised their kooky son, Sheldon known as Shellie, with grace and patience (not once did I ever see her hit him or even raise her voice, when surely the temptation must've been there); she made sugar cookies and cheesecakes just for the heck of it (she looked like she actually meant it when she said, "Enjoy,")—kept the sills clean and the maimed window handles free of grime, but the house still stank of smoke since some rooms could never get air. Jamie did her best though. She held that whole house together just by keeping it relatively dust-free and stocked with every possible variety of gummy fruit snack.

I'd set up shop at the coffee table in their den. There were newspapers, clippings of classified ads, phone numbers, and scribbled notes spread across its entire surface. It all looked pretty legitimate. Admittedly, however, my efforts were half-hearted. I'd heard for months about a job getting ready to start at the Cape. They were planning a new launch tower and would need electricians to climb to the top and wire the fixtures that would one day link to Titans. It was the closest I'd ever be to space, and it was my dream job. I'd signed the books down at the local hall and waited for it to start. It'd been delayed time and time again, though, so I made a show of job hunting now. Tom wanted it, though he barely did more than dig through junk and fix a car every now and then himself.

But I wouldn't be job hunting this particular day. For one, it was late. By the time I took a shower and dressed, it'd be lunch time, and I could go looking after that, though I'd hardly have

time to get started before everyplace had to close down. Second, it was beautiful outside, and I just hated to waste a day like that. Third, I missed Meredith, my girlfriend, more than ever.

The previous December, Meredith had told us she wanted to be a communist for Christmas. She'd just come back from the mall and had some neat waxy bag in one hand and a plastic sack full of oranges in the other, which in itself isn't particularly remarkable. Everybody had plastic sacks full of oranges that year. It was perfect weather, the experts said. A real bumper crop. Tom didn't even have a single tree, yet still we had more oranges to give out than we knew what to do with. They'd come in from some uncle or coworker's sister or neighbor and of course you had to take them. You might say, "That's wonderful, and those sure are some fine looking oranges. Bigger and orange-ier (how else to compliment an orange?) than all the others, really, but we've got enough as it is." But they'd insist, and before you'd know it, you'd be lugging in another three plastic bags to throw on top of the rest. The fridge was full and they overflowed out of the pantry, rolling under our feet when we got up in the night to get a drink of water. Meredith almost broke her leg once. Tom even started storing some in the garage, half-hoping some rats would get at them. Once, Jamie sent Shellie to his elementary school with three full bags, the filmy plastic thin under the strain of the oranges, to hand out to his classmates and teachers. Holiday presents, she called them. He returned with five bags of oranges and a half-eaten box of chocolates. "It came that way," he had said.

"Bolshevik or Menshevik?" Shellie asked. It was the sort of question only a fifth grader would think up. Meredith tossed him an orange and he simply looked at it, rubbed his fingers over its pocked and dimpled skin, and let it drop to the carpet. He was like that.

“Maybe Maoist?” I offered.

“No, *communist*,” was Meredith’s only reply. She put her bags down and joined us in the living room.

We all sat around the TV watching a show on the end of the world, the kind of program popular that time of year when it really did seem like something big might just happen when the calendar flipped over, even though it never did. A guy with a frizzled beard was showing off pictures of Hiroshima, muddy snapshots of women with their pale backs scarred by the dark gridwork of their checkered dresses who learned the hard knocks wisdom to always wear white when you get bombed. It all came down to timing, Frizzled Beard explained, and maybe a bit of luck, but more than likely we would all just blow ourselves up one day anyhow. He had shallow pockets for eyes, like his pupils tried to climb out once but the gravity of his cheekbones just sucked them back in, and they wandered around aimlessly since they no longer knew what to do with themselves because there was no other chance for escape. I liked him for that and that alone. Otherwise, he was all doom and gloom with a row of his own books behind him and patches at the elbows of his sleeves. He seemed like he would make for depressing company.

The show cut to grainy red stock footage of a mushroom cloud blooming out over the ocean. Something about it reminded me of a CAT scan I once saw of the human brain. It was really wonderful to think that maybe we all had something like a hydrogen bomb going off in our heads. It was like we all were more important than maybe we realized we were.

But then Jamie came in with a plate of oranges all neatly sliced up. Meredith grabbed two slices and held one out to me. I hated the sight of her just holding it out there like that. It looked

sad, quivering there between her thumb and forefinger like a dead orange fish she didn't know whether to throw back or keep because it was already dead and neither her nor the water wanted anything to do with it. Juice started to bead at her fingertips. I was sick of oranges by this point, but I still took and ate the damn thing. This was the winter where we all learned to hate oranges.

The show on the end of the world was over. Tom, Jamie, and Shellie left to go to their Wednesday night church service, leaving Meredith and me on the couch. She poked at the plate of oranges Jamie had left on the table.

"Goat," she said, "I'm really sick of oranges." She had a knack for saying simple things and making them sound important. It was a trick she did with her eyes, or maybe the way she gently sucked in her cheeks. Her red hair fell around her face just enough for me to never be sure.

"I think we all are," I said.

"No, I mean I'm done. No more. I can't."

"That's fine."

"And I'm serious about the communist thing, too. I'm done with free markets." She explained that she'd been to the mall trying to buy gifts with her little paycheck from the diner down the street. She'd felt anxious in the crush of people, as if they were all watching her and waiting to see what she'd buy. She couldn't pick anything out with all that pressure. She showed me her bag. It only contained a book of stamps, a designer pen set, and a few packages of tissues.

"That's all you bought?" I said. "You were gone all day."

She sighed. "I know. That's why I'm done."

I'd never been one for shopping myself, so I could kind of understand. She was the one that insisted we still exchange gifts this year. I'd been fine to do without. Even Jamie had told us she'd be getting something for us, but wasn't expecting anything in return.

"That's fine," I said. "Don't worry about it."

She leaned into my shoulder, pulled me closer to her. Her hair rubbed against my face.

"But communist?" I said. "Where did that come from?"

She nuzzled against my neck, and didn't say anything more. On the table, the leftover orange slices sagged and shimmered on the paper plate with a moisture that looked exactly like tears.

It was two weeks later when I found out she was cheating on me. His name was Billy Maker. He was seventeen, ten years younger than her, and a short order cook at the diner where Meredith worked. He called the house one night looking for her and I answered the phone.

"Is Meredith there?" he said. I'd never heard his voice. It still had a slight squeak to it.

"No, she's out on a run," I said. "Who's this?"

"It's her boyfriend, Billy."

"Boyfriend?" I was confused.

"Yeah. Who's this?" he said.

I started sweating. "Goat."

"Goat? Who are you?"

"I'm her boyfriend, too." The phone shook in my hands. It was a living thing I could not

possibly hold onto, an earthworm or a hamster that wanted to leap to the ground.

“Oh. Well, this is awkward,” he said. He breathed into the line. “She never told me about you.”

“Likewise.”

He breathed into the line some more. “Can you tell her I called?”

“I guess so.” I didn’t know how else to reply.

“Thanks,” he said. “And listen: you can take a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.” He hung up the phone and that was that.

When Meredith came home, I told her he called. She didn’t seem to get it at first, then dropped to the floor, crying. I wasn’t sure what to do with her. I didn’t know whether to comfort her and tell her it’d be alright, that we’d get through this, or just to storm out. I felt like the latter, but I couldn’t do that. Instead, I just leaned against the wall and stared at the lights. Then I closed my eyes and waited for something to happen. Meredith packed up her clothes, a few books, and the framed photo of her family back in Iowa in some trash bags, and in a few hours she was gone. That was all that happened. There was no fighting. There were no explanations or apologies. She was just gone. I remember saying goodbye to her like you might wish a toll collector crammed into a booth in the middle of the highway a nice evening. That’s what I was thinking about that midmorning in February when I knew I couldn’t look for a job.

Tom stared into the 120-gallon fish tank he had set up in the corner of the living room. All color and size of fish angled around its rectangular space, flat two dimensional shapes that almost disappeared when they turned. The tank was filled with too-green plastic plants,

multicolored pebbles, tiny castles made to appear as though they were constructed out of sand. The background was a glossy photo of the bottom of the sea. With the bright fluorescent bulb positioned directly over the top of the tank and making melodramatic shadows out of just about everything, the photo almost looked more lifelike than the fish and toys in the tank.

“I’m going for a walk,” I said.

I was used to Tom not responding. He was like that sometimes. He just stood there and scratched the back of his head before he grabbed the canister of fish food off the table and shook some into the tank. The fish moved to the pellets. There were plenty for all of them. One bright orange fish with black splotches all along its side and willowy fins came up close to the glass. Tom looked it in the eyes. It looked expensive.

“What kind is that one?” I asked. I slipped on my sneakers.

Tom took a breath. “It’s a striped sunburst cutter.”

“Really?” I was impressed.

Tom turned and stroked his goatee. His eyes held a laugh that didn’t ever come out. “No, I don’t really know. Jamie buys them all.” This was not a surprise.

“You hear anything from Meredith?” he asked. It had been about eight weeks since she left. I’d heard from her once, on New Year’s Eve. She said she was calling to wish Shellie a happy holiday. We talked for a few minutes about nothing important. I was still waiting for something to break or happen, but it never did, and I didn’t really know how to initiate it myself. I could’ve just said, “What the hell?” I guess, but I didn’t see what good that would do.

“She’ll come back,” I said. I left him on the couch watching *The Price is Right*.

I walked down to the marina and looked at the boats move on down the river for a little while. Being a weekday, there weren't all that many of them. The ones that did pass were mostly just small, unremarkable fishing boats. Along the banks, men in baseball caps and ragged shirts fished and shouted at each other, some of them watching several poles.

The day was so beautiful, possibly the first beautiful day of the year, but who really keeps track of these things? I think, more than anything else, it was the light. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and everything, the boat hulls, the fishing wire, even people's faces, all seemed to glow wherever the sun hit them. And these weren't particularly good looking people. Something about this day was just different. I'm not especially religious, but even I could see that everything was touched by God and the world seemed like a bigger place than it had the day before. It all felt right.

I sat on a bench and watched the river flow by and kiss the banks. After a bit, a family gathered on the bench to my right. They were well-dressed, the father in a suit and the two sons in little ties. The mother, a gorgeous woman not more than thirty, with a shock of red hair so bright it almost looked orange and all done up in some attempt at a bun, smiled politely at me and I returned it. They looked like they had come from a funeral, but they didn't talk about it. The father, with a son under each arm, walked over to the bank and held them over the water as they oohed at all they saw under the shifting green-black surface. He pointed out the types of fish and they nodded as if they already knew them. Then, he ran off with them down the bank, swinging them in wide arcs as they laughed loudly. The mother laughed as well, but quietly, and just to herself.

She'd smiled at me, so I figured it was all right to make some attempt at conversation. "Beautiful day, huh?" I said.

She nodded and looked down at her high heels. I decided to not say anything else. Maybe she thought she was above talking to some lonely guy hanging out by the river. She probably thought I was homeless. Or maybe she just didn't feel like talking. I don't know. Sitting there on that bench by myself, observing everybody around me living and being filled with life, but not actually doing anything, I started to feel like I was running against the grain of things. The world could only spin in one direction, but I was moving the opposite way. All the colors blurred into a multihued stream and people's face didn't quite seem right, either pinched or pulled this way or that since we weren't going in the same direction or even at the same speed. Nothing in my head clicked and I lost track of time. It was half past one before I realized that I was alone on my bench, the family having left an hour earlier, and following the movements of a trio of ducks swimming around the legs of the pier. I just wanted someone to confirm how beautiful everything was and if I, too, looked to be touched by God. So I left the marina and headed towards the diner where Meredith worked.

She never had told me her schedule, so I wasn't sure if she'd be working or not. And I'd never actually been there, since she'd asked me not to come, even before she left ("It would be weird serving you," she'd said, but it turned out she just wanted to keep me a secret from Billy Maker), so I wasn't sure what to expect. At close to two in the afternoon, the lunch rush was just dying down. Meredith ran back and forth behind the counter, giving a few more tickets to the cooks, grabbing drinks. She didn't see me. Everything about her looked like a crumpled up

napkin: her uniform was wrinkled and only half tucked in, its loose fabric flapping like a tail behind her, and something in her face said she hadn't been sleeping. I wondered where she'd been staying.

I walked up and banged on the counter, shouting for service. It was supposed to be funny, but I'm not sure she got that I was joking. She, along with the other two waitresses working the front, glared. She inhaled and started to say something, but went back to pouring cups of coffee and balancing plates on her forearms.

I drummed my fingers on the counter and tried to see the two cooks, but they kept their heads down, looking at the griddle, or their backs turned.

After several minutes, Meredith towed her hands off and leaned on the counter in front of me. The place was starting to empty. "What do you want?" she said.

"How about three pancakes, a scrambled egg, and a side of—"

"Goat, what do you want?" She wiped at her forehead.

"I just wanted to see you."

"Really?"

"You look good."

She smiled, almost laughed. "What did you expect?"

I shook my head and met her eyes for a moment. I couldn't tell what she was thinking. The place had mostly cleared out and the other waitresses were in the back. The floor, only a few minutes earlier alive with all the squeaks and cracks of slipping and stepping shoe soles, was now a calm linoleum sea. The diner looked huge without any people in it and, though we were

in the open, I felt we had some privacy.

“It’s a beautiful day, isn’t it?” I said.

I want to say that, then, she smiled and slowly looked around her, impressed by the rays of light that streamed through the murky, too-long-since-they’ve-been-washed windows and even the dust floating in them. I want to say that next she looked at me, a sense of wonder overcoming the boredom that almost always filled her eyes and saw the touch of God on me. But I won’t lie.

Instead, she rolled her eyes. “You came all the way here to say that?” she asked.

“I guess so,” I said.

“How’s the job search going?” She seemed hopeful. I wondered how things were going with Billy. I’d heard he dropped out of high school.

“I’m working on it,” I said.

She nodded. In that moment, I found myself again spinning against the grain, and I was overcome by the noise of dishes sinking into steamy water, running faucets, the jovial hey-look-at-me clatter of pans banging into each other, and the shared laughter of cooks and waitresses finally happy for a break. I was still outside it all.

“Good luck with it,” she said. “I know you’ll find something.”

“Meredith—”

“Goat, I’ve got to get back to work,” she said. She collected some plates between her arms and pinched up a few glasses off a table. “Call me some time.” She turned and went into the kitchen.

She didn't give me a number where I could reach her.

A few weeks later, work finally started at the Cape. It was an hour drive either way, and a five tens workweek, but it was worth it. I had to pass through a checkpoint (it actually had armed guards) and present a badge to get to my job. It made me feel important.

The middle of March produced some strong winds, and working on the new mobile service towers could be dangerous and frustrating at times. Up there, you'd want the wind to just stop or slow down for a minute, just to let you regain some feeling in the side of your face, but it wouldn't. I'd heard stories about a man, Jimmy Fellows, who the spring before had been working on a tower and been knocked off by the wind. He fell close to two hundred feet. I wasn't sure if it was true or not, but all the guys liked to talk about it.

Things just looked different up there. The sky and the ocean were bluer. My hands were steadier and stronger. Anything seemed possible. And as I collected more and more paychecks, I could finally start to pay Tom back and begin saving for my own apartment. Things were looking up.

But, of course, I can't end there. One Sunday in the middle of April, when Tom and his family were all at church, I went to the park, where I knew people often walked their dogs. I liked to go there and kill time, recharge the batteries, that sort of thing. Sometimes I'd take a book, but mostly I'd just sit, listen, and watch the clouds drift by.

I was on my favorite bench, half asleep, when I felt a dog nuzzling against my hand. I instinctively jerked back. Looking up, I saw Meredith. I hadn't seen her since that day in the

diner. She was different. Her hair was short now, just cupping around her neck. And she didn't look quite so tired. She had the dog—a chocolate lab—on a leash.

“Hey, Goat,” she said. And she really smiled.

She sat next to me. I told her about the job at the Cape. She said she was working in a lawyer's office downtown. A friend had gotten her the job, someone from the diner she was living with now. The way she described it, I figured it was a woman. She didn't mention Billy Maker and I didn't ask. She seemed genuinely happy. A few minutes later, a woman with long braids waved at her from the parking lot. Meredith stood up.

“Goat,” she said, “I'm sorry for everything. Really.” The dog pulled at the end of the leash, quaking from his exertion.

“It's okay,” I said. And it was, I suppose. I'd forgotten what I was really waiting for in the excitement of getting a new job, and that had told me everything I needed to know about our relationship.

She smiled again, turned away, looked at me and laughed. In the morning light, everything was more colorful than it should have been naturally. It was beautiful, but I felt part of it now, close to it. The tips of the grass shoots glowed neon, the wood bench looked like it was cut from glossy paper. Meredith's head, so close to mine now as she fell into laughing, but not touching, stood out against the sky as I looked up at her and was the exact same size and shape of the tops of the palm trees jutting up like green explosions paused in the middle frame of a video. It meant something, I knew, something that I could never possibly describe or explain or even understand, though another part of me knew that's just how things had always been.

THE MAN IN THE FIRE

Truth be told, nobody in Dummetville was particularly surprised when on the last day of the twentieth century Hal Smalligan blew himself up. It had been some time coming. So nobody canceled their New Year's Eve parties, nobody cried. As they heard the news on their way out the door, they all feigned shock and horror, of course, asked how such a thing could happen, then they shrugged into the oversized coats pulled out just once a year to stylishly face the first Florida winter chill and whispered to themselves, "I thought he was already dead."

They had good reason to think so. Two years earlier, he'd been hit by a truck while crossing 44. It'd left him wheelchair-bound for six months. He had the broad frame of a man who looked comfortable in wheelchairs—not like the little old folks or women who were swallowed in the blue vinyl of a seat made to withstand men like Hal—so most everybody just expected he'd stay in it. He surprised them. The previous year he'd been mauled by a tiger, or so people liked to say. Really, it was a lynx, and it did little more than scratch parts of him raw, up around his thick neck and at the forearms. He'd been in Georgia at the time, stopped at a zoo. Climbed in the cage. It was a dare. A stupid story he could never get away from. He didn't like to talk about it, so over time the story grew and grew.

Other than that, Hal was only known for two things: standing in fires and disappearing for long stretches of time. Out at the parties in the Blight Land, Hal would stand in the fire for money or beer. He started his approach without saying a word to anybody. He just walked over to the edge and looked into the flames. Then, somebody would notice and everybody got real

quiet. He'd inch his way further and further in. Usually, someone whooped when the fire first caught on his pants and then they'd all start laughing. This would last for a few more seconds. Sometimes the fire reached up to his thighs before he danced away and patted out the flames. Somebody would press his hand and give him a beer, which he'd take by himself over to the woods and drink and watch the trees.

Shortly after he turned twenty, Hal started disappearing for weeks, even months, at a time. It was pretty well known that he'd head up to Georgia, but nobody knew exactly what he was doing. He'd just tell anybody who asked he had "business." What business a half-unemployed son of a mechanic could have up in Georgia was anybody's guess. This was about the time of the lynx incident, and nobody was feeling too sympathetic towards Hal Smalligan. It didn't help matters when he came back with fancy brown loafers about two sizes too small that were "genuine Italian leather." He'd tell anybody he met, just before asking them if he could borrow a buck or two for gas. The rumor was that he'd won them betting on cockfights, that he'd spent his whole time up in Georgia organizing a ring with his estranged older brother. Pretty successful, some said, but neither had a clue how to manage money (or any lick of sense in their heads at all, their parents pointed out).

The other rumor was that he was preparing to elope with Myra Little—Hal's best friend since kindergarten because their last names were kind of similar—but most people said she was smarter than that. Myra studied biochem at UGA, and so it didn't make sense. She did send Chester Buddy an email the day after Hal died that was so full of emotion and sadness that Chester had to close it halfway through lest he cry, which only intensified the rumors and caused

everybody to wonder just what was wrong with Myra Little.

So you couldn't really blame the people of Dummetville for not canceling the last parties of the millennium. Marco the Jew—a boy three-quarters gentile who everybody said was going places and in whom the algebra professor at ICCC had noted “a special talent for equations”—who, as usual, organized the New Year's party at the Blight Land, had simply left one roman candle unlit, explaining that Hal had already taken care of that part of the fireworks.

On New Years Day, people began to put together the details. Hal had been fueling up his van at the gas station out by Sherwood, just outside of town. The clerk didn't remember anything strange before the exploding fireball that took two gas pumps, a 1986 Astro van, and of course Hal himself. The fire investigator suggested that maybe he was filling up a canister and the static electricity created a spark. His parents said that he'd probably been smoking. Either way, this sort of thing wasn't supposed to happen. In the minds of all the people in Dummetville, Hal Smalligan would forever be a little stick figure man running from his own fire off a warning sign on every gas pump they ever saw.

Marco, for one, still wanted to throw a party in his honor. The day after New Years, everybody was too spent up to care. The next day, they listened to him. By the end of the week, everything was set for the following Friday at the Blight Land.

Chester Buddy was long, lean, and used to staring out windows at absolutely nothing but cracked up parking lots. He worked at the Double Dip—by then the oldest ice cream shop in town, though it used to be called Hoff's—mostly by himself and with few customers during the

day. A couple of kids might stop in after the high school let out, but aside from that, he was alone, listening to the chattering of the fan, polishing the glass of the display counter, and dreading the next time he'd actually have to scoop ice cream. Sure, he didn't enjoy talking to customers, having to pretend to be excited about their frozen treat or some aspect of their day just so he might get a fifty-cent tip—the high schoolers never tipped anyway, so he didn't say a word to them—but what really bothered him were the styrofoam cups.

“Medium or large?” he'd say after someone placed an order, pointing to the cups. He'd grab whichever one they chose, squeeze it a few times just to feel it give and hear it pop. Then he'd take up the cold metal scooper and bury it into the tub of ice-hard ice cream they'd chosen, troll it around to get a full scoop, enjoying the slight tension in his forearm and bicep, and ease the mess into the cup gently, like a mother releasing her child's hand after prayers at bedtime—so he liked to think— careful not to spill any over the edge, and then he'd yank the spoon out, its metal scraping against the rough styrofoam sides, generating a friction that passed from the spoon through his hand and sent tiny vibrations all the way up to his shoulder. He hated it, and he hated that he always knew right when to expect it.

Since he had to fill in at the shop that Friday from eight till midnight, Chester was one of the first to arrive at the Blight Land, showing up just as the sun was setting and the hunters were pulling out from the refuge across the highway, half-drunk and tired from a day of sneaking up on unsuspecting trees and filling mounds of dirt with bullets. It was quiet, mostly, and the dimming light cast long shadows of trees well across the strip of dirt and sand where the kids and young people of Dummetville had held so many of their parties.

The land itself was still owned by Marco's dad. It sat just on the outskirts of town. He'd bought it a while back when prices were low in the hope of putting up houses, even cleared part of it, but his business partner had backed out at the last minute and all the investment money got tied up in court. Development had stalled for years. For a while, a lonely yellow backhoe kept watch. Then it left and the land was truly dead. Prices were low again.

Shortly after that, Marco began to use it for parties. He said it was okay, but everybody knew he'd never asked his dad for permission, not that anybody really cared. They'd build a little fire, usually only five or seven kids, but sometimes more, right on the border between the sandy cleared area and the woods. They called the sandy area the Blight Land because there wasn't anything there and it looked like they all imagined the future would, or, sometimes, they called it the Beach since it was their playground on the edge of a sea of pine. Sometimes they made sandcastles, too.

Once, Bernie Mullen constructed a giant sand penis the size of a man, standing straight up in the air. He spent hours on it and nobody knew what he was doing at first, playing in the sand still wet from the day's earlier storm. Then, it began to take shape and everybody laughed. It was really fantastic, the greatest thing they'd ever seen. Girls snapped pictures with their phones, made silly faces in front of it, sticking out their tongues or popping them against their cheeks. He kept working on it, though, and eventually it became uncomfortably realistic. Nobody wanted to look at it anymore. He finished and somebody begrudgingly took a picture of him hugging his creation. Shortly after, the rain washed it away and everybody was thankful they didn't have to look at it anymore. After that night, Bernie's entire existence revolved

around trying to recreate that artistic high. That was the circumference of his life.

It had been raining off and on for a few hours before Chester arrived. The wet dirt climbed the soles of his shoes as he approached the fire. He waved to Marco, who was sitting around the fire with a few people Chester didn't recognize, friends he'd met at ICC. Marco was proud of these friends, Chester knew, since they were educated and going places just like he was and he liked to remind the rest of the people of Dummetville of that very fact. But even though it always felt like Marco was about two steps closer to the door than everybody else, everybody liked him, because when they stood next to him, they felt two steps closer as well.

"Hal would've hated this weather," he said.

Chester didn't understand.

"His shoes. His 'genuine,'" he said it so it rhymed with "mine," mimicking Hal's accent, "Italian shoes."

Chester laughed. "That's right. Couldn't get this mud on those goddamn Italian loafers."

Marco was a ball of energy, always moving, always laughing, always gesturing. That's the first thing people noticed about him: his hands. They didn't stop fluttering if he was talking. And if he wasn't talking, they were tapping away at his sides, or twirling a stick, or slapping a table or counter. One day he'd slow down, he knew, but that day was years to come and so he went full tilt at everything without ever fearing burning out, largely because he knew it was only a matter of "when," not "if," his energy subsided, so he might as well use it while he had it. He jumped up to greet Bernie Mullen and Shells DeGroat, shaking both their hands and thanking them for coming. Bernie immediately set to work on his latest creation, gathering sand in a huge

pile in front of him. Shells swore he was making a snowman. He didn't know the story.

Everybody but Marco and Chester went over to watch. The two of them just stared into the fire, drank, and pretended to see things that weren't there, pretended they weren't just staring at a fire because they didn't have anything to say to each other. They'd been best friends since elementary school and had run out of conversations about four years earlier. Marco drummed on his knees.

After a few moments, Chester said, "I've got to leave early tonight. Got to cover for Melanie at the shop."

"Lame," Marco replied.

Chester looked into the fire. "I've got to."

"I know."

They listened to the laughter coming from behind them. Shells kept trying to explain to Bernie that he was doing it all wrong, that his creation was shaping up to look nothing like a snowman. Bernie, for his part, remained quiet, moving about and padding dirt here and there with an unmatched artistic intensity. He was a man playing an artist, hyperaware that everybody was watching. He gestured and hummed. He was half-crazed and passionate, carrying fistfuls of wet dirt instead of a paintbrush or a chisel. Nobody bothered to shut Shells up.

By then, over a dozen people had arrived. It was half past seven. They all just stood around smoking and drinking, pointing to the last light from the sun, explaining what it looked like. Paint mixing. A blanket. A rising tide. Every now and then the wind would kick up and blow around people's hair and they'd all huddle closer together, happy for the excuse to stand

next to each other. They brushed hands and leaned their weight on one another's hips.

Marco desperately wanted to see something in the fire. He needed it to speak to him, for some image to form out of the smoke or the flames themselves. He needed to see the twenty years of his life crystallize right in that moment and fill the emptiness in his stomach. He needed something, anything, to distract him so just so he wouldn't have to tell Chester, "I miss Hal."

He'd started having dreams about his old friend the night after his death. They mostly followed the same pattern: he was with Hal in a dusty basement in Georgia, standing near the back of a crowd of taut necks strained from screaming and laughing. These men were all as big as Hal, wearing sweaty t-shirts and baseball caps filmed with dirt and mud. When they turned, Marco saw their faces were lined with dirt as well, every crease and pore overflowing with the stuff, but they didn't even seem to realize it. It was a dirt that was part of them, dirt they'd carried for years. To attempt to wipe it off would only rub it deeper and deeper into their skin, browning their whole appearance even further. Only Hal was clean. He hoisted a dead rooster, limp as a shirt, up into the air, the brilliant too-red of its blood clinically perfect against its grayed feathers, paint straight from the bottle waiting to be mixed on a clean palette.

Marco had never been particularly close to Hal. They went to the same parties. They knew the same people. But they hadn't talked much. Marco couldn't even remember any moment when they were actually ever alone, without someone to buffer their conversation. His strongest memory of Hal was his thick drawl that made it look and sound as though he had to chew on each word before letting it escape from his mouth. For Marco, Hal was just the one who had got away first. He'd proven that there was a life outside Dummetville and the parties at

the Blight Land, even if none of it quite added up. It was more, he thought, than his other friends would ever see. Even Chester, a smart kid that had done well in school, could not look past his job at the ice cream shop. It was all he needed, he said. It paid decent for easy work. And it was just a stepping stone, anyway, just temporary. But whenever Marco had asked where that stepping stone led, Chester just became frustrated and quiet.

But now Hal was dead. Before, Marco had told himself, “If Hal can get away, so can I.” He, too, could escape to some place mysterious, away from his hometown, his dad everybody knew, but most of all away from these people he did not respect. He no longer enjoyed these parties. He loathed being around all the self-satisfaction. He’d always been charismatic, well-liked (much of this he knew he owed to his father’s property), and enjoyed all the talk of how he was “going places.” But now he was twenty, afraid of having stalled. A guy he knew from school might come up to him at a movie and press his shoulder, inviting him to a party—and, in fact, needing him to come if the party was to succeed, if it was to be something more than a few buddies from high school sitting around a living room with red plastic cups in hand and laughing at their own disappointments—and all Marco could feel was another heavy hand telling him, “Stay.”

For his part, Chester could not make the fire look like anything other than two scoops of ice cream. He was mad at himself for this. It was so simple. He worked with ice cream, so he saw ice cream. Bending forward, coming face to face with the dirt, he appeared to be stretching, but all he was really doing was examining the sandy mush that, by the light of the fire, made waves of rust crashing against his calves. It stuck to the hair of his legs, delicately flocking the

tiny dark curls. He brushed it off on his palm. Of course it would then seem to him like residual ice cream, the half-melted ooze that dripped from the scoopers or spilled over the tops of cups left sitting. He wondered when he had become so dull. It was with great relief that he heard Marco break the silence.

“I miss Hal,” he said.

“Really?” Chester replied. “I never thought you two were that close.”

“We weren’t.”

Behind them, Bernie Mullen’s sand penis took shape. Shells, finally seeing the big picture and pouting because nobody had corrected him when he’d try to direct the creation of a sandman, hung back in a corner away from the rest of the crowd. Bernie still moved about frantically, practically leaping from side to side around the six-foot tall tower, patting here and there, shaping and adding more mud. Nobody had the heart to tell him this whole act stopped being funny or interesting about three years earlier. Instead, they just clustered around him, muttering compliments in the dark, hoping he’d one day get it.

Marco told Chester about the dreams. “What’s it mean?”

Chester shrugged. “Probably nothing. They’re just dreams.” For Chester, there was nothing more dull than listening to somebody else’s dreams, especially when that person was convinced that they meant something, that they were more than simply images left over from the day’s thought process tucked away in a mental fridge to be reheated in the middle of the night. He himself didn’t remember his dreams. He enjoyed telling people that he didn’t dream. It sounded somber.

With that, Marco stood. He waved a hand through the uppermost tips of the flames. He knew, of course, with the part of his brain responsible for grocery lists and day-to-day planners, that Chester was right. He was the one going places, even if he didn't know what those places were or how to get to them.

"Tell me not to stand in this fire," Marco said, hovering akimbo over the flame. "In honor of Hal."

"What?" Chester gave his watch a sidelong glance and figured he'd have to leave in five minutes if he wanted to get to work on time. "Don't be an idiot."

Marco grinned. Quicker than anything, he leapt over the fire, legs and arms flailing upwards as though held by invisible threads. He cleared it and gave Chester a raise of his eyebrows. All he could think about was how completely empty he felt. Shouldn't this have meant something? He smiled his biggest smile.

"You want to try?" he said. "It's fun." He leapt again, sending a stretching splash of shadows back and forth between either side of the fire. People filtered over from Bernie's sand sculpture. He was at the boring part of the artistic process now, anyway. Bernie called it his "Harmony" phase. He'd sit with his creation for anywhere between ten minutes and an hour, pressing his hand against the sand. He explained that this gave the sand an opportunity to talk back to him, to tell him how it wanted to be shaped. Everybody knew he'd started this bit of his routine one night when a girl from the local art school had stopped by. He'd hoped to woo her with his sensitivity, but not knowing a thing about her besides the fact that she kept a tin of pencils in her purse at all times, he failed miserably. He just kept the "Harmony" phase for the

sake of tradition. People expected it.

By now, Marco was a whirl of flesh shooting back and forth over the fire. It was only a small flame this evening, but the stunt looked more impressive than it actually was. People clapped and hooted with each leap.

Chester couldn't help thinking of Hal. How he'd stand in the flame, the toes of his shoes pressed against the burning logs, making it look easy. He neither smiled or laughed and he didn't quite frown either; instead, his big round face contorted into any number of expressions that did not resemble known emotion. It must've hurt, Chester knew, but how many times did he let him stand there? How many times did he watch a little bubble of fire shoot up his jeans, even before anybody else came over? He did not feel guilt, though, weighing down his limbs. Why would he? He was, after all, Hal, the man who stood in fires. That was who he was. That's what people would remember. Instead, all Chester felt was embarrassment for Marco.

"Look at Marco go!" someone shouted.

"Can't touch that!"

"Marco the fire leaper!"

Chester stood and walked away, saying goodbye to nobody. With what felt like clarity, he understood the need to drive in his car very, very fast down empty and lonely roads.

It was the motion, Marco knew. That's what kept everybody watching. He vaulted over that fire, the cheers from the others increasing as he got closer and closer to the flame. To keep their attention, he employed cartwheels, somersaults, and handstands. The world around him spun, but he could not stop. To stop, to be idle, would be to become Hal, just another silent

spectacle that nobody ever really understood. He wanted to show them all that he could keep going. That he was different. That, with his energy, his intensity—anybody could jump over a fire, but who would do it for ten minutes?—he was better than them. But really, he just didn't want to let them wander back to Bernie and the sand, simply picking and choosing their curiosity to idly drift between like bored patrons at a sideshow. He couldn't admit to himself that he didn't know how to stop.

When his foot finally caught in the mud and he saw the ground rushing up towards his face, he knew, as much as you can know anything in half a second, that he would be okay. He would land on his hands, spring back up, and flip forward. It would be his most impressive step yet. But his hands smashed into the dirt harder than he expected. He squeezed every ounce of strength from his forearms to propel himself back up, but the soft, wet sand only gave. His hands sank into it up to the wrists. The warmth of the fire spread around his calves, easing through his jeans and up against his skin. Somebody screamed. He knew he was on fire. But there were too many things to do at once. He needed to put the fire on his legs out, he needed to roll or crawl out of the fire, he needed to extricate his hands from the dirt, he needed to stand and smile to make himself look normal again and to reassure everybody he was fine. It was too much, and all of these actions hinged on one another. So he was thankful to feel the hands dragging him and the shirt beating against his legs. A few seconds later he was out.

They looked around, eyeing each other to figure out the right reaction, as if there was a particular code of conduct for this situation—a man falling into a fire—that could be looked up in a book or that they could be quizzed on, and they'd failed to study. A girl nodded her head

compulsively. A few people laughed. Somebody asked if he was okay. He said he was. His legs had not yet begun to sting. Somebody else patted him on the shoulder and handed him a beer. He was grateful.

After a moment, the crowd slid back over to Bernie. He'd finished his "Harmony" phase and had gotten back to work. He was almost finished. They wondered what would happen when he was done. Would he say something? Would he just destroy it? Would he just walk away? No response seemed quite adequate to the kind of intensity he'd poured into his creation. They never quite knew what to expect, and Bernie was enough of a showman to keep them on their toes.

Marco looked around for Chester, but all he saw were footprints in the sand. He wanted to explain it all, or to at least talk it through with his old friend, because with that talking he was not sure he understood himself. Gradually, his legs awoke to the burns. His heart continued to pound in his chest. He rolled up his jeans and saw the singed and cracking redness spreading across his ankles. He did not want to move.

When Chester arrived at the Double Dip, the place was overrun with high schoolers. They sweated despite the cold and ordered double scoop cones. They sat in the corners of the place, near the mesh window screens clotted with dead bugs, and ate and talked about what it meant to be them. Melanie—Chester's boss, a big woman in her early forties who he loved because she wore too much eyeliner—stuck around for a few minutes to help out before she had to go pick up her son.

“Thanks,” she called on the way out the door. “Oh, and we ran out of cups. I had to buy some paper ones instead.”

It was all Chester could do to hide his joy at the harmless suck of the spoon against the wax-coated insides of the paper cups. Unlike the styrofoam, it wasn't irritating at all. It just let you know the cup was there, that you had indeed made contact with a cup, kind of reassuring in a way. It was ecstasy in paper. He hadn't felt this good in weeks. He was dishing out scoops left and right. He was actually making progress and cutting into the long line of kids waiting for their ice cream, dollars in hand and half-smiles on their faces. They were watching him, he thought. They were impressed.

A moment later, after the line had been cleared, a kid approached the counter. Chester was wiping the insides of the glass display counter and everything on the other side swam in its own unreality.

The kid wore oversized sunglasses and a baggy sweatshirt. He had hair that looked like it would've bored a barber to death, but a smile that all the girls would follow. All his features cascaded into that crooked, half-cocked smile. He placed a cup of ice cream on the counter and muttered a complaint. Chester did not hear it. All he heard was, “Hey, ice cream man?”

“Ice cream man,” the boy had said. So this would be it, then. Of course, he'd heard it before. It wasn't new. With all the self-consciousness of a watch ticking out seconds, or a printer eating paper, he'd already accepted it. Hal the man who stood in fires and blew himself up, Bernie of the sand penis, Marco the fire leaper, and Chester the ice cream man. The singularity of his identity slid over him like a new skin and he was afraid.

But he did not have time to think about it. More kids came in. He ignored the numbness of his hands, freezing cold from the constant contact with the icy metal scooper. He ignored all sound but for the orders, shutting out all the laughter and empty teenage melodrama.

The party at the Blight Land was over. It had been Hal's party, and his name had been mentioned all of twice. The young people of Dummetville had short memories.

It was the rain that ended things. It started as a fine sprinkle, but quickly picked up. People rushed to their cars, spreading jackets over their heads and sharing that protection with whoever would take it. They laughed. Bernie abandoned his sand sculpture. It was nearly finished anyway, and he hadn't really known what to do with it. Before he left, he offered Marco a ride home.

"I'll be okay to drive," he replied. "I'm just going to sit here a moment more."

Bernie nodded and waved. He was a normal guy again, but everything about him seemed smaller than it had earlier. He was back to being boring Bernie Mullen, and the sadness in his eyes spoke to just how aware of this he truly was.

And so Marco was alone. He sat and rocked in the wet dirt, slowly digging himself in deeper, tapping his fingers on his knees and not saying a word because he knew all that would come out is "Ow." He wondered about the burns along his ankles, about how serious they really were, but he didn't want to check again. He knew it would hurt too much to walk (the stinging had only intensified), so he decided to sit and wait out the pain for a few more moments. He was thankful to have the rain cooling his legs. Over time, he watched Bernie's creation erode back

into the ground and saw the untended fire die down and finally out. The night deepened. It started raining harder. He just rocked and rocked, as though the movement would distract the pain, but only scooping himself further and further into the sand.

TRAILS

We never took the hurricanes seriously. Sure, our parents did, my father especially, and he tried to impress us kids of their danger by stocking up on gallons of water, peanut butter and crackers, and getting into heated debates with my mother and anybody else who'd listen about whether or not you open the windows to let the wind pass through. His grandma and great-grandma always did, he said, and it worked fine for them. Once, before a storm, he tried to open a window in the rear bedroom. It had rusted shut and the handle was about twenty years past due for replacement. It snapped off in his hand, but he pretended it didn't. He muttered something about making a point and went into the kitchen to drink. It was easy to hate yourself when you saw your father walking off with a broken piece of metal tucked in the fold of his palm like nobody could see it.

We were far enough inland to avoid the real damage, the lashing wind that dusted the beaches on either coast and took out the glassy condominiums—"What a shame," their neighbors might say, when really they were just happy to have that little bit of ocean view back—and bridges, rushed through palm fronds so fast it turned them into things unnatural, bent, and flicking. We didn't get that. Sometimes we lost power and the milk would go bad. Every now and then a half-rotten oak landed in the middle of the road. Sometimes on a house. The letters, too, on the signs that bordered the highway running out either end of town, often got whisked off. I remember one sign in particular that had witty sayings, stuff like, "The best reason for having dreams is that in dreams no reasons are necessary," or "We make a living by what we get,

we make a life by what we give,” and “Patience is not a virtue, it is a waste of time.” They were often contradictory, and they usually were better when they tried to be funny rather than wise, making not so clever jokes about gorillas and donkeys. We all paid attention to that sign, but after the storms, it’d be missing so many letters that it made less sense that it had before. The gap-filled words always reminded me of a boxer who’d been hit in the mouth too many times.

In some ways, just before, during, and after a storm, all of life seemed to end. Businesses shut down, people huddled up in their houses, the lights sometimes went out, and right after we could walk outside into a world that was either frighteningly new or beautifully old. It was completely empty either way except for the drenched and lonely stray dogs. Everybody else still paled in the beams of their flashlights, their faces thin and limp and whitened like a gauzey sheet, unshaven and makeup-less and lined with pride at their own resilience. “This is my Dachau,” they liked to think with less than half of their mind. “You are my Pol Pot.” The other more-than-half knew that all they faced was a strong breeze and the inconvenience of forced family time. The real resilience was to go on looking at these people in front of them when *they’d* attended a school in the city, when *they* had once been called “Beauty of a Million Suns.” They prayed for the martyrdom of a blown away trash can so they, too, could have a story to tell at work. The dogs, meanwhile, too exhausted and too full of what they alone had seen to even bother hunting for scraps, stood near the sunset-colored puddles, occasionally lapped at the water, but mostly just passed time, staring and circling each other, slick-haired and wet-dark satellites gradually bending back towards survival.

The night after one storm, when the bad weather had all passed and most people, my parents included, were asleep or, at the least inside because of the mandatory curfew, I snuck out and met up with my good friend Manny Brookes. He lived a few blocks down and we'd been close since kindergarten. I say good friend even though he was probably actually my best friend at the time, but boys at eleven don't like to talk about these things, and I still don't now.

This storm had been a touch worse than most and actually knocked out power through the whole town. It had even shut down entire streets with flooding or fallen trees. After being stuck inside a dusty hallway all afternoon (it was the furthest inside we could be, Dad had explained), I couldn't wait to get out and explore the remnants of my hometown. I imagined complete devastation. Collapsed houses. Bodies in the streets. Random fire hydrants unleashing geysers of water.

That night, Manny was being tagged along by this kid Willis, another boy in our class who I never really talked to, but who'd heard from his dad, a cop, where some of the choicest, most interesting, most torn up areas of town were. We decided to hop on our bikes to check them out, avoiding the major intersections where the cops parked their cruisers and ran their lights and crisscrossing through as many backyards as we could.

There is nothing quite like being in somebody's backyard when you know you're not supposed to. You can't breathe, and you're amazed at how quiet your body can be. All the air pulses with energy, and when you finally leave the yard, your skin rides up your limbs and emanates electricity like some kind of release. It is probably the one thing I miss most about childhood: sneaking through backyards.

Willis tripped on a kiddie pool and cursed, loudly enough that I was afraid we'd be caught.

"Did you bring a flashlight, Tim?" Manny asked me as soon as we were back on the road.

It was totally dark all around us but for the moon. "Was I supposed to?" He didn't answer.

Our eyes adjusted quickly enough. We didn't say much else along the way. All I heard was Willis' panting and the lingering wind skimming over the treetops overhead, along with the squealing of the bikes. It was fun passing through the empty streets that I knew so well but only when heavily trafficked, or at least when we went out on other nights, well lit by streetlights and houses. With the power out, it seemed like everybody was gone, even though I knew they were just asleep. Still, in my mind, I pretended we were the only survivors of a nuclear holocaust and billions were dead around us. I didn't mention it to Manny or Willis, however, since we were close to being too old for that kind of thing, though I suspect they must've been thinking similar thoughts.

We arrived at the first stop on Willis' list of wrecked-up places to check out.

"Is that it?" Manny said, looking straight down Pine Street. Some mailboxes had been knocked over and a few branches littered the road. Other than a little disarray, it was just normal, uninteresting Pine Street: boring station wagons parked in front of boring garages with ordinary, boring swimming pools in every boring backyard.

"My dad made it sound worse," Willis said. He planted his feet on the ground and surveyed the scene. "It probably looks different in the light."

"Yeah. I bet," I said.

Willis gave me a scowl.

“Well if somebody had brought a flashlight, we’d know, wouldn’t we?” he said.

I barely knew him, but I already strongly disliked Willis.

“C’mon, let’s just go to the next stop,” Manny said.

We pedaled a few blocks over to Heather Glen, the new gated housing development that had just been completed that spring. My dad had said all along it’d been shoddily built, saying there’s no way you could build that many good houses that fast without any problems. Now, it looked as though he was right. Heather Glen had been constructed in a shallow valley and all the runoff stormwater had drained to the center of the brand new community, leaving pools three-feet high at their doors.

“Now that is something,” Willis said. We all climbed up and sat on the low concrete wall that surrounded the development. “I’d sure hate to be them.”

I nodded, but I quickly became bored and bit up with mosquitoes and other bugs that flitted around the high, uncut grass on the outside of the wall. I was ready to go on, and I think Willis was too, so we hopped off the wall and mounted our bikes. Manny didn’t move yet.

“It’s kind of pretty, in a way, isn’t it?” he said.

“What do you mean, Manny?” I asked.

“Just look at the moon, reflecting off the water. It’s like looking at a pond, but all those houses grew up around it.” He shook his head. “I don’t know.”

I could see what he meant, but why would you tell anybody that? The words will always fall apart as soon as they leave your lips. I tried to hide my confusion, my surprise at what he said. In the dark, it’d be easy. Just look away. I think he still saw though.

Manny jumped off and got back on his bike and we rode off. He was like that sometimes, caught up in his own head, but it never really took. He'd look at the monkey bars and comment on how their gridwork made checkers on the blue sky. Or, he'd shed a tear for an anthill decimated by a stray football. To be truthful, I think a lot of times he and I were more in sync than we'd ever really know, but I was just too afraid to say it. I like to think this now anyway. If any other kid in our class had talked about something being pretty like that, or even looked like he was about to say something involving an emotion, Willis would have punched him in the arm and called him a fag. I might've too. But we respected, or feared, Manny too much to do that to him. It's not because he was that much bigger or stronger than the rest of us (he was), but because we didn't know what he could do.

"Where to next, Willis?" he said. And the boy who'd just had a vision was just Manny again.

Willis pulled out a piece of paper and looked it over. "Corner of Russell and Mulberry. Supposedly a tree fell on some house."

"Shit," I said. "Isn't that where Whistler lives?"

Willis' jaw dropped and he couldn't help laughing. Manny didn't say anything before taking off. We tried to keep up.

Whistler, or Fred, which I think was his actual name, was an asthmatic in our class. More than that, though, he was just a real jackass, like some kids learn to be before their time. When we were younger, in either kindergarten or first grade, we'd try to be nice to him, like all kids at least want to be at that age, even if they don't quite understand how. We let him ref the

basketball and football games his condition kept him from playing. We always let him sit next to us at lunch. We even invited him over to our houses from time to time. But as we got older, we saw that he was just a jackass, simple as that. He was always trying to one-up us in class, always trying to look the smartest. He'd sneer when one of us got a multiplication question wrong, fight to hold back laughter when one of us couldn't name the capital of New Mexico. And I don't think he particularly liked people anyway, so he stuck to himself. None of us liked him, but we let him be. Then, the last day of class before we got out that summer, he had to go and get Manny mad at him, which was hard to do because Manny was then and is now a pretty laid back guy.

The day was almost over and we were having this end of the year party in our class. The teacher had made cupcakes. Someone else had brought balloons. Pretty exciting stuff when you're four, but not so much when you're eleven, when you're more interested in sounding like you know all about what you think adults talk about—drugs, sex, and violent movies—than party favors. We were all just sitting around, chatting at our desks. Manny was, in fact, talking to the second or third prettiest girl in the class, depending on what you liked. They were chatting, laughing, having a good time. Then, Manny asked her, “So, Sarah (I think her name was Sarah, but it's not really important), what are you gonna' go do this summer?”

Sarah smiled, leaned forward on her desk, raised her eyes and blinked them slowly in that building up way girls do, but before she could speak, Whistler interrupted and said, “Don't you mean, 'going to'?” And then he grinned that little grin of his. It was a grin I'd seen before, but only on him and evil CEOs on television shows or corrupt sheriffs in the westerns my dad would

watch on Sunday afternoons.

“What?” Manny seemed perplexed.

“Don’t you mean, ‘going to do?’ Isn’t that what you meant to say, Manny?” Whistler explained. “Because ‘gonna’ isn’t any word in the language I or Sarah speak, right ,Sarah?”

Sarah just shook her head. Manny didn’t say anything. Whistler finally walked off, but Manny turned redder than I’d ever seen him. Sarah said something to him, but he didn’t pay any attention to it, or just gave her a short answer, so she finally left. After school, Manny went looking for Whistler, but he was already gone.

With Manny leading the way, the trip over to Whistler’s was short and we were all out of breath when we got there. It was worth it. A huge oak had fallen on top of the house, mostly just the upper branches, but they were big enough to crash through a few windows. Part of the trunk had landed on the side of the house and gone through the roof. It was a chaos of wood, leaf, and concrete. There was no telling where the tree ended and the house began. It’s hard to appreciate just how big those trees are until you see one on the ground like that. Next to a fallen oak, you realize we don’t build our homes nearly big enough. Nothing at all is big enough or strong enough to prevent that kind of damage. In the dim light of the moon, the house looked like a body—that was the intensity of the carnage and the quality of the lighting—that had been ripped to shreds by a tiger and left in a heap, or propelled through the window of a speeding car on direct impact with a concrete wall. Next to that, I went completely weak at the knees and wanted to go home, but couldn’t say it.

“You think there’s anybody in there?” Willis whispered.

“In that mess?” I said. “I hope not. For their sake.” I liked sounding ominous.

Manny knelt by the road and picked up a few rocks. He hadn’t said anything yet.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

When he had a handful, he gave a few to me and a few to Willis. He kept the biggest for himself. “What’s it look like?”

As he reeled back his arm and threw the first rock, I said, “I don’t think you should do that.” The rock flew through the air and splashed against the big window in the living room. It cracked, shattered, and then fell to the grass.

“What’s going to happen?” he said. “They going to come back and find some windows broken?” He pointed to the windows that the tree had already knocked out. Then, he threw a rock at one that was half-splintered. The remaining window popped. “It’s too late for that.” He smiled.

Willis looked on in awe. “It’s the perfect crime,” he said.

Their logic was flawless. We could never get caught. Nobody would be hurt. It might have been the only chance I ever got to throw a rock at a window with so few consequences. And, even at eleven, I was painfully aware of what was slipping by me. Parents and adults always focused on the past and the future, never anything in between. It was always, “Look at this picture. Look how young you are. All that baby fat,” or, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Songs, movies, and television shows touted the idea of never really growing old. They told us to take advantage of what we had, but never explained how. I would’ve never been able to call it that at the time, but somewhere along the line I’d developed a complex about never

having enough time, or never spending it right. I think it carried into adulthood. I find myself now always looking back, asking, “Did I use it well?” or looking forward, “How can I use it better?” Maybe that’s not so different than everybody.

“Come on, Tim,” Manny said. “Their insurance is going to cover it all anyway.” He gave me one of his big rocks and waited for me to throw it. I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to break a window, even if most had already been wrecked.

“Tim,” Manny said. He didn’t need to say anything else. His eyes were disappointed. He looked truly sad. He wanted to save me, to grab my hand and throw the rock for me, but he couldn’t.

Mechanically, I forced my arm to make the motion and release the rock. It smashed into a window and the glass dropped out. We walked over to check out the damage. I looked through the window: single twin bed, small television, posters for all the latest movies, a few videogames on the floor. “This must be his room,” I said.

“Good,” Manny said. I couldn’t see his face for the shadows.

Then, Willis jogged over. “Run!” he whispered. Behind him, a light moved through the windows in a neighbor’s house. We got on our bikes and sped off down the familiar and empty streets, the air forcing its way around us, and nobody to see but the few stray dogs jauntily trotting about like kings.

After a few minutes, we parted ways with Willis. Manny and I slowed down and enjoyed the muggy, quiet ride homeward.

“You don’t think they’ll catch us?” I said after a while.

“I don’t see how,” he replied softly, his eyes focused straight on the road ahead of him. And he was right. Nobody ever found out. But, in some childish way of compensating, after that night, I did try to be a little nicer to Whistler, though he rarely gave back the kindness. Manny, too, in his own quiet way, returned to normalcy with Whistler, and neither that night or the incident with Sarah were ever discussed again. That’s how life goes sometimes.

After that summer, we rushed onward into adulthood like everybody else in our class, but absolutely no quicker than anybody else ever had or ever will. At fifteen, Willis and his family moved to Texas. A year later, Whister had an asthma attack that sent him into the hospital. He’d collapsed in the hall at our high school, kicking his legs on the ground and coughing. It shook up a lot of people. Manny and I went and visited him. After graduation, I went off to college in Arizona, studied organic chemistry for a while. I ended up getting a job selling drugs for a pharmaceutical company for a while before coming home to Florida and doing contract negotiations for the Department of Transportation. It’s nothing like I ever imagined, nothing like it at all. Manny dropped out of college after three weeks at the local technical school. He got a job changing oil for a while. I don’t think it was anything like he imagined either, but we didn’t talk about it. When we did see each other, we never talked about much, but I don’t suppose that’s much different than ever. Kids never talk about anything really. We kept waiting for some big change, for some signal that we were now adults, but it never came. The few times we did talk, it went back to that night throwing rocks at a house with no consequences. It never went past, and I can’t say we really knew anything about each other. We were never as real as we were that night, and I wonder how real we were even then.

Fifteen years later, I'll be depressed and melancholy for no good reason—like everybody else in their mid-twenties—and growing a beard to prove it. I was in town visiting my mother. Dad had passed the year before, and she got lonely. She passed the time crocheting blankets for the church to give away and standing in front of windows wearing old dresses while pretending it was yesterday. Not years earlier, when she was still young and beautiful, when I was a kid, or when Dad was still alive. She told me all this, almost as soon as I opened the door, without me asking.

She also explained that Manny's mother had just died. Mom had a cake with a note, a chocolate cake she made—even the frosting, she pointed out—and a little yellow note folded in two. She didn't tell me not to read the note. She didn't even comment on it, but I later opened it and it just said "Sorry" in loopy script.

I visited Manny that afternoon at the small house he bought near the airport. It had one bedroom and a single sabal palm and all the sky was striated with jet trails. The palm stood in the yard like a thumb. I wanted something to be the fingers, a fence maybe, but nothing would suffice. A dog down the street yapped. I knocked. Another plane roared overhead before Manny answered.

He was depressed and melancholy, trying to grow a beard to prove it. I handed him the cake before he even recognized me. He wanted to take it in and close the door without another word. What kind of weirdo just goes knocking on random people's doors handing out cakes?

"Thanks," he mumbled. Just before he shut the door, he recognized me and laughed,

invited me in. He scratched the curls on the back of his neck as he held the door open. In the greatest moment of self-realization in his twenty-five years, a real genius second, he understood then and there that he could play the hair on the back of his neck like other men play the cello. He didn't say that, though. Instead, he closed the door and laughed again. I laughed too.

He showed me around, apologized for the mess. There was a bonsai tree on the window sill in the kitchen. He bought it on a whim seven weeks earlier on a day when he planned to turn his life around.

"It was just the first step," he explained. "A symbol." It was half dead. There was a rock next to it. I told him it reminded me of the West. He nodded and apologized for the mess.

There was a stack of old televisions off to the corner of the living room, half-tucked behind a chair and partially eclipsed by some slacks and a few baseball caps thrown on top. There were maybe five or six of them. They looked like a collapsed robot from some B-movie. They were covered in dust.

"Do you fix those?" I asked.

He didn't even blink. "Nothing speaks more to the human condition than a broken TV," he said. I could hear the rehearsals in that line, the number of times he'd said this mantra to the mirror, and I knew just how rough things must've been for him over the past few years. He went on to explain that he bought one almost every year as a Christmas present for whichever girl he was with at the time, then took them back when things fell through.

I told him I was sorry about his mother. He said he was sorry about my dad. He asked why I was in town.

“I don’t even know,” I said, kind of shaking my head and looking off into the distance, then down into the carpet—which needed to be vacuumed, but no more than any other carpet—for effect. That look give off the impression of someone tired of the world and everything in it.

He rolled his eyes. But he didn’t want me to see, so he kind of jerked his head to the side, tried to make it all look like one motion. We’d known each other too long, though, to not catch each other’s tricks.

“Mom’s been hassling me to visit.” I’d built up some vacation time with the state and didn’t have anywhere else to go. I laughed about this so it didn’t seem sad.

“Do you want to go driving?” he said. “Do you want to get a drink or something?”

It was a little past one in the afternoon, but I agreed. He suggested it like it was the only possible thing we could do other than stare at each other and cry. We stepped outside and all the sky was striated with jet trails.

He drove. It was pleasant with the windows down, the wind running between us. He started to say something, but stopped. We drove down roads we knew and roads we didn’t. We drove down roads that once seemed bigger than they ever were, roads that once were the entire universe made up in gravel and dirt. We drove down streets with names we should’ve known, but didn’t. We drove by old girlfriends’ houses, and the houses of those who should’ve been girlfriends. We passed gas stations, squirrels, and all the blank and repetitive woods full of men still chanting, “The South will rise again.” I asked where we were going.

“This is what I do when I trace my failures,” he said. I could tell that was entirely true.

Finally, we stopped at the Green Barn. The Green Barn was, is, and always will be a drive-

by liquor wonderland. It's a landmark. One-Armed Mel still worked there, a little ragdoll man with a plan framed by a window. Mel was loved by all those on the short side of adulthood because he didn't card and by everybody else because we thought we were better than him. Once, he tried to tell me a story about his ex-wife. I didn't really care and told him as much. He just laughed and handed me my beer. This was why people loved Mel.

Mel barked that he knew me, asked me how I'd been.

"It's good to see you," I said. The emptiness in the right sleeve of his otherwise ordinary plaid shirt will still terrify me. It'll look like a limp rag—the sleeve—or maybe the inside of a black hole.

Manny placed his order. Mel turned to grab the bottles. He had to take them one at a time, gathering them on the counter beside the cash register while he reached up to grab the next one from the shelf. He left the cash register open. The till was in arm's reach for Manny. He looked at me. His eyes didn't say anything. I shook my head. Mel whistled to himself. The paint around the window was chipped and flaking. All of the corners of Mel's counter were rounded and there were cracks in the surface. I shook my head. It would have been so easy for him. The till was right in arm's reach. It would have been right there. I saw his place. I know he could've used the money. Mel turned back around, apologized for being slow, and totaled up the sale. Manny paid him. We drove off, headed back to Manny's.

We drank. We talked about the past. We talked about Willis, Sarah, and Whistler. We talked about hurricanes. We laughed, unsure of why the other was even laughing. Manny smiled and the skin around his eyes and at his forehead crinkled up like old newspaper. He was the

happiest he'd been in fifteen years. He remembered the cake, which he left sitting on the card table in the living room, where the bugs could get at it. He said that he should've put it in the fridge. I agreed that it would have kept better in the fridge, that it would've been better cold, that the frosting might have melted. He asked whether we should just go ahead and cut it. I shrugged. He asked me if I wanted a piece. I said I didn't know. He said come on. I said it was his cake. He said it was my mom's cake. I said that was kind of rude. He said we should go ahead and cut the cake. I said whatever, but I wasn't mad. I didn't care about the cake. He said he was going to get a knife. I said I wasn't mad.

He went into the kitchen. I was alone for a moment and was struck by all the little piles of clothes spread around the place. Little mountains of Manny, I thought, a man made up in socks, worn-out undershirts, and wrinkled slacks. Just before I could feel like a complete idiot, he came back with the knife. I was standing there, on the opposite side of the card table. The cake sat between us, unsheathed. Manny held the knife, but he didn't just cut the cake. He didn't just hold the knife in the open and say let me cut the cake. He held it sheepishly at the tuck of his wrist, his hands low and awkward at his sides, unable to cut that cake or any other, unable to take the till even if he wanted to, even if he could get away with it, unable to leave his head and be in an arm or a foot or hip. I wanted to tell him I was sorry for thinking he could, that he was somehow different from me, but it would have been exactly like apologizing to an orange you'd split in half. I understood, then, and now always understand, that this is what it means to be an adult. We exist entirely as a type of pressure just behind the bridges of our nose, back in the sinuses, the kind of thing that makes you squint involuntarily, when the light coming through the

window isn't even all that bright and all the sky is striated with what looks to be jet trails, but you cannot be completely sure if they're trails or just a funny cloud, if they're what's left behind or what was never there in the first place.

SLEEPING OFF ANGELS

My father once told me the sky looked like an angel. He was between jobs at the time and wore his paint-stained shirt. It rolled over his belly like a big green sea with splotches of yellow and white foam, but it was just a shirt and they were just paint drips.

“Have you been drinking?” I asked. I was maybe eight or nine.

He shook his head.

“Do you mean like a part of it or the whole thing?”

He looked up and pondered for a second. “The whole thing,” he said with some consideration.

I tried to find his angel, but all I saw was the sky. “Like a cloud?” I asked. “Maybe a cloud looks like an angel?”

“The whole thing does, son.”

“God a’mighty.”

We lived in a house that butted up against the woods, or at least an unoccupied wooded lot about thirty by sixty feet that if I turned in the right direction could pass for the woods. In those moments, we lived in the forest in a house out of a fairy tale, one of those made from ordinary stone, thatch, and yellow ink. Not the princess’ castle or the witch’s ruined hut, but some place tucked away where one of the blue collar fairy tale denizens resided, like the woodcutter or the hunter or maybe just a dwarf who wanted to escape from it all. If I turned the other direction, I’d see the neighbor’s house only a few yards away, and sometimes that misplaced Dutchman, an old

timer named Ysebrand Bloem (but we all just called him Icy Bloom), would be sitting in the rocker on his back porch staring at me. Sometimes he'd wave. We'd heard he'd killed a man when he was younger, but he was nice enough to all of us, despite the staring.

The abundance of trees left the lawn filled with sticks longer than a fishing pole and bigger around than your forearm. My father told my mom he'd clear them whenever he worked up enough round-to-its, which he never did. The dog, Glenfiddich, loved them. She rummaged around the back of the yard until she found one of those giant branches that suited her, worked an end of it around in her gums to gain a solid tooth-grip, and dragged it over to me, the other end hanging down to the grass and marking a trail through the dirt. She walked kind of cockeyed from the struggle, the stick coming close to being twice her length. Then, she dropped it in front of me and wag her tail. I told her to sit, which she never did, before I heaved up the stick myself, testing its weight in my hand. I took a few steps back, spun three times, and tossed that stick across the yard like a discus. It flew. I covered my eyes with a hand to watch it go, just like the discus throwers did in the Olympics. It hit the weeds in the back with an angry splash and it looked like all the brush was revolting for a second, throwing up all their tendrils of viney stems and tossing back their leaves. They settled for just a second before Glenfiddich went diving in, her gold body pushing all the green back to revolution.

This is what I was doing the morning my father told me the sky looked like an angel. Normally, he'd tell me to stop, that Glenfiddich was going to break her neck trying to haul in one of those branches. Maybe she would. But it felt too good throwing those sticks and watching her run for me to be too worried. This morning he just said the sky looked like an angel.

I ran into the house and told my mother what he'd said. She was watching *The Price Is Right*.

"Like a cloud or something?" she said.

"The whole thing."

"Has he been drinking?"

"He says no."

"God a'mighty."

"What should we do?"

She turned from the television and her face looked for a half-second like it might just slide off her head, as though the only words she might possibly say next were, "I don't have a clue" or "Why were you ever born?" Some bells and whistles went off on *The Price Is Right* and Bob Barker handed a pretty co-ed the keys to a car. She jumped up and down. It seemed like that's kind of how it always went.

Finally, Mom said, "Tell him to take a nap."

I went back outside to tell him, but by then he'd already stopped his pondering and come back to earth. You could see it in his eyes. He petted Glenfiddich at the nape of her neck, even threw one of the giant sticks for her. He waved to Icy Bloom, walked over to the fence, and started a conversation about orange trees.

At lunch, I asked him if the sky still looked an angel.

"What are you talking about?" He used his angry voice, snarling over a half-chewed piece of sandwich, but I knew he wasn't really angry. That's just how he sounded most of the time.

“Don’t you remember?”

He blinked and continued chewing his sandwich.

Fifteen years later, my parents will no longer be in that house butting up against the woods. Icy Bloom, our old neighbor, will have shot himself in the face one afternoon in December, shortly after the last rodeo left town (he mentioned this in his note), and the wooded lot was leveled. A house built on it. My parents moved out after that, heading to a smaller, more manageable place further outside of the city. Glenfiddich died; they adopted a cat. They also bought a satellite dish.

One night, I was with a girl. We were in my little apartment not far from the college. She was pretty but largely unimportant in the scheme of things. Her favorite band was the Rolling Stones and she drank everything—milk, juice, soda, whatever—from its original container. She was morally and eco-consciously opposed to cups. Here’s what matters: that night, I looked up at the sky outside my window, not seeing anything but the light pollution, the occasional passing jet. Off in the distance, a few frighteningly regular lights blinked on the radio towers. I covered them with my index finger. This girl nuzzled against my neck and asked me what I saw.

I froze. I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t think of anything at all clever. My mind was blank. My dim reflection on the pane looked stupid. Then, I remembered what my father had said that morning so many years earlier.

“An angel,” I replied.

She looked at me and shuddered. Her eyes and mouth trembled, her face settling like foam dispersing through a glass. We kissed.

She pulled back, leaned her forehead against mine. “What’s that mean?” she asked.

“I’ve never known,” I replied. This was the truth. I told her about Dad, about the house butting up against the woods, about Icy, Glenfiddich, and all the rest.

We rested on the couch, kissed some more. The room wanted to become more than a room. It wanted to be some important space, something meaningful. It wanted to be a stomach, or a cathedral, or the cleft of air between a dancer’s foot and the insole of her shoe. But it wasn’t. It was just a room.

“So what does it mean?” I asked her. Her hair fell through my fingertips.

She pursed her lips, then bit the lower one. She wrinkled up her nose, blinked her eyes. Finally, she smiled. “It means I’m *your* angel.”

I smiled back at her. This, of course, wasn’t the right answer, and within two weeks, we split. After a month, we never saw each other again. But for now, we kissed some more. Our eyes adjusted to the darkness, and from somewhere—a few passing cars, those distant towers, the general smog of light generated by all the other students cramped together in these few city blocks—a fine dazzle drifted over us and the furniture, graying all our edges and rounding out our silhouettes.

APPENDIX A: WRITING LIFE ESSAY

In my oldest memory, I'm turning three and, with the help of my mother, wobbling down the unending eight-foot hallway that separates my bedroom from the living room. If I could remember sound, I know I would hear the laughter of people I haven't seen in decades, the squeaking of the front door that never got oiled, the television. What I do remember is the smell of a slightly burnt cake and the cold press of the hardwood floorboards against the soles of my bare feet. I remember the light: yellow lamps brightening the corners of the room while the long window in the middle let in the late afternoon. I remember that it was late afternoon. I remember the little keyboard computer toy I received that would say a word and then give me a chance to spell it. I want to say that this toy—probably a gift from one of the same aunts or uncles who always bought me some learning game (“your own fingerprint kit!” “1,001 interesting facts about states!” “Look! The secret life of the earthworm!”) when all the other cousins received basketballs, roller blades, and cash (they didn't wear glasses at five and therefore didn't look “smart”)—inspired my love of writing and language, made me the boy who'd eventually make it to the district spelling bee and lose on “ivy,” but I don't remember ever touching it again. I remember being overwhelmed by sensory details that have since left me in the past twenty-one years. I remember falling back asleep to shut them out. And I remember my mother as a hand, my father as a black hole.

Remembering my mother as a disembodied hand isn't as bleak or Addams Familyish as it sounds. It's more than I remember of anybody else at this particular birthday party. She was, at least, there. She walked me down the hallway. She held my own hand in hers and that is what I

remember first. All the other memories eddy around her touch.

My father is the opposite. I know he was there. Logic would tell me he was, and I've since asked my parents and they confirmed it. But I don't remember him. I can at least picture half-details of the others—the crease of one grandmother's wry smile, the skinny energy of my brother, somebody's belly laugh—but with Dad it's nothing. He's an outline in his normal chair at the head of the card table, surrounded by an outline of smoke climbing up from his outline ashtray, his outline boots with their outline laces tipping over in front of him. And he bends the light around him. But it's more than that, too. He bends emotion, all feeling, all the memories. If my mother's hand tries to hold them together, to keep them in the well of her own gravity, my father's outline sucks them all towards him, coloring the memories with a presence I do not fully understand.

Of my small nuclear family, it was and is my father who is the storyteller, despite his raising two sons who went on to get degrees in creative writing. But for as long as I can remember, his stories have never fully made sense. They're interesting, often funny, but it seems like the one important detail that ties everything together has gone missing, and he doesn't feel the need to explain why he told us. My childhood is full of half-stories about hunting trips, dead electricians, flying saucers, angry bulls that flipped cow dogs into the air—the dogs loved it, I'm told—that don't quite add up. It's more than that I question their veracity or have literally no way of telling, with Dad's even voice and blank poker face, what's been embellished. It's that, even though the stories usually seem to build in momentum, I'm not sure at the end why I've been told them. As children, we're used to morals. My mother has been a Sunday School

teacher for over twenty years, so I'm familiar with these stories, too. But from an early age, from the first moment he gathered my brother and me around him to tell us how his day went, my father was teaching me about a different kind of story, the kind of irresolvable snatches of life I would one day endeavor to write.

It's these two principles—the gravity of an image and a lack of resolution—that drive my writing today. All the stories here began with an image, then a line, then a sentence that just sounded right. From there, a narrative swirls into shape, but, at least in the first draft, I'm constantly working towards that image and how to get to it rather than any sort of larger design for the plot. As a reader, then, I sought out authors who developed stories often lacking in overt or neat narrative structures, stories that still resonated somehow in the end, but not necessarily through a clever denouement. I found writers like Denis Johnson, Grace Paley, and Stuart Dybek, who in their short fiction present moments of life that buzz with energy and flicker with meaning, even as the plot often seems secondary, seemingly acting more as framework to get us to interesting moments than the actual focus. I also discovered inspiration and models in poetry, in particular the work in James Wright's *The Branch Will Not Break*, where the use of imagery pulls the reader closer and closer to the speaker's mind, imbuing the setting with more and more subjective significance.

Working at the stories in this collection has helped me to become more aware of these impulses in my writing. The stories should represent a learned balance between a natural love for working with the image and the need for an engaging narrative to drive the story forward. This has sometimes been a frustrating lesson. When I'm struggling with a piece, it's often my

instinct to either start over from scratch or begin something completely new, putting the problematic story aside indefinitely or, sometimes, permanently. This is, of course, a bad habit for a writer, but the scope of this project has forced me to practice more focused revision and to look at each piece in the context of my larger body of work. In some ways, over the course of the past year and a half in which these stories have been written, I do feel like I've just been writing the same story over and over again. Many of the stories deal with similar themes of isolation, disconnects, and the objects or symbols we arbitrarily choose to infuse with meaning. The stories are mostly set in central Florida, centered around the fictional Illaca County, a mythicized version of my own home, Volusia County. Fathers are misunderstood, friends grow apart without always realizing it, and relationships break down in the background of daily moments. But even as the stories approach some of the same ideas from different angles, I don't think I've actually completely gotten at "it" yet, that core issue or struggle that I keep writing to. And that is nothing but an exciting feeling, so I look forward to taking the lessons I've learned here and applying them to my work as I continue this process.

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