

THE EIGHT-DOLLAR BILL

by

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ABSTRACT

“The Eight-Dollar Bill” is a collection of tales that explores human isolation and displacement accented by the backdrop of magic and mystery. The characters are often cynical and disenchanting while harboring deeply suppressed longings. They are guided by strange events and circumstances that ultimately transform their world-views. Each story provides a window into an ordinary life at the moment it slips into the extraordinary. The common thread of loneliness and loss runs throughout the collection, explored with multiple points of view and interconnected plots that link characters and places.

The title story follows a divorced, detached banker who is jolted out of his monotonous routine when a peculiar bank note becomes his new obsession. Young, irreverent newlyweds learn more about their solemn commitment when they come face to face with their future selves at a mysterious sea-side hotel in “Honeymoon Suite”. Two sisters traveling home from their father’s funeral must examine their own personal barriers in “Black Ice” when a mysterious stranger offers a glimpse into their father’s memories. “Plywood Kingdom” precludes “Honeymoon Suite” when the prospect of marriage forces Lenny and Elsie to carve a separate space from their long-time friend and roommate, Trey. Concluding the collection is “The Ruined Grove”, about a troubled teenager who struggles with his mixed ethnicity and dangerous temper. He meets a little girl who can manipulate reality, but only within the boundaries of an abandoned orange grove.

The stories take each character out of his or her comfort zone to a place where convictions are tested and often demolished by the shifting margins of dreams, visions and memory. From debilitating self-denial to the bitter longing for a sense of identity, the themes present in the collection always end in the subtle placement of hope and triumph.

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THE EIGHT-DOLLAR BILL

Ellis Clingmeyer was a tall, gaunt, willowy creature with hair the color of bran flakes. He chose for his wardrobe an array of muted browns, greens and greys that mimicked the hues of an empty street corner. His small house was sparse, the living room closed in by bookshelves and an oak computer desk. There was an old couch purchased from a scratch-and-dent retailer after the divorce. A dog-eared collection of literary essays lay on the coffee table, the water ring on the cover declaring it more of a coaster than an inspiration. There was a bell jar clock near the door, the kind with the turning golden spheres inside. 7:28 am.

Mr. Clingmeyer placed his thumb and middle finger at the inner corners of his eyes, shut them tight and opened them again. He poured himself a thermos of coffee and slid on rectangular black-rimmed glasses. His kitchen was stocked as if he were prepared for fall-out, a tribute to bulk buying apparent on every shelf. There were giant cans of his favorite caffeinated morning drink, twelve packs of bottled water, dried noodles, soup and frozen entrees. Such practices saved him shopping trips in spades which resulted in less human interaction, ie: crying babies, acne-ridden clerks and robust women in mumus and curlers deliberating the right choice of mango. He whirled on the cap of the thermos.

“Half an hour,” he muttered. “Keys, badge, coffee.”

It could be said of Mr. Clingmeyer that he constantly behaved as one roused from an afternoon nap by a persistent solicitor. Aggravation for all things seemed to plague him, the list of which began with mornings. He preferred the dark, secretive solace of night when the world was asleep and he could be left very much alone, but, his occupation dragged him out into the waking bustle of goings-on, and he met it with resentment. He swept up his olive-drab London Fog, a gift from his ex-wife, photos of whom were absent from the decor, and felt the pocket for the plastic security badge. He plucked his keys from a console table near the door and exited.

Outside, the few trees in his yard were close to withering, leaves shriveled and the bark turning pale and dry. Winter's first snow seemed stalled-out. A tired old Dodge waited for him on the oil-stained driveway. Ellis took a breath, exhaling steam into the cold air that mimicked what curled up and out of the mouth of his thermos. As usual, the ominous monster materialized before him. Enzo, his neighbor's pit-bull, had impeccable timing. The officer that lived next door was a stocky outgoing black man whom Ellis managed, on most days, to avoid. When he did fail at it, the officer insisted on calling him "Mr. Spunkmeyer", which he found futile to correct.

His neighbor woke up early, opened his garage door and hooked the dog on a lead that extended across the yard. He then left him to roam until it was time for his shift, during which period Enzo would rifle through Ellis' recycle bin for a suitable plastic water bottle. He was particularly familiar with the sound of both Ellis' ring of keys and the front door opening and closing.

"Dammit, dog," Ellis complained as Enzo trotted after him down the driveway, the bottle clutched in his powerful jaws. "Go on home. Go on," he commanded over his shoulder as he unlocked his car.

Though Enzo was a pure-bred, handsome and muscular dog, his owner had doted on him so profusely that the pit-bull in him was nowhere to be seen. His body was a rust color all over except his paws and head which were bone-white. From far away, the dog looked as if he'd been skinned from the neck up like a canine zombie. Despite his sinister appearance, Enzo behaved more like a Labrador. He was always eager to see Ellis, enamored liquid eyes staring upward, but Ellis harbored no trust for him. He was convinced by the fact that the dog had it in him, albeit buried deep, the capability to tear a man's head off if provoked in just the right way. Though Ellis had never succumbed to humoring the animal with one single toss of the warped bottles, Enzo hadn't given up on him. The pit-bull stretched the lead to its last thread until the orange-brown fur was pressed at the neck under his collar, but he always remained too many inches away.

5296 #. The lock clicked open. The five arcade-like beeps permitted Mr. Clingmeyer into the bank building where a long dismal hall flecked with mediocre pastel paintings led toward another access door. A grey plate on the wall sensed the badge he waved in front of it, and the plate's light turned from blue to green. A short hall flanked by a small break room and a locker area had another access door at its end. He could hear tellers in the break room, scooting in chairs and prattling about the weekend. He recognized the sound of the coffee carafe cap slamming shut, indicating someone had just finished brewing. Mr. Clingmeyer refused to drink the bank's preferred brand, some unheard of, inexpensive soil-flavored slop that came in metallic red packages.

“I’m trying to get a few days off in December for my Vegas trip but, nobody gets time off in December,” he heard Alice say.

After nearly ten years he knew all their voices well. Ellis was one of five seasoned Teller Leads. It was exhausting to explain to every new person he met the particulars of his occupation. Meeting new people was something he dreaded in the first place, but in the event he was forced to answer the livelihood question, he was constantly misunderstood. “Oh, a bank?” they would say. “My friend so-and-so works for a bank. She says her customers are so rude.” But Ellis never saw customers. The non-descript bank building was three stories, the first reserved for its commercial cash vault. Large deposits from restaurants, department stores and shopping malls arrived in armored cars, and were counted on machines by tellers in cubicles. It was a secure site, closed in by steel and concrete, accessed only by associates. Ellis was comforted by these attributes.

“Morning, Mr. C,” said Trey as Ellis passed the break room.

Trey was twenty-three with a pile of thick black curly hair, a subtle Trinidad accent and a collection of T-shirts with comic book characters printed on them.

“Yep,” Ellis returned stoically and slipped through the door.

The area between the vault and the hall was called a man-trap, a preventative cell created to thwart criminals. One door couldn’t be opened until the other was closed.

“Morning, Kurt!” Ellis said to a small tinted window in the wall.

Through the window, the silhouette of a man could be seen. The guard, a stocky retired marine with patches of white hair and a birth-marked scalp, punched a button to admit him.

“Gotcha!” Kurt shouted back.

There was a sharp click and Ellis pulled open the last access door. There was the familiar aroma of must and Lysol, and Roberta’s flowery perfume. She was another Teller Lead, and usually arrived only moments before Ellis, leaving the offending trail in her wake. The walls were a chalky blue, streaked here and there near the floor with dirt from disobedient flat beds and carts.

Mr. Clingmeyer’s first task was to calculate the stats -- teller production numbers from the previous day that averaged to a percentage. His desk was in the midst of the cubicles, barren and sterile housing only his computer and a few supplies. Roberta was cheerfully clicking away opposite him, plucking Danish butter cookies from a tin decorated with pilgrims at a feast. She was about his age with a tan, leathery complexion which was emphasized by an abundance of gold jewelry. Roberta had a habit of overusing a particular word which changed almost daily.

Yesterday, it had been spawned by an e-mail she’d received, a picture of a puppy wearing a Santa hat. “Isn’t that precious?” she’d said to herself, and thereafter described it as such to everyone she stopped to show it to. “I saw it and I thought it was just so precious,” she’d said. “Don’t you think that’s precious?” Today, it seemed the word was ‘miserably’.

“It’s getting miserably cold outside,” Roberta commented to a passing teller. “It’s a wonder why it hasn’t snowed, yet. It’s just been so miserably cold lately.”

Ellis stared at the screen. The percentages were aligned and matched by name. One hundred percent was a ‘meets’ rating, anything above was ‘exceeding’. All the tellers on his team were ‘exceeders’. His mind could echo the spreadsheet, a memory and an updating system equally as efficient. Trey was a solid one-hundred and twenty percent, if he wasn’t seated next to

a friend. Ellis had strategically placed him next to a mousy middle-aged woman named Marie who spoke very rarely. She walked with hunched shoulders as if through a corridor of thorns, and could always be seen wearing the same green sequined beret to pull back the front of her wiry, red-brown hair. Marie was a one hundred and thirty-five percent. Alice was usually a one hundred and twelve percent, but, since she had been planning her vacation, had dropped to ninety-eight.

The strategies for keeping the workers at their stations were thought up by Lynn Caldwell, the buxom banking center manager who had once made several unreturned advances toward Ellis shortly after his divorce. There was the policy of locking up all money before stepping away which thwarted frequent bathroom and water-cooler trips. When a problem arose the tellers would call out for the Leads instead of leaving to find one. The standard phrases were ‘discrepancy’, ‘override’, ‘counterfeit’, and when the teller had a complex dilemma, he or she would simply shout ‘lead!’

This operation was especially frantic during the holiday season because of the annual increase in the volume of counterfeits. Ellis declared that this was mostly due to the untrained seasonal help hired by malls and department stores, teenagers who could rarely decipher a genuine hundred from a concert flyer. The bills arrived already marked by the bright yellow detection pens, which had proven to be useless inventions. The fakes ranged from twenties to hundreds, from bleachy copies to inkjet and laser-printed creations.

Ellis was the vault’s expert. He had seen every type of monetary oddity. There were bills marked with ‘Happy Birthday’ and a variety of anti-government messages, stamps and stickers, presidents’ faces decorated with devil’s horns, hippy glasses, mustaches and the like. There were

the Christmas bills with Santa's face, the antique silver and gold certificates, the misprints and the limited mints. There were the altered bills - fives and ones with the corners of twenties, bleached-out fives reprinted as hundreds.

"Hey, Mr. C.," Trey had called out once when he came across an old two-dollar mark with red ink and a rendering of Monticello on the back. "How much do you think this is worth?" he'd asked, holding up the bill with enthusiasm.

"Two dollars," Ellis had dryly replied.

"Aw, damn. Really?" Trey said, staring at it. "What's Monti, Monti -- "

"Monticello," Ellis answered. "It's where Thomas Jefferson lived."

Though many of the new-hires were impressed by the peculiar bills, Ellis had long been disenchanted. Perhaps there was a time as a teller when he'd been fascinated by the antique cars on the backs of the older bills, amused by the thought bubbles written over the presidents' heads, even intrigued that someone would actually spend a Morgan silver dollar at a fast food restaurant. But, the sentiment eventually fizzled like the childhood thrill of Disneyworld.

Roberta continued to eat her cookies and hummed to herself as her ringed fingers steered the mouse over a pad with a rose blossom on it. More tellers began to file in. The beeping of the time clock echoed as they swiped their cards. There was the sound of air cans spraying the money counters clean, the musical call of the computers booting up, keyboards and cutting boards shifting. There was conversation. Trey could be heard down the hall praising a movie he had seen. His laugh was loud and distinct, a series of three quick nasal barks followed by a swift intake of breath and then repeated.

Ellis clicked the printer icon, waited for the mechanical whirr and stood up to snatch the paper as it eased out of his Epson. He pinched a thumbtack from a small container and headed toward the bulletin board, which was crowded with holiday decorations and newsletters depicting several employees holding up their paper-weight awards for teamwork. He pinned the paper over the previous day's report, a few of his tellers stopping to view it like students waiting to see their final exam grades. He smoothed his tie and returned to the floor where the Jetscan money counters were already humming, a helicopter sort of sound, pouring stacks of cash into a double-decker pair of pockets.

Ellis slurped the last of his coffee before adding up some cash-in slips. The air vent kicked on. He heard a machine jam. Folding up the tape he'd finished, Ellis stood and traveled toward the sound. Alice was having trouble picking out the half-shredded fifty from the roller.

"Of all the --" she started to say, before Ellis' tall shadow nearly blocked out the fluorescent bulb in the ply-board ceiling.

"Here," was all he said in a dry tone, and took a coin tag from her supply cup.

The cup bore a large sticker that read 'Jesus is coming, look busy'. He pushed back one cuff of his brown collar shirt and reached into the already dust-crusting machine. Shoving the coin tag through the roller, he forced the bill upward until its corner was exposed. He pulled at it with his fingertips until it inched forward under the metal roller. He tugged it from underneath, then from the top again, back and forth until the stubborn bill gave way. He yanked the fifty from the roller and it came free, wrinkled and dirty. He handed it to her.

"Thanks," Alice said quietly.

"Remember to count it. The machine didn't," Ellis told her, and smoothed his tie again.

It was lunch time. Unlike the basement atmosphere of the vault, the second floor of the building was a world of briefcases, suits, hose and heels. The hall was painted a regal maroon. The floor boasted a richly hued carpet like a grand hotel lobby. The cafeteria was at its end. Ellis stepped out of the elevator with his frozen entree. In the other hand he clutched a finance magazine and part of a newspaper. The cafeteria was where the social exchange of the vault's employees was both developed and demonstrated. This was an unfailing classification, and Ellis found the steadfast seating chart a guarantee against invasions to his space.

Trey and his friends from Receiving claimed the table near the front next to the vending machines. Trey usually ate beef or chicken curry and pepper sauce, the spicy smell a potent greeting at the cafeteria entrance. Alice and three other tellers made up the table Ellis referred to as the 'Baptist Women's Group'. Marie sat alone in a corner near a window that looked out over the parking lot. Her meals were always leftovers; green beans and chicken or pot roast and mashed potatoes in clouded Tupperware. The four hearing-impaired tellers sat at one table, conversing in a way that reminded him of over-excited referees. One of them had undergone an expensive operation to implant a device behind his ear, but the benefits were minimal. Ellis still had to rely on Post-It pads to communicate with him.

Ellis cleared his throat as he thrust his 'Savory Salmon and Rice' lunch into one of three microwaves, punched the buttons with his knuckle and folded back a page of his magazine. Four minutes later, he carried the steaming cardboard box across the room and settled comfortably at a table all his own.

Ellis blinked out of his malaise, the computer screen coming back into focus through the rectangle frame of his glasses. There were often times in the afternoon when his stomach was full and his duties were complete that he drifted off into fragments of memory. He had been updating a teller profile. Somewhere in the middle, he returned to his old study, a warm, dark room where his computer used to be. There was a yellowed globe on his desk where photos of his wife and the son he held on his lap were also placed. James was six then, his dark eyes wide with interest as Ellis pointed out Eastern Europe.

“Check-lo-slo-vaka,” James tried to repeat, running his fingers over the raised mountains.

Ellis hadn't corrected him. He'd just laughed, and had James spin the globe twice, three times, telling him that the world really was spinning, he just couldn't feel it.

“Whoa, look at us go!” he'd said to his son.

Someone's voice interrupted, and the vault's dingy walls and noisy cubicles were once more sharply real. Trey had called out.

“Lead!” he shouted again.

Ellis advanced toward Trey's cubicle. He had a bill pinched in his fingers and was holding it up to the light. Ellis' brown brows came together as he approached. Trey had become quite apt at detecting counterfeits, and he immediately assumed it was yet another unique or antique note he was taken with.

“What is it?” he asked him, adjusting his glasses.

“Check this shit out,” Trey answered. “I mean, uh, look at this!”

A few of the other tellers had leaned over Plexi-glass partitions and were gawking at the bill. Even Marie had stopped working. Trey turned it, face forward, toward Ellis. At the sight of

it, the expression on Ellis' harsh, geometric features became something none of the tellers had ever seen before. The eyes blinked behind the glare of the glasses. The chapped lips parted. Ellis Clingmeyer was bewildered.

“What the hell?” came his words in a blunt outburst.

It looked like any other antique bill: the deep grey-green color, the worn bleeding ink, the rich dimensions. The series was 1910. It was in extraordinary condition, like the collectables people keep in lockboxes until they give them to grandchildren who spend them at movie theaters. But, it wasn't Franklin, Grant, Jackson or any other former nation's leader that peered from the oval frame. Ellis knew his face, knew him well from his reading when he was once so fond of fiction. It was Mark Twain. Under the picture, which was finely crafted in ornate detail, was the name 'Samuel Clemens' in a banner.

At first, Ellis thought it might be an altered bill, a trick or toy note from some board game or party store. The denomination, printed clear at the corners and also across the right hand side over a seal, was eight.

“Eight?” Ellis read, taking it from Trey.

“Cool, huh? Do you think it's real?”

“Of course not,” Ellis replied flatly.

He studied it more, the tellers waiting in hushed anticipation for his diagnosis. He rubbed it with his thumb, felt the unmistakable federal linen blend in his fingers and held it up to the light. He turned it over. On the back was detail of a steamboat on a river, the waves in dark green like an etching. In the corpse-white glow of the florescent fixtures he read the phrase above the picture: IN THE REALMS OF THE GOOD AND GREAT.

“I’ll be damned,” Ellis muttered.

“I know, too weird,” Trey said, then pointed at the bill. “Hey, how come the reserve seal says Florida? I mean, I thought the reserve banks were cities.”

“Florida is a city,” Ellis answered, still entranced. “It’s a village, rather, in Missouri where Mark Twain was born. 1910 was the year he died,” he added, flipping the bill back over. He looked up to see the tellers staring at him, perplexed. He cleared his throat and handed the bill back to Trey. “Write it up and debit the customer,” he said.

After that, the vault was like an anthill that had been disturbed. The Teller Leads scurried between and behind each other. The tellers passed the bill around as if it were a gem. Roberta searched the denomination on the Internet without luck. Ellis called the Secret Service number, asking if they had ever heard of such a find. At the end of it all the bill was deemed invalid despite its remarkable craftsmanship. Secret Service declared that it was not technically a felony since it did not seek to emulate an existing print, and they didn’t require it sent to their office.

So, the eight-dollar bill became a novelty, a company keepsake. Lynn Caldwell declared it the vault’s mascot, a conversation piece. The conversation, however, would ultimately disrupt the perfectly functioning work environment Ellis strived to maintain.

“I want to know who accepted it in the first place,” one teller remarked to another.

“It was Patty’s Patties, that burger place,” the other answered. “Can you believe some clerk took that? And a manager packed the deposit!”

“Who would go to all that trouble? I mean, I would make, like, at least a seventy-five dollar bill, you know?”

Ellis heard more of them continue as he made his way over to the copy machine. “Mark Twain? Now I know it’s a joke. I guess it’s good to have a hobby.” His irritation escalated. The work would pile up. He would be there until six o’clock. The air vent kicked off with a deadened sigh. Their voices were even louder, now. Trey was laughing again. Ellis cleared his throat indignantly and slammed the copy lid down. The tellers quieted and the 10-key punching resumed. Satisfied with himself, he returned to his desk.

At five-forty, the tellers packed their cash in a colorful array of red, purple and blue money straps bricked together by rubber bands and carted it to the vault. The computers sang the closing melody in military sequence as the employees shut down, one after the other. Ellis was relieved until he heard more chatter by the bulletin board. He leaned over his desk, his tie brushing the scratched wood, his severe mouth open in curiosity.

“Time to go home, everybody!” he called down the hall.

A crowd was gathered at the board. Trey delayed, re-telling the story as he referenced the bill like a teacher at a chalkboard. It had been pinned up with the flyers and reports, Mark Twain’s eyes ever-watchful now from above the daily percentages.

Trey’s wide grin dissolved. “You got it, Mr. C.!” he called back obediently. “Good night,” he added, and turned toward the man trap door.

Luckily, the rest followed. Ellis grunted and shook his head, then shifted in his chair, silently cursing Trey, the bill and the person who made it. Big fucking deal, he thought. Was it really enough to waste half an hour of overtime on? He checked his watch, a conventional silver and black no-brand with heavy links that pulled at his arm hair. It was four minutes after six. He

hurried through the bag report and shut down his computer. Sweeping up his thermos he took one last look around.

“Badge, thermos, coat, keys.”

Enzo was resting on his haunches. His ears perked as the Dodge pulled into the driveway. Ellis was sure the dog knew his car. There was a low whining from a power steering problem whenever he turned the wheel, and a hole in the exhaust pipe made for an interesting and, unfortunately for Ellis, distinct combination of sounds. He climbed out of the car as the pit-bull made his way toward him. Enzo’s white head was extended nearly vertical in order to look up at the man. The dog half whined, half barked at him.

“Christ,” Ellis complained tiredly, slipping awkwardly around the car to avoid him. “Don’t you have a kitten to snack on or something?” he said, quickly glancing up for any sign of the neighbor. The yard next door was speckled with lighted inflatable snowmen and motorized moving deer figures that, to Ellis’ surprise, the dog had not mauled into fragments. “Get, get,” Ellis said and finally made it inside.

He turned the lamps on, illuminating the books on the shelves and the gold clock. Ellis pulled off his coat and washed out his thermos. He sat down at the computer and checked his inbox, usually empty but for Viagra and credit card advertisements, then checked his account with an online book-selling website where he had slowly been ridding his library of classic titles he hadn’t touched in years. Two of his unwanted anthologies had been bought, so he packaged them and set them by the front door. He made himself another frozen dinner, wiping down the kitchen surfaces while the digital numbers counted down. He listened to the radio while he ate, a news channel that blathered about foreign policy and stock prices.

When he was finished, he tossed the tray into the garbage, leaned back on his couch and began his regular succession of T.V. shows. First it was a re-run of *Columbo*, then *Modern Marvels* and whatever was on the History Channel until the clock struck ten. Then, he turned off the television and lamps and went to his bedroom. Sleep was something that Ellis always found difficult to acquire, especially that night. He carefully hung his tie with the rest of his collection on its spinning rack. Hair combed and glasses cleaned, he found himself under a faded, green and black striped comforter, trying not to think about the eight-dollar bill.

He stared up at the shadows on the ceiling, accented by the faint red gleam of the numbers on his alarm clock. Random images invaded: Trey's obnoxious Green Lantern T-shirt, Roberta's crumb-speckled pink lipstick, Lynn Caldwell's freckled cleavage. His lids were half-closed now, his mind adrift at the brink of dreams. The house was quiet. There was the hum of electricity, the shadows shifting as the clock's numbers changed. There came, again, the waking memories, years becoming pictures, light and darkness confused. Ellis blinked lazily.

Light filled the room and a memory took over. There were two suitcases on the bed, resting on the richer, crisper green and black stripes. The one on top was a small blue one bearing an awkward cartoon character. There were paintings and framed photos on the walls, decorative candles on the night stand. This was the day she left.

"I don't know you anymore," his wife had said.

Ellis tossed in his sleep. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" he remembered thinking, but hadn't asked aloud.

He always found it peculiar, the way women speak. He still didn't know what had happened. There was no great tragedy, infidelity, ill treatment. He'd been most worried about

James. A new school was always rough, he knew. It had taken time to adjust to his absence. There were no more scattered coloring books, overly muscled action figures or talking Tonkas. The vanilla smell of the house vanished with his wife. He never knew what the origin of it was, perfume, candles or her shampoo. He could still remember her long curtain of soft black hair spilled out on the pillow in the mornings, when mornings were once tolerable.

James was probably driving by now. She had taken him to Tennessee and work had made visits difficult. The man she had taken up with, Latin like her and five years Ellis' junior, would eventually become James' step-father. Miguel would be the one to teach James how to drive, yell at him maybe, tell him he's riding the brake too much. The guy wanted James to play football, pushed it on him. At James' thirteenth birthday party, Ellis attempted to advocate for his son's freedom to choose his own extra-curricular activities. Miguel was less than amiable toward the suggestion and Ellis punched him in the face. His ex-wife played the mediator. The terms were time away from James and Miguel's word not to press charges. Ellis had dutifully kept a distance. Over time he considered himself poisonous to his own son, his bitter cynicism and temper like an infection he didn't want James to catch.

Ellis' dreams quaked with heartache and anger and his body twisted under the covers. The memories became brief, then broken, then mingled with the present.

“Reverse a correction,” Ellis murmured aloud. “Customer error.”

The moonlight hit the bedroom window, finally freed from a thick winter cloud. Ellis stirred, then calmed. He was on his back, his mouth dropping open. He started to snore.

The Receiving team cried out in unison but the boxes toppled onto the floor, nonetheless, losing their lids and their contents. Brad continued to pull the flatbed unaware until someone rushed up to tap him on the shoulder. He turned, a defeated expression on his face, and he hit his forehead with his palm, saying something in that familiar seal-like speech that Ellis guessed meant, ‘shit!’ Ellis had been facing the mail cubbies, sorting out the company junk mail from his personal pile, when the commotion occurred.

“Nine thousand dollars for an implant,” he said under his breath, chucking a pension plan statement into the blue receptacle.

The vault had changed. The eight-dollar bill had become an object of fixation. Ellis’ foul mood was worsening. The stats were dropping, he noticed daily, as he sipped his coffee with a slanted frown. Alice’s average was now at eighty-seven, a deplorable number for someone on his team. And, to his horror, Marie was down twenty percent. Her average had been steadfast for three years. Adding insult to injury, he was forced to pin the averages right below the eight-dollar bill, feeling scrutinized by the dead author’s wry gaze.

The lunch room upstairs had undergone a social overhaul. The hierarchy had been disturbed, an awful shift in the order of things. Trey wore his Incredible Hulk T-shirt, the guys from Receiving gathered around him as he devoured a large slice of pizza. Some of the hearing-impaired had wandered over to ask questions about the bill. Marie was not at her table. She was seated with the Baptist Women’s Group. Marie had been invited over the previous day - the fact that she had been sitting next to Trey when he discovered the bank’s new memento making her somewhat of a celebrity. Alice asked her if she’d ever been to Las Vegas. “Once, when I was sixteen,” was all she’d said, and thereafter she and Alice were comrades. Ellis ripped open his

meal and overheard the women asking Marie what she seasoned her meatloaf with. He realized he was now the only one at a table by himself.

At the end of every day, the numbers were lower, the conversation was louder and the crowd at the bulletin board was more abundant. Roberta touched the bill with the edge of her bright scarlet fingernail.

“It’s remarkable,” she said to the others. “Isn’t that just remarkable?”

Ellis arrived earlier than usual one morning, draped in his London Fog and sweeping quickly past the break room. The heavy perfume was absent as he stepped out of the man-trap, telling him he’d beaten Roberta to work. His operation was covert. He’d planned it out carefully while his coffee brewed, that guttural song filling his small kitchen. The cameras that dotted the ceiling covered every area of the vault but one, he realized, the one spot where money was never in transit. He went to his desk, printed up the stats and went to the board.

Checking the entryway for tellers or otherwise, Ellis swiftly reached up to take one pin out and stabbed another in. It was done. The reports were up, and Twain was down, a mystic sleight-of-hand maneuver, the genius of which he was suddenly quite proud of. The man-trap door clicked open. Roberta’s off-key humming could be heard. Ellis crumpled the bill into his fist and moved toward the bathrooms, passing Roberta innocently. Her perfume wafted into the hall and he ducked into the bathroom. The door closed behind him, the small blank cell and its one light-bulb closing him off from the rest of the world.

There was a mirror, jagged and blackening at the edges that reflected the strict line of his mouth, the listless glare of his rectangle frames. He straightened his tie, a brick-red color and

dotted with little beige diamonds. Ellis opened his hand. He smoothed out the bill and looked at it. After a moment, his eyes drifted away and he released the bill from his fingers.

It floated, leaf-like, toward the dank pool of the toilet. Ellis had already imagined it soaking and darkening in the water, the ink bleeding and washing out, lost in legend. He was already reaching for the metal handle, wanting the portrait to spin and drown until it vanished into the piping leaving only the whispering of the tank re-filling as its requiem. But the bill took a turn, unruly in the sudden puff of air from the timed freshener on the wall, dipping left and around to the tiled floor. It settled in the shadow of the bowl.

“Shit!” Ellis hissed and bent down to retrieve it.

With a grunt he picked it up, hovered it over the seat like a dead goldfish. His fingers wouldn't release it this time. He stared at the bill, hypnotized. It was singularly the most wonderful thing he'd ever seen. He marveled at the print, akin to that of 1950's currency, the briny green and leaden shadows like a Hopper painting. Someone tried the bathroom door. Ellis could hear the slapping of a thigh and a groan, the sequence always accompanying the discovery of a lock and a wait. His throat was dry and he tried to swallow as he quickly pulled off one brown loafer and laid the bill inside like an insole.

Ellis stepped back into the shoe and briefly ran the water in the sink. He pulled off a paper towel and threw it in the trash. He opened the door to one of the Receiving guys, who was bouncing from side to side and rushed in after him. The bill seemed to burn a hole in his foot with every step, and he envisioned a Twain-shaped branding in its arch. Ellis felt his face flush. His breath was an echo in his ears as he made his way back to his desk. If he could sit down, keep the bill from moving under his sock, he could relax.

There was the potent floral scent, the trail of perfume leading past the time clock. Roberta hadn't noticed it was gone. They were all zombies in the mornings, barely awake and trudging to their stations. He slipped back to his chair and pulled up the stats. As the printer hummed them out he knew it wouldn't be long. When the tellers gathered to gawk at the data sheet they would see that the eight-dollar bill was absent. They would all be upset, but it was for the greater good. All he had to do was get it home.

Unfortunately, Ellis' action proved ineffective. In fact, adding to his perpetual dismay, the disappearance of the beloved bank note created even more frenzy than its discovery. The Leads were up in arms, interrogating the tellers as to its whereabouts. Ellis defended that one of the supervisors may have removed it for further study. All day the bill plagued him like a tumor. He endured the frantic overture of voices, curious questioning and absurd theories. There were accusations of maintenance and cleaning crews, whispers about the guard behind the glass. Roberta echoed her new word of the day.

"It's so bizarre!" she said, pink fingernails on her hips. "Just bizarre."

The day finally ended. Ellis made his exit quickly, shoving the man-trap door closed and shaking out his coat in front of the dark glass pane. He fanned his paperwork under the camera to show there was no money hidden.

"All right, Kurt!" Ellis shouted.

Even this routine had been disturbed. Instead of shouting back "Good night, now!" indicating the guard's approval to leave, Kurt's silhouette of a bald head passed the window and the guard station door opened.

“Not quite, chief,” Kurt said, reaching out for Ellis’ coat. “Lynn wants me to check everybody thorough today. She wants to be sure is all.”

Ellis faltered a little and handed him the coat. Kurt shook it and turned out the pockets, handing Ellis his things to hold. He felt his neck turn hot against the wrinkled collar. He focused on a dirt smudge on the poorly painted wall and wiped the sweat beads from his lip. Surely, Kurt wouldn’t make him take off his shoes. The small rectangle room got suddenly stifling, door, door and window like a prison cell or bomb shelter entrance. Kurt whistled jovially as he handed Ellis back his coat and checked the paperwork. Ellis shifted his weight, standing full on the chosen shoe. The guard gave him back the papers.

“And if you don’t mind.” Kurt pointed at Ellis’ pant pockets.

“Oh, for Christ,” Ellis mumbled, yanking the pockets inside out. “There,” he said.

“Alrighty, see you tomorrow, chief,” Kurt said.

Ellis exhaled harshly and pulled on the handle of the door leading out. He leaned his body on it but it didn’t open. He stared blankly out the door through the cross-wires in the tiny window. Someone had come through the other door, locking him in. It was Trey.

“I hear you’ve got to strip search us all, man,” he said to Kurt.

Several of his friends were in tow, the door still swung open.

Ellis clenched his jaw. “Come on, guys, let’s go,” he told them. “Let the door close.”

“Got to check everybody,” Kurt confirmed.

“All right, I confess,” said Trey, raising both his hands. “I took it. It was me.” Trey turned around and put his hands on the wall opposite Ellis. “But you’ll need a glove to get at it.”

The Receiving crew croaked with amusement. Kurt snorted with disdain. “How about I use my foot instead?”

The click was like music, the inner door shutting them in. Ellis pushed open the outer door within half a second, bursting out into the hallway as if up from deep water for a breath. The locker clanged open, closed. There was the jingle of keys and the long tile corridor out to the parking lot. He climbed into the Dodge and slammed the door shut. He’d made it.

Luck in the form of a squirrel was keeping the pit-bull occupied when Ellis drove up. The rodent was perched vertical on a tree trunk three too many inches out of the dog’s reach, squawking at him and flicking its tail. Ellis kept watch while he got out of the car, grateful for the distraction as he moved toward the door. Once he was far enough away he looked back with a kind of car-wreck hypnosis at the animal’s long white teeth. Enzo was snarling at the squirrel, gums and fangs displayed. Ellis swallowed, curling his toe over the bill in his shoe.

His neighbor’s door opened. Ellis whirled and ducked inside, dropping the keys on the table and turning on his lights. The house was quiet. The soft tick of the clock and the hum of electricity greeted him. He tossed his coat over the couch and stepped out of his shoe. There, grey-green and beautiful against the worn sole, was the bill. He bent down and picked it up, bringing it carefully over to the couch where he sat down to study it. Ellis didn’t make his dinner or turn on the radio. He neglected his book-selling and email. He turned the money over in his hands like a delicate relic.

“I’ll be damned,” he said aloud.

That face stared back, wild hair and bushy brows in the perfectly rendered etching. The rich black-green faded into white like a halo around the bust. The number eight was bold in the corners, the bottom loop more robust than the top. Ellis rubbed his chin and laid the bill on the table in front of him. He turned it over. The curled water under the steamboat was black in the shadows. IN THE REALMS OF THE GOOD AND GREAT. Ellis squinted one eye in contemplation. He stood and went to his bookshelf, searching for a particular volume that wasn't in its proper place.

“Ah,” he said, snapping his fingers.

On the top of a stack near the packing envelopes it sat by the computer, ready to be purchased and jettisoned. The American literature anthology was snatched up and taken to the couch. Ellis opened it. The book hadn't been touched since his teaching days, the pages dry and yellow. He worked his thin fingers through the table of contents, over the ink of those names he once revered. Samuel Langhorne Clemens, page 48. There was *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the Great American Novel, the first book he ever enjoyed that didn't have pictures. Ellis licked his thumb and turned each page.

“Where the hell is it? I know it's here,” he said. He pushed up his glasses and furrowed his brow. It was a mission, now. “Dammit, which chapter? There!” Ellis blurted to the quiet house, halting at a page and smoothing it out. The poem by Emmeline Grangerford was neatly centered on the page, the “Ode to Stephen Dowling Bots, Dec'd”. Ellis skimmed to the last lines, *They got him out and emptied him; Alas it was too late; His spirit was gone for sport aloft in the realms of the good and great.*

He leaned back on the couch with a delighted grin as if he'd stumbled upon a treasure map. He pulled off his glasses and tapped them on the book. He would have to take the anthology off the listing. That night, the eight-dollar bill made itself at home.

5296#. Ellis walked the hall, followed the perfume, pulled up the numbers. Each day that followed the bill's disappearance showed a marked decrease in production. The theft had created a gossip mill. Each and every employee testified that there was no information regarding the theft. The numbers slid and the work days were even longer. As a precaution against 'further losses', Lynn had appealed to the corporate office for an additional camera to be placed over the time clock, and to stage one-on-one questioning with employees who could remember the last time they'd seen the bill tacked in its proper place, and the first time they noticed it missing. It didn't take long before Trey's name was mentioned. Ellis guessed it was Kurt, likely offended by the remarks in the man-trap, who had implicated him. It had been circulating for the last few days but most of the tellers clarified that Trey had just been teasing.

Ellis broke up most of the discussions that kept tellers away from their stations. He assured them that it would soon be over, that they would all realize that such a frenzy was not only unnecessary but destructive. A brief commotion caused a distraction for at least one afternoon, a small batch of purple 2008 fives that tellers called 'Grape Abes' turned out to be counterfeits. After a few well-worded jokes about their manufacturer's bleak future explaining to the other felons in the cell what crime he'd committed, the conversation drifted back to the missing Mark Twain once more.

Ellis came home to the bill night after night, some manic satisfaction taking him over knowing that he had it captured. It lay by the computer, its company an ever-increasing pile of print-outs and books that reached at its origin. Several of his online customers flooded his inbox with irate messages about their unshipped purchases. The usually tidy desk was littered with coffee mugs, empty frozen dinner trays and Post-it notes. Instead of news, Ellis played his old Prokofiev and Mozart CDs while he searched the internet for any trace of the odd denomination.

He tried every combination in the engines: U.S. Currency + eight, eight-dollar bill, U.S. mint + eight dollar, Mark Twain + U.S. Currency, Samuel Clemens + U.S. Currency + 1910. Ellis flew through the anthologies, biographies, collections to discover information that only teased at usefulness; Twain had befriended presidents, was once a freemason and dabbled in science and technology. One historical website mentioned that Twain knew a fellow freemason who designed plates at the Philadelphia mint, and proclaimed about the author in one local paper that 'his whiskers would make a splendid etching'. But, there was no whisper of the bill, itself.

Ellis dozed at the computer, the screen glowing in the reflection of the glasses placed at his elbow. The bill was a blur in his slowly closing lids, signs and symbols from the front and back like ghosts in his vision. He was back in his classroom at the community college. The anthology, crisp from the bookstore without a dog-ear to speak of, was open on his podium. There was the freshman who looked so much like Trey, the little prick who got him fired. The voice echoed in his dreams, over the ticking clock and whir of the hard drive. *If I were Hemingway I would have shot myself, too.* That's where it began, the foul German temper that caused him to curse out an eighteen-year-old and rally angry parents and administrators.

The bank was an accident, a sympathetic colleague who heard of a job opening. How could he possibly make the two worlds co-exist? Slowly, one world fell victim to decay while the other flourished.

“T.S. Eliot was a banker,” Ellis slurred in his sleep. His cheek was pasted to the oak and his hand was limp on the mouse pad. “They got him out and emptied him.”

The Jetscans played their musical tune of intermittent beeps and jams. Work was heavy and the trucks were early. The computers were playing up. Ellis surveyed the teller line, noticing with ominous certainty that there was a lull in the mood. It was quiet. Passing the break room that morning, he recognized two voices belonging to the Baptist Women’s Group. “He’s only been here a year or so,” one had said. “He moved up here from Florida and he’s never worked at a bank before. You never know.” Ellis knew they were speaking of Trey. One of his own receiving tellers had gotten Trey the job and Ellis interviewed him. The suspicion hadn’t lifted and he knew they would question him soon, maybe even today. More production time had been lost on the series of ridiculous one-on-one interrogations, and Trey had been saved for last. Ellis could guess why.

He paced the floor, looking up now and again to where Trey was seated. No one had the heart or guts to tell the kid he was targeted, could be let go over what had never even been defined as genuine currency. Trey was bobbing his head of black moss to the Soca in his oversized silver earphones, unaware. He had just signed up for night classes at the local art school. Ellis had signed and mailed his tuition reimbursement forms, money he wouldn’t be

granted if terminated. "I'm going to start my own comic," Trey had said, launching into a torturous plot summary about a pot-smoking super genius with a bionic penis.

"They might fire him," Ellis heard Alice murmur to her neighbor.

"They wouldn't fire Trey," the other teller insisted. "Not for that. It isn't even real money."

"But it's bank property," Alice replied. "It's still stealing."

Ellis felt his ears burning and his palms going damp and cold. Then, he saw Lynn Caldwell marching up the hall in thick brown heels and a tight yellow sweater. Her shoes stamped the vinyl tiles heavily as she grew closer and turned the corner toward Trey. Ellis caved. He grumbled to himself. He couldn't let the poor kid take the fall.

"Lynn," Ellis intercepted her. "You got a minute?"

The computer on Lynn's desk had a scroll marquee screen saver that read CASH SERVICES - WE COUNT. She crossed her arms over a long gold necklace with a heart pendant. Ellis rubbed the back of his neck with his hand and cleared his throat.

"Look," he said. "I took the damn thing, O.K.?"

Lynn blinked. "Took what?"

"The bill, the eight-dollar bill. It was hindering the workplace. You've seen the overtime and the production numbers. I thought we'd be better off," he stated plainly.

"You took it?"

"The stupid thing was being ogled every day like a school girl in a short skirt. I had to get rid of it," Ellis continued. "So, just give me my verbal and I'll get back out on the floor. We'll tell them it was cleaning woman or something, that she thought it was trash."

Lynn paused. She stared at him. He felt his forehead moist with sweat and his tie felt suddenly tighter. She exhaled and turned away for a second. Ellis thought he saw her smile.

“Well, where is it?” she asked him.

“I, well I...” he started to say. “I flushed it down the toilet.”

“Ellis!” Lynn gasped. “Are you joking right now?”

“I didn’t want the cleaning crew to find it in the garbage,” he defended sourly. “They’d just put it back into circulation. We can’t have this kind of thing put us behind, especially a couple of weeks before Christmas.”

It was quiet, then. Lynn looked lost, stupefied as Ellis stood his ground. He had both hands in the pockets of his trousers awaiting her reply, looking as if he expected her to nod in agreement. She shook her head.

“I’ve got to let you go,” she declared.

“Huh?” Ellis said. “Are you joking right now?”

“I’ve got to let you go,” she repeated firmly.

Ellis huffed, waited for the punch line. “This, this is crazy, you know that?” he said, shifting his weight. “It isn’t even real currency, why, why would...”

“It belongs to the bank,” Lynn answered him.

“So do the pens and the coffee creamers! The tellers haul that stuff out of here all the time!” Ellis said angrily. “I’ve been here nine years, I’ve worked my ass off for you people,” he went on, pointing his finger at the ground. “You know I’m the best Lead you’ve got. Now, let’s just talk about this a minute,” he said.

Lynn paused again, looking at him with sympathy now, like a vet about to put down an old dog that barks and growls whenever anyone goes near him.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ll need your badge.”

The afternoon waned in its cold sunlight, winter gusts blowing dry leaves over and onto the pavement as he drove solemnly down his street. The houses, like the officer’s, were decorated for the season with inflatable figures. But, at this time of the day, before night came and the colored lights blinked on, the Santas and snowmen were limp and flat in the grass, looking like the casualties of some North Pole battlefield. Ellis let the car roll into the driveway and shut off the tired engine.

“Deception cannot be tolerated,” Lynn said. “Especially in a position of leadership.”

His stomach was plagued with sharp pains as he recalled his termination, and he sat in the car for several moments staring at the jerking branches of his dying trees. Suddenly, he heard the chime of Enzo’s collar, small metal tags hitting each other as the pit bull trotted across the yard to his recycle bin. Ellis’ eyes focused and drifted over to the dog. Routinely, he had found his bottle of choice and waited for Ellis to open the car door. Ellis wondered what those jaws would feel like sinking in, breaking the skin and finding bone, tearing and thrashing at mauled flesh.

He got out of the car, his thermos clutched loosely in his fingers as he nudged the door shut with his elbow. He stood like a gunslinger, feet apart and eyes accepting of what fate would decide.

“All right,” he said to the dog. “All right.”

Ellis set the thermos on the hood of the car and approached him. Enzo gazed up excitedly, crunching down on the bottle. Ellis reached for it, grabbing it by one end and pulling at it. The dog pulled back. He was strong, so strong that Ellis' fingers started to chafe as he kept his grip on the bottle's cap-less mouth.

"Come on!" he said. "Give it, give me the bottle!"

Enzo shook his white head from side to side, Ellis' arm being thrown with his movements like a fragile human body on the back of a powerful bull. Enzo pulled harder, taking Ellis with him, black shoes losing their grip on the concrete and forced to step forward. Ellis yanked at it, but the jaws were locked. He yanked again and Enzo yanked back. Finally, they both stood, unmoving, until Enzo opened his jaws to regain a better grip. At once, Ellis wrenched the bottle from his mouth, stepping quickly back and out of the measure of his lead.

"Ha, ha!" Ellis exclaimed triumphantly, and waved the deformed bottle at the dog. He threw it, then. Enzo charged after it, seized it, and brought it back. The tug of war began again, and Ellis waited for the jaws to open. He wrenched the bottle free again and held it high above the dog. "What have I got? What have I got?" Ellis said.

Enzo barked and whined, jumping up at him several times. Ellis wouldn't release it, and so, the pit-bull seemed to understand what must be done. He sprang upwards, higher than before, jaws at the ready and liquid eyes wide. But, instead of grasping the bottle Ellis held chest-high, his teeth found the end of his tie. Ellis felt his neck go rigid with force as he was pulled to the ground. He let out a startled curse, his hands pressing the grainy concrete as he tried to steady himself. Enzo pulled at the tie, several threads ripping as Ellis' mind spun.

This is it, he thought. This is how it's going to end. Enzo reared further backwards, knocking Ellis off his palms and onto his side. His neck burned from the friction and his throat compressed. The images came: his wife's dramatic brown eyes, the warm brown carpet in his study, his son's small hands covered in finger paint. He wondered if he would be missed. He wondered if anyone would think it was unfair. Maybe it had to be this way. Maybe he deserved all of it. He felt needles on his face, cold, icy pinpricks. He shut his eyes.

"Zo!" a voice shouted. "Enzo, what the hell are you doing? Jesus, let go!" The force on his neck was suddenly gone. Ellis blinked, looking up at a handsome black man in a crisp uniform, the shirt sleeves creased and a nameplate shining on the shoulder. He was gently stroking the dog's ears. "Mr. Spunkmeyer?" said the man. "You all right? I'm sorry about this, he's just playing. Enzo doesn't hurt anyone unless I tell him to. Mr. Spunkmeyer?"

Ellis paused, then sat up. The officer was kneeling. "It's Clingmeyer," Ellis corrected weakly, putting a hand on his pulsing neck and rubbing it.

"Oh, sorry," said the man. "Man alive, he had you good, didn't he? You sure you're O.K.? Listen, I feel just awful about this, let me make it up to you. A new tie would be right, for starters, what do you say?"

"Uh," Ellis grunted, still recovering. His face felt wet. "You don't have to do that."

"Sure I do, just wouldn't be right. At least come inside for a cup of coffee. You drink coffee? Well, look at that, you got the first of the snowfall," he said, looking up at the few dropping flakes.

Ellis blinked, several of them landing on his lashes. He was disheveled, dirty, out of breath and unemployed. Yet, he felt violently yanked free, torn from some great angry machine

and reborn. The snow floated down noiseless around him, as if the sky had waited for just the right moment. Enzo panted hot breath on his cheek.

“About goddamn time,” he said.

HONEYMOON SUITE

Lenny gawked at their waitress. She was a curvy blonde whose white collar shirt gaped purposely at the neckline, a locket on a chain snug in plump cleavage. She was taking an order for the table near them. Elsie dangled her second shrimp skewer over the bread basket that sat between her plate and his. She whistled lowly.

“Let me know when you’re done,” Elsie said.

“Huh?” was his response, turning back to her. Elsie flicked her eyes at the waitress.

“What?” he said, shrugging. “She has a great rack.”

Lenny took the skewer, treated it like Excalibur and nodded in theatrical gratitude. It was practical, the arrangement. Seafood dining always left Lenny wanting more of his favorite and Elsie could never finish the standard serving.

“Yes, she does,” Elsie said.

“So you’re looking, too,” Lenny said. “We can take her with us to the hotel.”

“Thank you, no,” Elsie answered in monotone. “Sharing a hot waitress isn’t really what I had in mind for our honeymoon.”

“Sharing is a virtue,” Lenny replied, tugging a shrimp from the skewer.

“Then let’s share the bus boy, too,” Elsie said.

“Hell, no.”

“Then shut up.”

Lenny was twenty-three, a lean two-hundred pounds with large, amiable brown eyes, a careless sweep of overgrown black hair, small silver earrings and a forearm tattoo of a Biohazard symbol. His t-shirt read I'M WITH THE BAND. Elsie was nearly a year older and dressed in tight jeans and heeled sandals, her hair a loose ponytail of brown streaked with red, long bangs hanging over plucked brows and dark, metallic eye shadow.

The restaurant window boasted a view of hotel-cluttered A1A. Locals with wind-tossed hair abused their flip flops on the bleached sidewalks. Lenny and Elsie had been counting the number of hibiscus decals on the passing cars. The window was tinged with a film of salt.

“So, isn’t Capsize Point an ominous name for a hotel?” she asked.

Lenny hummed ‘I don’t know’ with a mouthful of crustacean. He dug into his pocket for the folded brochure. Elsie took a moment to glance down at her top, a low-cut grey ribbed tank with a pink surf logo. She pulled at her bra’s under wire. The waitress had her by a cup size. She looked away at the framed pastel paintings of shorelines.

“Some shipwreck thing. Long time ago,” Lenny said, skimming the brochure. “Your grandparents stayed there for their fiftieth anniversary, right?”

“Yeah,” said Elsie. “But, let’s not talk about it. I don’t want to picture old-people-sex.”

The endowed waitress breezed up to them with a small plastic tray. The bill was tucked into its tabs. She smelled like marshmallows.

“Here you go,” she said, flashing a lip-glossed smile.

Lenny took it up. “Whoa, whoa, I hope this is your phone number,” he joked, pointing at the bill. “Babe, looks like we’re washing dishes again,” he told Elsie. “Do you have a finance option?” Lenny asked the waitress.

She was blank for a second, then laughed awkwardly and looked at Elsie. They always looked at Elsie, hoping she'd be the serious one, tell them he was joking.

“We just got married and we're a little strapped for cash,” Elsie said, playing along, instead. “Don't worry, he's a whiz with the water hose.”

“Are you guys serious?” the waitress said on a laugh.

Lenny pulled out his wallet with dramatic resentment. “Fine. I guess we'll just have to dip into our future kid's college fund.”

“I hope you're happy,” Elsie said to the waitress.

The girl grinned, catching on, as Lenny pulled out his card and placed it on the tray. “You guys are funny,” she said, taking it from him. “I'll be right back.”

Lenny watched her walk away, eyed the shape of her ass under the wrinkle-free black trousers. Elsie kicked him in the shin.

“Damn it!” he said.

Elsie crossed her arms and lifted an eyebrow. Lenny pulled another shrimp and bit it from the tail.

“You'd do her,” he said.

“You wish,” said Elsie.

The ocean breathed into the open windows of Lenny's brick-colored 1987 Camaro. A frothy lip of shoreline peeked in and out of view between the towering hotels as they drove.

“Are you going to make with the road head or what?” Lenny said on the exhale of his cigarette.

Elsie huffed. “No.”

“Weren’t you listening to our vows? The bible says that marriage obligates the woman to give road head on long drives,” Lenny said, like a child justifying a Christmas list.

“Wow. That’s sacrilegious,” Elsie said.

“Woman, it’s your duty. Don’t make me remind you,” he said with a southern drawl and a raised back-hand.

Elsie sighed apathetically. “Wouldn’t be much of a blow job if you hit me in the mouth.”

They played at this, a comic theater of characters, accents and mischief. A hundred made-up sketches of wife-beater, whore and pimp or flamboyant swingers littered their long history of couplehood. The high school irreverence had not diminished with their solemn commitment, the wedding videographer catching them at silent thumb wars during the opening prayer.

Scroll marquee advertised drink specials, weekend rates and Olympic-sized pools. Gift shops were lit against the saffron beginnings of sunset, bikinis on mannequins and palm-tree shaped rafts propped in the windows. The tourist clutter tapered off into smaller motels and private drives that vanished up into grass-flecked dunes and behind walls of palms and sun-bleached fences.

“Too much rice,” Elise said, rubbing her stomach. “I feel fat.”

“You look hot,” Lenny answered, taking another drag.

“Jeez, look at that one,” Elsie said, her gaze following a grand two-story beach house with a long front porch and round-about driveway. “Must be fucking nice.”

“Hey, I think that’s it,” Lenny said, nodding at the windshield. Over the rise a lighthouse was visible to the east behind the dunes. The garish yellows of the expiring sun caught its distant

windows, the tower like a low-hanging star. “Shit,” he added, jerking the wheel just before a weathered sign that read CAPSIZE POINT - FIVE MILES.

The Camaro squealed, rotated and jolted to a halt at the side road. The smell of hot rubber drowned the heavy sea drafts. Lenny was laughing

“Was that completely necessary?” Elsie said, punching him in the shoulder.

“Ow! Did you see that shit? Yeah! I’m the man. Calm down, there weren’t any cars around,” he said, sobering, and took the road down a snaking path through dense palms.

“I can hear my mother now,” Elsie said, putting an invisible cigarette to her lips and squinting. “The little bastard tried to kill you before you even got to the hotel,” she said with a drop and husk to her voice.

The Capsize Point Hotel materialized out of the silhouetted drifts, the hissing ocean much louder as the car barreled over a short causeway made up of rocks. The building was a three-tiered set of aging blocks with white borders, scrolled trim and crumbled columns. Windows were lit eyes, weathered gables their mournful brows. The lighthouse rose up from behind, eroded ashen stone like a giant finger of chalk topped by a dark metal thimble. Over the causeway was an arch, a strange composition of wasted old driftwood and rusting metal bolts and clamps. A thick wooden sign swung with a creak as they passed under.

“Para Ahogarse o Nadar,” Lenny read the etched letters. “Is that Spanish?”

“Nadar means ‘to swim’,” Elsie offered. “To sink or to swim. Jeez, this place is older than dirt. They probably don’t even have a pool.”

“Whatever. You’re grandparents are paying for this so just go with it.”

The great mechanical beast roared up to the entrance, a stone path that circled a grim fountain. What was once a rim of colorful tile around its base was chipped and bleached by the sun. Stairs led up to two large doors with spotty brass handles. The parking lot was a sparse slab to the side of the building, so close to the dunes that sand was streaked across the pavement.

“No valet?” Elsie joked.

She sized the place up while Lenny gathered their bags. It was like an old fortress or a monastery, high straight walls pocked with windows and topped by decayed molding. Despite its humble exterior there were few empty spaces in the parking lot. Elsie could hear music, along with voices of other guests from balconies overhead. A heavy breeze from the sea swept more sand over the lot. Lenny and Elsie made their way inside.

The lobby was oak-paneled and dotted with framed mirrors, mounted anchors and antique photos of fishing crews. A smaller fountain murmured before the front desk where a studious-looking girl with a loose dark bun and large round glasses stiffly checked a register book. A mosaic of a Spanish galleon in rich blues and reds decorated the wall behind her. Lenny and Elsie trailed in hauling their luggage. The concierge looked up, beady brown eyes magnified through the glasses.

There was a sign on the stone column to the right of the counter, an old rusting brass plate bolted to the wall. *Posted*, it read, *Attention Golden Suite Guests – Interference or influence is STRONGLY discouraged. This establishment is not responsible for any damages which may result. Please enjoy your experience responsibly.*

“Lenny and Elsie Morgan,” Lenny said, leaning on the counter.

The girl looked down at the register, then back up at the both of them. She smiled, teeth full of braces with green rubber-bands. “Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Morgan. You’ll be staying in our one-of-a-kind honeymoon suite,” she said with programmed politeness and pulled out two card keys and a guest pamphlet.

“So, why is it one-of-a-kind?” he said to the girl. “Does it have a sex swing or something?”

The concierge blinked, stone-faced, the goggle-eyes looking over at Elsie.

Elsie leaned in, shook the streaked bangs from her forehead. “It’s just that we brought all our leather accessories, you know. He’ll be very disappointed,” Elsie said.

There were a few seconds of silence, only the trickle of the fountain and Spanish guitar music over the intercom. The concierge pushed her glasses further up the bridge of a long nose.

“I don’t think so,” she said, and scribbled something in the register.

“Hey, don’t you use a computer?” Lenny asked, gesturing at the worn book she wrote in.

“No,” said the girl.

“So, what’s the Golden Suite?” Elsie said, pointing at the brass plate on the column.

The girl didn’t look up. “That’s our fiftieth anniversary suite, very expensive.”

Lenny and Elsie traded looks, made haughty faces at each other. “You mean people actually stay married that long?” Lenny said. “Hell, I’m already thinking about getting a divorce,” he added, jerking a thumb at his wife.

Elsie smacked his thumb away. “The suite gets used a lot?” she asked.

The receptionist finally looked up, eyes like drowned rocks in the glasses. “Yes, Mrs. Morgan. We also do an extensive background check and require original marriage certificates.”

“Holy crap,” Elsie blurted. “Is the room made out of gold or something?”

The girl’s sterile politeness returned suddenly, the young freckled face lighting up with a green-flecked smile. “In fifty years, you can see for yourself,” she said, one bony arm extending to hand Lenny the key cards. “Take my word, we’ll still be here.”

The couple clamored into the elevator, Lenny remarking with delight at the view of a small bar down the steps from the fountain as the doors closed them in. The inside of the elevator was mirrored, the door separating their two reflections. An infinite number of Lennys and Elsies haunted on either side.

“We’re across the hall from the Golden Suite,” Lenny said, looking at the pamphlet. “Just two suites on the third floor, us and the old farts.”

Elise checked her bangs in the mirrored doors. “At least we only have to share the floor with two other people. Could be a whole row of rooms, people fighting over the ice machine.”

The doors opened and they stepped out. The hall echoed the lobby - wood-paneled, warm and antique. A display of rusted lanterns lined a shelf overhead and several yellowed scraps of captains’ logs in frames traced the corridor.

“Yeah, but with our luck the suite is booked this weekend. We can’t just have the whole floor to ourselves,” said Lenny.

“There goes the romance,” Elsie said. “Now, we’ll have to hear the echoes of old bodies in the throes of passion. Martha, get me my oxygen tank!” Elsie mocked with a rickety tone.

“Oh, my wrinkled testes! Dammit, there goes my hip,” she said.

Lenny wasn't laughing. The large brown eyes stared past Elsie in terror. Elsie turned. Behind her, an elderly couple had approached. The woman was a sultry, proud-looking dame with short white hair combed close and swept over what looked like part of a stubborn scar on her forehead. Her face showed the ghost of long-enjoyed beauty now obscured by abundant lines and sunken cheekbones. Skillfully applied make-up didn't fight her age but brought out what was left of pink hues and brilliant, tireless eyes. The old woman stood straight and graceful, as if her bones and back still served her with youth's vitality.

She gripped the handles of a wheelchair where her husband sat, a lean, bearded greyhound of a man with muscled arms folded over his chest. A bald patch on his head gave way to long grey hair that ended in a spiral of a ponytail peeking out over one shoulder. The old woman shifted her weight and placed one hand on her hip.

"Mind if we go down?" she said, her voice an icy chime of confidence and sarcasm.

Elsie staggered backward away from the elevator. The woman pushed the wheelchair in and pushed a button. The old man half-smiled at them as the doors closed.

"Shit, shit, shit," Elsie breathed.

Lenny laughed, then.

The room was colossal. It smelled of Freon, complexion soap and aged wood. A bay window took up the far wall and a giant king-size bed wore a thick blue patchwork comforter. Elsie lay back on it. The ceiling bore a circle of artwork, a peeling representation of a storm-swept sea and a ship threatened by a tall wave. Above it was painted the small figure of an angel

reaching down from the clouds in a contrasting hue of pale gold against fierce indigos and lead-greys. Elsie held up the pamphlet and opened its three folds.

“Capsize Point is named for its treacherous topography, as it was known for the most frequent shipwrecks in the early nineteenth century,” Elsie read.

“Told you,” Lenny said as he stuffed his clothes into an antique bureau. He scratched his head and looked around. “No T.V.?”

Elsie sat up. “This place is ancient, look at it. All this stuff is old and dented,” she said, gesturing at the furniture. “You don’t really think we were going to be able to watch porn, did you?” Something caught her eye and she stood approaching the window. “Check it out,” she said. There was a small balcony with chairs and a wooden stairway leading down to the beach. The lighthouse was at the end of the path atop a mound of rocks and weeds. “Let’s go see the lighthouse.”

“It’s almost dark,” Lenny answered. “And I think it’s like ten bucks or something. That’s twenty for us.”

Elsie’s posture sank. “It’s our honeymoon. We don’t have twenty bucks? Or do we only have twenty bucks if it’s something *you* want to do?”

Lenny closed the drawer. “We can go,” he said. “But it’s already dark. How about we go right before we check out on Sunday? It’ll be the last thing we do.” Lenny crossed the room to her. He put his hands on her hips. “I promise,” he said and kissed her neck.

“You better promise. I have a present for you and I expect gratitude,” Elsie told him, turning around.

Lenny lit up. “Yeah?”

Elsie slid her arms around his neck and leaned her hips into his groin. “It’s panty-related,” she said. “It starts with C and ends with - less.”

Lenny opened his eyes to the shadowed room. The door to the balcony was ajar, the salty wind rushing in and inflating the curtains. Elsie was on her side next to him, nude shoulders draped in soft brown hair and the curve of a tattooed hip exposed from the folds of the sheets. He touched her, ran his fingers over her skin as she breathed in deeply and writhed in response. Their lovemaking had changed little over the years. The lustful desperation with which they wrangled each other was first practiced in the awkward twisting of their adolescent bodies in the back seat of his Camaro by the airport landing strip at dusk. Clothes half-off, shirts and underwear hanging from various limbs they panted and worked to please each other while homework went unfinished and curfews lapsed.

Lenny threw off the covers and pulled on his jeans. One last cigarette peeked out from the open pack on the night table. He swept it up and slipped through the door, out to the balcony and down the stairs. He took a corner under an awning looking out over the moon-drenched shoreline and tried his lighter. One, two sparks but nothing lasting.

“Fuck,” he said.

“Take mine, you simp,” a voice interrupted. It was grating, gravelly and female.

Lenny found the silhouette in the corner, a thin older woman in a formal mint-green pant suit. The moonlight revealed the halo of a newscaster haircut and a large heavy corsage of white carnations encircling an orchid. His mother-in-law extended her arm, a lit cigarette in her

fingertips. She wore her outfit from their wedding, the mother-of-the-bride ensemble. Lenny paused, perplexed, then took it, lighting his own with the smoldering end.

“Mom?” he said between puffs.

“You know, kid, I never had the heart to tell you, but I don’t like when you call me that,” the woman said, taking the cigarette back. “I thought this musician thing was just a phase, I mean, you were sixteen. But you’re a husband now for Christ’s sake!”

Lenny stared blankly. His mother-in-law blew out the smoke in quick hard breaths, silvery vapors against the moonlight. “I’m doing better. The band plays local shows now and I work full-time at the transmission place,” he defended weakly.

“Those other boys will be married soon enough, too, and then what?” she interrupted through a brief fit of coughing. “Elsie’s stupid enough to believe in you and you’ll milk that, I’m sure. She loves you, kid. Maybe one day she’ll come to her senses.”

A long ash formed on Lenny’s cigarette. The woman coughed again, a choking, hacking convulsion that shook the orchid on her pale green lapel. Lenny always hated orchids -the flower that looks like it’s about to vomit. The ash broke off and fell to the sand. A light came on above him.

Lenny jerked awake. He sat up and looked around. Elsie was in the shower, a yellow outline of light around the bathroom door. The door to the balcony was closed. He turned on the lamp and checked the old-fashioned clock on the night table. It was after eight. Elsie’s sliver of black panties was nestled in the sheets at the foot of the bed. Lenny reached for his cigarettes. The pack was empty. He rubbed his eyes and whirled a hand through his hair.

“ - the fuck?” he said, and trudged over to the bathroom.

Steam poured out as he opened the door.

“You’re letting the heat out!” Elsie protested from behind the curtain.

“I want to go down to check out the bar,” Lenny said. “You want me to wait on you?”

“Na,” she answered. “I’ve got to blow dry and all that. You go ahead.”

Lenny grinned to himself and pulled the curtain slowly back a few inches. Elsie was rinsing her long hair, soap in slick patches on her stomach and hips. He watched her bathe, her arms raised and her head back against the hot stream. She opened her eyes, startled.

“Going to get me some hookers to bring back up, is that cool?” he said.

“Not in the budget, remember?” Elsie said with a smirk. “Close the door!”

“Sorry!”

The lounge was dimly lit by chandeliers, the bar spotted with only a few patrons. There was a deck outside and double doors open to it. Table candles glowed in the darkening evening.

Lenny asked for the house rum and Coke and turned from the long mahogany counter.

Immediately in front of him sat the old man with the grey ponytail, his wheelchair comfortably

situated at a small table near the bar. Lenny frowned and swallowed. The old man looked

directly at him, grinned through his grey beard and beckoned him over. Lenny forced a smile and

paid for his drink, then ambled over to the unoccupied seat across from him. The old man

gestured for him to sit.

“The Honeymooners! Where’s the other half?” the old man asked.

“Freshening up,” said Lenny with a nod at the roof.

The old man held out his hand, a rough, thin-fingered hairy mitt at the end of a long-sleeved, beige camp shirt. Lenny shook it. His grip was strong, encouraging.

“Eugene,” said the old man.

“Hey,” Lenny said, perking up. “I’m Lenny.”

Eugene leaned back in his wheelchair, examining Lenny with a kind of suppressed excitement and a knowing grin like a child holding back a secret. Lenny cleared his throat.

“Hey, look, I’m sorry about before...” he started to say, but the old man waved his hand between them as if to shoo the words like flies.

“Don’t mention it. After fifty years, me and the wife have a sense of humor. What do you do, Lenny? Let me guess. You look like you play an instrument,” Eugene said, pointing his finger and snapping it back again.

“Guitar,” Lenny answered.

“Ha! Electric, right?” Lenny nodded. “Thought so. I used to dabble, myself. I wanted to perform but --” Eugene pat his legs. “Shit happens. I did some recording and some equipment servicing. I’m retired now but I still got my shop.”

“That’s cool,” Lenny said, then quietly smoothed the condensation on his glass.

“You all right, son?” Eugene asked.

Lenny looked up, meeting his eyes. Eugene had thick grey brows, and the beard obscured most of his mouth. The eyes were inviting, benign. “This place is kind of weird,” Lenny admitted.

Eugene let out a short laugh. “Yeah. It’s got personality, that’s sure. No better place to get away and get your bearings, though,” he said, digging into a pocket. He pulled out his wallet

and unfolded it. “Granddaughter’s getting married in May. I’m thinking of sending them here for your room.”

Lenny peered at the photos behind clouded plastic. There were several of the old woman, caught at parties and sunning herself on a boat. One showed Eugene and his wife next to a handsome middle-aged man and a teenage girl with brown curls spilling out of a red mortar board cap.

“That’s her high school graduation. That’s my son,” Eugene said proudly, pointing at the man in the center.

“Wow. Fifty years,” Lenny whispered.

“It flies,” Eugene said.

Elise finished her make-up, an efficient five step process. Powder, shadow, blush, mascara and lipstick could be applied in less than seven minutes. Her hair was a two-tone plank of brown and red blown straight and tossed behind her shoulders. She looked herself over. The adolescent dread of a girl’s own reflection had never left her, the unforgiving scrutiny of body parts always haunting in bad lighting and full-length mirrors. She half-turned, examining her rear, and curled a lip at its fullness. Turning back she sucked in her stomach and ran a hand across it, fingering the silver belly ring with the ruby stone. Lenny had been with her when she’d pierced it, holding her hand while she squinted her eyes tight against the parlor’s skull posters and rows of oddly shaped needles. It was her eighteenth birthday.

The ritualistic dissatisfied sigh was an echo in the small bathroom, and she chucked her cosmetics back in the paisley bag. Elsie exited the room, slipping her key card, the only modern

amenity the hotel seemed to exhibit, into her pocket. The hall was specked with lamplight that illuminated the wall art. The paintings continued down the hall, garish depictions of more shipwrecks in dark colors and rough brushstrokes. Sailors swam in the monstrous undertow toward shore, their boats turned vertical toward the sea.

A clock ticked quietly. Elsie glanced at the end of the hall where the door to the Golden Suite faced her. The elevator was between the rooms and she approached it, but she didn't push a button. Instead, she padded softly further, listening. The door was simple enough, like their own, and affixed with the card device, but this one bore an engraving right into the varnished wood, gold-accented lettering that spelled *Nadar es el Triunfo*. Elsie hesitated, then dropped to her knees, then her hands and stomach, to peer under the door. She closed an eye but could see nothing except the dark masses of the bases of furniture. There was light inside, touching the tips of her fingers as she lay still on the carpeted floor.

Suddenly a shadow crossed the light and Elsie leapt to her feet. Her eyes shot open wide and she stepped back from the door. There was feminine humming and the clicking of the door handle. Elsie sprinted back to the elevator as the door opened, quickly stiffening in front of it as if she'd been waiting there. The humming was louder. The old woman appeared in the hall and the door to the Golden Suite clicked closed behind her.

The woman strolled up next to her, tall and airy with her chin high. She had a graceful, sweeping manner like she might have once been a showgirl, and wore a glittering purple frock over black slacks. Elsie turned and nodded, mustered up an awkward smile and turned back. The two stood quietly for a second, the old woman still humming softly.

“You know, dear,” the woman said, and reached forward. Elsie flinched as the thin pale hand glided in front of her. “You have to push the button if you want the thing to work.”

The slender index finger pressed the arrow on the console in front of Elsie and the button lit up. Elsie’s mouth dropped open.

“Oh, I wasn’t...I didn’t...”

The doors opened. The old woman raised an eyebrow, lifting the scar above it through the smooth silver hair. She stepped inside. She looked at Elsie knowingly and waved a hand at the vacant space beside her.

“Were you going down?” the woman asked.

Elsie slipped quickly into the elevator and it closed. The two women stared at the mirrored doors as the gears could be heard working somewhere beyond the four walls. There was the unsettling drop as it eased downward. Elsie jerked her bangs from her eyes and noticed the old woman looking not at her own reflection, but at Elsie’s. Elsie looked away.

“You’ll forgive me,” the woman said, seeming to read her discomfort. “Youth-envy, you know. I miss those twenty-something days.” She smoothed her hair over the scar on her forehead and leaned toward Elsie. “I had a fantastic ass.”

Elsie laughed at the candor, disarmed. “I think you look great,” she said.

“Well, carrying around those oxygen tanks keeps me in shape,” said the woman mildly. Elsie responded with a look of horror. The old woman’s expression made light of it. “I’m Loretta,” she said. “My husband’s Eugene.”

The elevator hit bottom and the doors split. “I’m Elsie. My husband is Lenny,” Elsie replied.

“Let me guess,” Loretta chimed, stepping out. “He’s at the bar.”

“Yeah.”

“Mine, too,” said Loretta, breaking into a leisurely stroll down the corridor toward the lobby. “After all these years he still loves his booze.”

Elsie followed, the old woman’s walk like the graceful glide of an apparition, purple frock fluttering behind her. “I’m trying to get Lenny to lay off it,” Elsie said.

“The best of luck with that,” Loretta muttered.

Elsie frowned, affronted. They passed the lobby, dark and quiet except for the fountain. Elsie once more caught sight of the brass plate on the stone column.

“What does it mean, interference?” said Elsie, pointing at the brass plate as they passed it.

Loretta looked over and nearly stopped. She eyed the plate, her composure stiffening for only a second, as if it were some relic or omen that reminded her of impending doom. She took a breath and continued on.

“Oh, that. It refers to some of the amenities we have, that’s all.” Loretta smiled, then. “I’m afraid us VIPs aren’t supposed to talk about it.”

“So have you guys really been married fifty years or did you forge some paperwork to get the Golden Suite?” Elsie joked.

Loretta laughed a closed-mouthed series of hums. “Tempting, sure, but this place has a very strict background check,” she said. “Yes, we’ve really been married that long.”

“So, I’ll bet you’ve been asked this before but, what’s the secret?” Elsie said.

“My sweet,” Loretta said. “The secret is that there is no secret. It’s all common sense, you know. You both stick to the contract, stay the course, go down with the ship. Treat each

other as friends because when the thongs don't fit anymore and the toilet seat is up for the thousandth time, that's what you're left with, friendship."

"But, what if you stop being friends?" said Elsie.

"You know what's upsetting about young people? They don't read the fine print. It's all in the language, dear. Can you even recite one word of your wedding ceremony?" Loretta asked.

Elsie stuttered. "Well, come on, I mean, we all want to get to the reception, right?"

"Freely and without reservation," said Loretta, stopping to face her as they reached the bar. "What God has united, let no man divide. This contract is not to be taken lightly. Anything sound familiar? Or have they replaced all that with 'Besides, divorce is expensive'? You don't really think they call it a *solemn* vow just to be poetic, do you?"

Elsie stared at her, defeated, like a child being scolded. She glanced away toward the tables, looking for Lenny. He sat at a table with a drink, smiling at someone blocked by a waiter. The waiter moved. Elsie's eyes opened wide. A young woman sat with him, a shapely blonde in a white collar shirt. She was playing with her necklace, sliding its pendant up and down a gold chain. She let it go, the pendant a gold locket that glittered in the dim lighting.

"What the ..." Elsie barked.

Several patrons near the steps turned. The blonde laughed at something Lenny said and placed a hand on his arm. The waiter moved in front of her again, and Elsie found herself stepping from side to side to see around him. The waiter turned. The woman was abruptly replaced by an old man, the same man from upstairs. The two of them were half-finished with their drinks. Elsie grimaced, her eyes then darting around the bar for the woman, but not finding her.

Loretta's voice interrupted. "You all right?"

"I...could have sworn," Elsie began, but stopped, perplexed.

"Hmm," said the old woman. "That one yours?" she asked, nodding at Lenny.

"Yeah," said Elsie.

Loretta left her and walked toward the table. Elsie followed her and they all engaged in a short introduction. The old man's sallow face beamed at the sight of the girl. His eyes scaled her from under the wiry brows and he was caught with a greedy gaze on the red rhinestone belly ring just visible on the inch of skin between shirt and waistline. Lenny and Elsie were startled as Loretta swatted Eugene's bald patch with her delicate white hand.

"Ow!" Eugene complained, looking up at her from his wheelchair.

"Stop ogling the poor girl. You're going to creep her out," Loretta scolded.

Lenny and Elsie murmured indecision at the old couple's invite to dinner, which Loretta stifled by requesting a table for four and asked Lenny to push Eugene up onto the patio because the 'boardroom bastards didn't install a ramp'. Three drinks later and the newlyweds were comfortably tipsy, leaning back in the lattice-work chairs taking in the warm glow of hanging lamps and the sound of waves in the darkness.

"Ninth grade," Lenny answered the inevitable question. "We met in ninth grade in the hallway between classes on the first day of school." Elsie transferred her fried shrimp to Lenny's plate as he spoke. "She was lost."

"We were both lost, stupid," Elsie interrupted. "I asked him if he knew where portable eight was," she said, taking over, "and he was too embarrassed to admit that he didn't know. He wanted to be all manly so he's like 'uh, it's that way'," said Elsie, pointing toward the ocean.

“He says he has the same class so he thinks this is a good opportunity to schmooze me all the way there, right? All the portables are in the opposite direction we were going. He’s still confident so he keeps insisting. I’m fighting with him and we’re wandering all over campus by ourselves. Finally a teacher spots us and escorts us to the right portable, and when we walk in *twenty minutes late*,” said Elsie, stressing the words to Lenny as she handed over her cocktail sauce. “Everybody thought we were skipping to make out or something. I hated your guts for that.”

“But then her best friend went out with my cousin, Trey, the summer he stayed at my house and you fell hard for me,” Lenny added in a slur.

“We got tossed together when Trey and Amy used his room as a sex den,” Elsie clarified. “And you served me burned grilled cheese and made me watch *The X-Files*.”

“You like that show,” Eugene chimed in. Elise looked up from her drink at the old man, whose eyes glistened with the realization of some sudden mistake. “Don’t you?” he quickly added, then cleared his throat.

“Well, yeah,” Elsie said slowly.

“Hey,” said Lenny. “How come you’re in a wheelchair?”

“Dude, what the hell?” Elsie barked in disapproval and smacked Lenny’s shoulder.

“It’s fine,” said Eugene with a drop in his voice. “I was injured in the war.”

“Which one?” Lenny blurted.

Eugene paused. “*The war*,” he said dramatically.

Loretta stared at the table, shifting her food from one side of the plate to the other with her fork. In the lamplight there could be seen a stifled smile on the thin withered lips, like someone trying not to laugh during a prank.

“I think it’s time we turn in,” she said, nudging the arm of Eugene’s chair with her elbow.

Lenny stood and stepped forward to help with Eugene’s chair, but in only seconds, Loretta had scooted him from the table and steadied him down the patio step. Eugene waved a languid farewell as he was wheeled out of sight toward the elevator.

“What just happened?” Elsie said, slumping in her seat.

Lenny blinked, looked down at the table of empty dishes and scooped up the small vinyl folder. A receipt for the bill hid inside.

“I think they just paid for us,” he said.

At night the lighthouse stone reflected the moon, the peculiar chalky glow invading the honeymoon suite even from behind closed drapes. Shadows settled on the furniture and in corners, a cast of strange shapes and depths a labor for the eyes. The waves were muffled and distant outside the window, rising crashes and hisses against the rocks. Lenny was awake on his back looking up at the ceiling, its painting obscured by the darkness. His feet were dry from their walk on the beach after dinner, and his long black lawn of hair was already starched with salt. Elsie tossed beside him in the cool sheets, first on her side, then on her stomach. She raised her head briefly, turned it and shoved it back down in the pillow with a little snore.

Lenny got up and padded to the bathroom. He closed the door to keep the light in. He ran the water and splashed his face. He reached for the towel but felt an arm, instead. Lenny jerked

upright and blinked rapidly. There was the smell of marshmallows. The waitress from the restaurant stood beside him at the mirror, naked.

“Holy...” Lenny wheezed and stepped back into the shelving, knocking the towels and soaps from their niches.

“Shhh!” the woman said, coming nearer. Her abundant blonde hair fell over bare shoulders and down her back. A pile of clothes, white and black, was at her feet on the tile. “Do you want to wake her?” the woman said, shaking her head.

Lenny stared at her breasts, large, full and perfect only inches from his touch. The locket chain glittered against tan skin. The woman took up his hand and lifted it. She kissed him, slid her tongue into his mouth. He closed his eyes. His fingertips brushed her ribcage, then the fleshy rounded side of her breast. His hand closed around it until it swelled in his palm.

“Wait!” he shouted against her mouth, taking his hands away.

A feminine cry echoed from behind the bathroom door. Lenny turned, reaching for the knob. Suddenly the warm presence of another person was gone. The hot breath against his cheek was replaced by the cool air from the vents. Lenny’s eyes drifted around the small room. He yanked back the shower curtain to find no one there. His face still dripped with water from the sink. The only sound was the grating whine of the exhaust fan. The towels were in a pile on the floor. Lenny lowered himself to the tile and stared at his hand.

Elsie kicked at the sheets and muttered in her sleep. A whimper escaped her and she rolled. Lenny was at her side, his voice soft at first until she started to flail and push at him. He pulled her up by her arms and she woke, her face slick with tears and some of her hair sticking to it.

“Fucking stop!” she sobbed.

“It’s me!” he shouted back. Elsie halted and relaxed, looked around at the dark corners and the wide beam of light from the bathroom. She exhaled in a shudder. “Bad dream?” he asked, plucking the wet strands of brown and blonde from her cheeks and neck.

Elsie nodded. “It sucked,” she choked out. “You took me to see that house, the big one we saw on the way here. It was empty, like we were looking to buy it, and we went in all the rooms,” Elsie told him, her eyes like glass in the bathroom light. “There was a huge deck in the back, and a whole bunch of people were standing out there like it was a party. But, you got me out there and started laughing at me, saying it was all a joke. You were like, ‘Come on, honey, we could never have a place like this in a million years,’” she said, mimicking Lenny’s deep, stoner-tinged speech. “And the people were really random, like my grade school English teacher and the bully who lived two houses down when I was a kid.”

Lenny stared at her, her thin arms still in his grip. Elsie shook her head, huffing a little laugh through her nose. “You were being such a dick.”

“Why would I do that?” Lenny said harshly.

“It was a stupid dream,” Elsie replied, her brows knitting at his tone.

“Why would you even dream that I would do that to you?” he said. “That’s fucked-up. I’m a total cheap asshole, right? Was your mother out there, too?”

Elsie studied him, searched his eyes. “What’s wrong with you?” she asked him.

Lenny swallowed and released her. “Nothing,” he said.

“What is it? Tell me.”

“Nothing,” Lenny echoed and stood up. “I guess it’s because I can’t sleep. This bed isn’t comfortable or something. I’m sorry,” he said. “Hey look, why don’t I take you to the lighthouse first thing in the morning?”

Elsie gazed sorrowfully up at him from the bed, clutching the covers to her chest. “I’m not four years old, Len,” she said and lay back on the pillow. “Were you going to offer me ice cream next?”

She rolled away from him, her narrow shoulders rising and falling with her breathing. Lenny waited, then snatched a new pack of cigarettes from the night table and stole out to the balcony. The stiff whacks of the pack against his palm resonated over the desolate drifts. Lenny beat the plastic-wrapped square until his hand stung and the cardboard buckled.

Morning poured into the honeymoon suite. The drapes were pushed back. Elsie was gone. Lenny paced the room as he yanked on a T-shirt. Her sandals were missing but her purse was on the nightstand. The room was different in the daylight, the mix of antique and vintage furniture exposed of their dents and scratches, the dust-littered sunbeams poised reverently in small squares on the carpet. For the moment the room seemed a relic, as if no one had set foot in it for centuries. Lenny rushed down the lobby corridor and up to the patio. There was a warm breeze at play beyond the railing, stirring the scattered grasses and sweeping the sand. The loop of tranquil guitar music was suddenly awkward. It trailed in from the lobby but was met with dissonance at the patio threshold.

Eugene and his wheelchair occupied the back corner, a stunning acoustic across his lap. His thin legs stuck out of khaki shorts and ended in a pair of flip-flops. His wife sat atop a long

bench across from him. He plucked skillfully at the instrument, some altered version of *Blackbird* with added riffs. Lenny had come upon their conversation.

“That was my favorite T-shirt,” Eugene said, stopping his playing to point at Loretta with his pick. “If I didn’t throw it out, what happened to it?”

“At this point your memory is as good as mine,” Loretta replied.

They noticed Lenny. “Morning, guys,” Lenny said.

“It’s past twelve,” Eugene told him, resuming his plucking.

“We usually call that ‘afternoon’, dear,” said Loretta.

Lenny checked his watch. “Have you seen my wife?” he asked.

“Yes,” Eugene answered, raising his bushy brows. “And you’re a very lucky man.”

“Try the lighthouse,” Loretta said over her shoulder.

Lenny nodded his thanks and made his way toward it. There was a broken wooden boardwalk leading up to the dunes where several hotel guests were padding back and forth in wet shorts and towels. The tower was deserted, the door at its bottom wind-blasted and swinging open. Lenny stepped in, the stench of fish and mildew meeting him at the high spiraling staircase. The air was close and stale, his breath echoing back at him off the dimpled rounded walls.

“Else!” he called into the hollow cylinder.

The stairs wound in layers above him, some impossible optical illusion that pretended eternity. There was no answer from the sunlit chamber at the top, no footfalls on any of the stairs. Lenny climbed. At first he tried to speed, stomping the thick wood in short bursts until his rhythm failed. He climbed slower, holding the railing now and watching his feet touch each step.

After four rounds the dizziness invaded and he carefully scaled two steps at a time, clutching the railing and pulling himself along. His muscles worked, his lungs burned, and he grew accustomed to the scent of stagnant decay. He called her name again and trudged hard and slow over the last few steps.

Light came in from all directions. The windows of the chamber were salt-crusting and cracked. Several panels were missing and dried up debris dotted the crumbled concrete. In the center was a forgotten old mechanism the size of a monster truck tire, its metal tarnished and its spotlight shattered. Elsie stood behind it, looking out one of the missing panels at the sea.

“You wanted to see if I would drag my ass all the way up here, huh?” Lenny said, heaving every few words. Her head turned. He approached her from behind, slid his arms around her waist. “I’m sorry. You should have woke me,” he said, resting his chin on the top of her head.

“It’s free, by the way,” Elsie said. “To see the lighthouse.”

“Yeah,” said Lenny. “Because it’s jacked.”

“Yeah,” Elsie laughed, both of them looking around at the rubble.

The sea stretched out, its spray on the rocks below and its dark, wrinkled surface calmer beyond. The sun flecked the peaks of tiny waves, those same gentle swells guilty of treachery and tragedy when fate commands. The morning battered Capsize Point with its heavy sighs of ocean wind.

“Eugene and Loretta are on the patio,” Lenny said. “We could have lunch with them if you want,” he added.

“Len, I’m sorry about last night,” said Elsie. “It was a stupid dream. I know you wouldn’t do that to me and I understand why you got all pissed off.”

“It’s O.K. Sorry I got pissed off.”

“It’s just that sometimes I feel like you don’t ever want anything nice, that you don’t care about building a better life for us.”

Lenny took his arms away. “Jesus, Else, what the hell is this now?”

“Really, though, I mean, do you want to fix cars forever?” said Elsie, turning. “Don’t you want to buy a house one day instead of renting with a roommate?”

“Of course I do, what do you think? I’m doing the best I can. What about you, huh? You’re still working at the craft store. Where’s all your ambition?”

Elsie took a step forward. “I’m trying to go to school, Lenny! That was your idea, remember? That’s part of the reason we got married, so I could get a student loan! You were all like, ‘It’s like we’re married anyway, this way we can get some tax breaks’,” she said, mocking his voice. “That was romantic.”

“You were cool with that, remember? We’ve been together since we were fifteen. I told you I could marry you tomorrow and never look back, that I decided a long time ago you were all I wanted for the rest of my life. For richer or poorer, Else.”

“Yeah, but there will never be a richer,” Elsie said. “We’re always going to be broke and borrowing, shopping at Goodwill and living on dollar menus. Two strangers paid for our dinner last night!”

“What do you want me to do?” Lenny said, throwing his hands up. “I know cars and I know guitars. If you want me to make millions as a stock broker or something, I have to go to school and shit for that and that takes money.”

“I’m not saying millions, Len. You know I’m not some gold-digger asking for a diamond for every finger. I don’t need to be rich, I just want you to care about not being poor.”

“I do,” Lenny told her softly. “I want to take care of you and I do want the house and the cars and the kids.” He came to her again across the ruined floor of the lighthouse and looked her in the eye. “You’re going to have all that, I promise, but for right now I’m busting my ass the best way I know how. We have time, Else. We have the rest of our lives. Besides, you like shopping at Goodwill,” he said, tucking her hair behind her ear. “You make fun of the college girls who go to the mall and pay fifty bucks for the jeans you find for five.”

Elsie studied him, eyed him admiringly. He knew how to defuse her, ease her into the dock like a pro. “Yeah,” she said. “Stupid bitches.”

Lenny kissed her, that small redeeming touch like punctuation for a resolved issue. He kissed her again, longer. His expression changed, the dark brows drawn together like a frustrated child begging for a favorite toy. Soon she was gripping his black hair and they were on the floor, groping under shirts and wrenching buttons free. Their heavy breaths echoed in the chamber, their limbs stretched awkwardly out over broken planks and bits of railing.

They emerged half an hour later from the base of the tower, breathless and flushed from their activity and the long descent down the crumbled steps. The sun was brutal on the weed-flecked sand and voices from the beach were carried up with the wind. Passing guests glanced at

them curiously. There was the coconut smell of sun block and a waft of turkey sandwiches and Kool-Aid. Lenny and Elsie grinned at each other and headed back to the patio.

“Well, hello,” said Loretta as they approached.

Eugene was still at the guitar, hands mottled and patched with grey hair stopping to rest on the smooth cherry finish. The old couple shared a strange moment, eyeing the newlyweds with an obvious melancholy as if they were both watching the sad ending of a movie.

“The lighthouse is pretty lame,” said Lenny, who was quickly reprimanded with an elbow to the gut. “Ow! I mean, it sucks. Not worth the climb.”

“Lenny,” said Elsie under an exasperated sigh.

“It’s all right, dear,” Loretta told her, casting a glance back at Eugene. He shook his head and began plucking again. Loretta reached up to pat the side of her shorn silver hair. “And you might want to dust that off.”

Elsie understood and mimicked her, finding her own hair white with powder debris from the lighthouse floor. “Oh,” she said and tousled the streaked locks free of it.

The newlyweds traded a chagrined look. Elsie pulled Lenny’s shirt straight and raked his hair back with her fingernails. He swatted her hand away.

“I remember those days,” they heard Loretta say to her husband.

Eugene chuckled and played a whiny porn-tinged ditty on the guitar, sliding his fingertips up and down the strings.

“O.K. O.K. Fun’s over,” Elsie said, pointing at Eugene.

“Come, sit,” Loretta offered, waving a graceful hand at the bench. “They’re having a live band this evening. It can’t touch Eugene’s showmanship but it should be fun,” she said, jutting

her chin at her husband. “Unless you two haven’t had enough alone time,” she added with a knowing look, taking up the umbrella-decked cocktail that sat near her on the bench.

“Hey, is that yours?” Eugene asked, stopping his playing to point at the parking lot.

The sand-swept pavement could be seen from the veranda, Lenny’s maroon Z28 like a bloodspot amidst the other cars. The back window housed a display of band bumper stickers.

“The Camaro? Yeah,” he said.

“Trouble you to give me a look?” said Eugene, setting down the guitar.

“If I can have a go at that when we come back,” said Lenny shrewdly, nodding at the instrument. “She didn’t want me to bring mine,” he said, glaring eyes on Elsie.

“Yeah, uh, it’s the beach. You saved for that precious Jackson for months and I know you’d be crushed if you got sand in the pick-ups,” Elsie said.

“Haul me down?” Eugene persisted, already gripping the worn rubber trim on his wheels.

“Yeah,” Lenny replied.

He pushed Eugene toward the steps leading down to the beach and ushered the chair over each one. Eugene sat comfortably, speaking in stutters as the chair bounced over the sun-dried wood, asking Lenny the engine size and specs.

“Boys,” said Elsie.

“Eugene,” called Loretta over her shoulder. “What are you doing?” she asked in a low warning, as if he were about to touch a hotplate.

Eugene halted the wheels with his mottled, muscled arms. Lenny nearly stumbled over him.

“I’m just looking,” Eugene said, sounding insulted. The old man glanced back. “Just looking.”

There was a second of silence, a beach breeze catching a strand of Eugene’s grey hair and pulling it loose from his ponytail. Loretta finally turned back, her silent blessing for him to continue. The sound of the wheelchair dropping the last few steps and rolling over the boards in the path grew softer as the two men headed toward the lot. Elsie waited, quietly observing, as Loretta dispelled the distance in her eyes and manufactured a polite smile.

“You’ll never know what they’re up to,” Loretta said, sipping her drink.

Her hand was poised daintily around the glass, pinky finger slightly raised. Near the blue paper umbrella, her left ring finger rested, naked. Elsie smoothed her hair, staring at it.

“Where’s your wedding ring?” Elsie asked coolly.

Loretta halted, swallowed and set the drink down again. “Oh, Eugene wanted to get them shined up as an anniversary present, but the damn jeweler didn’t have them ready in time for the trip.”

“I’ll bet that caused a problem with your background check,” Elsie said.

“It might have if we hadn’t been here before,” Loretta said.

“You have?”

“Once. Oh, sweetheart,” Loretta said to a young male server. “Could she have one of these, too?” she said, pointing at Elsie and then her glass.

The server nodded, smiled and trotted off. The sun crept behind a cloud. The beach-goers were beginning to file in for lunch, wet footprints like tribal markings on the wooden dock.

“What is it?” Elsie asked.

“Mimosa,” answered Loretta, stirring it with the umbrella stem.

“I’m not really a fan of champagne,” said Elsie.

“Give it a chance,” Loretta said loftily. “Trust me. It will end up being your favorite.”

Lenny popped the hood of the muscle car, revealing shiny metal intestines winding in and around a well-kept motor. Eugene’s peppered brows raised at the sight of it, and his thin-lipped mouth opened slightly. He wheeled the chair closer, arching his neck to see the engine and placing one hand lovingly on the brick-colored paint.

“Man,” said Eugene quietly. “Man, man, will you look at that?”

Lenny perked up proudly, tossing his black moss of lazy curls against the sea breeze. “Rebuilt it myself,” Lenny said. “That’s an after-market filter,” he added, pointing at the glimmering disc with his hand shaped like a gun.

“Did you?” Eugene said. “Nice work.”

The old man pushed up his sleeves and fiddled with what he could reach. The wheelchair tipped up off one wheel as he struggled to pinch at nuts and bolts.

“Else says it sucks up too much money,” Lenny said solemnly.

“It does,” Eugene answered frankly. “Enjoy it while you can afford it. We all have that one thing, you know? That one thing we eventually have to trade when we finally become men. Car like this is an excellent choice.”

“You had one?” Lenny asked.

“Sure did.”

“Where is it now?”

Eugene leaned back into his chair and rubbed his beard, still fondly staring at the car. “Oh, long gone, my friend,” he said, casually reaching out to touch the peeling Chevy emblem. “Long gone.”

Lenny flinched at the words, watching the old man’s eyes dance behind the square bifocals. He looked at the car, suddenly desperate to see it as Eugene did, some phantom of youth relived. There were a thousand trips down I-4 in the great metal beast, T-tops open and night air rushing in on the way to a late movie out by the theme parks. There were a thousand turns of the visor on Elsie’s side, flipped to check her make-up after her ritual latte had taken most of her lipstick. There were a dozen patches of worn fabric in the front and the back seat, perfume, cologne and cigarette smoke at rest in the strands. The center console could have been a time capsule, wrinkled remains of their prom ticket receipts, concert stubs and broken club wristbands buried like artifacts under the packs of gum and registration papers.

Lenny glanced at Eugene, the sleeves of another camp shirt pushed up to the middle of his arm. He caught the stenciled black angles and sharp points of a tattoo, the edge of a larger image hiding under the linen folds.

“Join us again tonight?” Eugene said, dropping his arms to grip the chair wheels.

Lenny blinked. “Tonight? Uh, yeah.”

“Have some drinks on us. The dock is nice at night when the moon is on the ocean. You can’t tell where it starts and ends until the moon shines. You can shut the hood, kid. Let’s head back before the girls have our asses,” Eugene said, backing up, then pulling himself forward toward the veranda.

Lenny laughed at the remark and put his hand on the hood of the Camaro. Eugene moved fast, wheeling up onto the path without looking back. Lenny lingered a second, studying his own handiwork with a strange sense of dread, as if it was for the last time, then slammed down the hood.

Steam from a hot shower fogged the bathroom mirrors. Evening approached and the newlyweds climbed into the small stall together. Elsie's moderate inventory of products took up one corner of the tub, and Lenny's bottle of unscented shampoo leaned on the towel rack. He was out first, toweling dry and pulling on a fresh t-shirt while Elsie washed the conditioner from her hair. She turned off the water.

"I hope you're getting dressed," she called. "Don't do that thing where you tuck it between your legs. I hate that!"

"I'm not," he called back.

His black jeans jingled as he pulled them on, the pockets still holding some change. The vinyl curtain slid back. Elsie dried herself, one foot up on the edge of the tub.

"You O.K.?" she asked him from behind the door he'd left ajar.

"Yeah, fine."

"You seem weird."

"Weird how?"

"Too serious or something."

"No," Lenny said with a shrug and swept up his cigarettes. "I'm fine. I'm having one while you get ready," he told her, waving the pack at the small opening.

She peeked out. “Okay.”

The shower dripped and Elsie stepped out. The mirror was obscured by the remnants of steam and Elsie began her ritual. First was the face cream, then the comb. She ran the white towel over her limbs and chest, patting everything dry. But, what was usually a robotic routine felt suddenly peculiar to her, her own body so familiar and scrutinized that any small difference was reason to be alarmed. The towel seemed smaller than before. Where it first wrapped her thin taut waist almost twice, she now struggled to pull the two ends to meet at her belly button.

She held it up full length, comparing it to Lenny’s hanging on the door. It was the same size towel she had used before, stark white with a C imprinted in the fabric on a crest. In the heavy steam that was slowly dissipating she looked down at her hips. To her horror they were swollen and huge. She could abruptly feel their weight like padding. Elsie gasped and frantically wiped the mirror. Its cloudy surface gave back her reflection; thighs thick with fat that rubbed together and a stomach that bulged, pale skin folded over the drowning red stone of her piercing.

“Oh, my God,” she sobbed, discovering the slack skin under her arms. “Oh, my God,” she repeated, violently pinching the bloated folds on her waist and turning her rear-end to the mirror. “Lenny!” she cried out, shoving open the bathroom door.

In the mirror her thighs were streaked with stretch marks, bulging and puffy with ballooned flesh in the glass still opaque with vapor. The tattoo on her hip, an Old English letter L inside a red heart, was widened and flattened on her skin. Elsie’s eyes were wrecked by tears, red-rimmed as if from a brutal nightmare as she pressed the towel to her horrifying form and sunk to her knees on the cold tile. The steam poured out through the open door into the suite and was replaced by cooler air. Lenny rushed in, dropping down to her.

“What? What is it? Else!”

She was hysterical with sobs, her face in her hands. “Don’t look! Don’t look!”

“Don’t look at what?” Lenny gripped her shoulders in his hands and shook her. She sucked in a breath and looked up at him. “Babe, what the hell is wrong? Are you hurt?”

Elsie stared blankly. The bathroom was nearly cleared, the hollow drip of the shower echoing. Cautiously, she hugged the towel to her body, feeling once again her own familiar size. She shuddered, looking past Lenny and pressing her hands to her waistline, finding it petite and smooth once more. Slowly she rose, Lenny’s desperate questioning becoming a muted din in her ears. He stood with her and she turned to the mirror. Like a patient removing bandages from some risky surgery, Elsie trembled with fear as lowered the towel.

The mirror was clear, reflecting the two of them and the racks of washcloths behind. Elsie let out a breath of relief, running her hands over her slim hips, over the little tattoo and the belly ring that rested in a once more concave abdomen. Lenny’s voice returned. It was low, crisp and troubled in the tinny bathroom space. Elsie looked at the reflection of his face. He was brushing the sopping hair from her shoulder, patting her and shaking her gently.

“Babe? Babe,” he said. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” she breathed in a rough whisper. “I just thought I was, I swear I looked in the mirror and...”

“What? Tell me.”

“I...thought I was huge and fat,” she said.

Lenny erupted in laughter. “Are you fucking kidding?”

“It’s not funny!” Elsie barked, wiping her tears. “I think I’m hallucinating or something. I’m going crazy. Last night I thought I saw you with that waitress from the restaurant.”

“What waitress?” Lenny said.

“The one at the place we ate at on the way here. You were sitting with her at the bar.”

Lenny messaged her damp shoulder with one hand. “All right, you caught me. I was with her. She followed me here. What can I say? The chicks want my cock,” he said, placing the other hand proudly on his chest.

A smile came to Elsie’s face and she smacked him in the stomach. He uttered a protest, then stepped behind her and put his arms around her waist. She stared at her nude reflection, Lenny resting his chin on her shoulder.

“You’re far from fat, idiot,” he told her. “You’re hot. Even if you were fat, I’d still love you.” With that he took his arms away and raised his hands in a surrendering gesture. “Of course I’d have to have skinny girls on the side, but you’d still be number one.”

“Such a romantic,” Elsie replied. “Len,” she said with a change in tone.

“Yeah?”

“I don’t like this place. I want to go home.”

Lenny’s grin faded and he took her into his arms. “Me, too,” he said, rubbing her back. “We’ll leave in the morning.”

A blues band played on the veranda, small speakers set up on the wooden walkway while guests strolled back and forth from the bar to the outdoor chairs. Further out the night had dropped its darkness on the beach, and four figures sat comfortably along the bench-lined dock

that stretched over the breakers. One of a few lamps running its length gave Lenny light to pluck at Eugene's guitar. Eugene sat across from him, nursing a drink in his wheelchair and wiping his beard after every sip. The music was faint, the notes still somewhat discernable over the gentle crash of waves underneath them.

Lenny stopped playing for a second, his head perked up. "Guitar's out of tune."

Eugene listened, glancing back at the hotel. "Yep."

"No it isn't," Elsie said, pointing at the instrument on Lenny's lap.

"Not this one, theirs," Eugene said, gesturing to the blues band.

The moon played on the water, a kaleidoscope of blue, black and white on the choppy swells in the distance. Applause could be heard as the band finished. Eugene tipped back the last of his drink and shook the ice in the glass.

"Who wants another one?" he asked the group.

They all had full glasses, Lenny having been pre-occupied with the guitar.

"We're good," Loretta said.

"Anyone want to roll me back? I'm not too fit to drive," said Eugene. Lenny was concentrated on remembering a Led Zeppelin riff. The women looked at each other, hesitating. "Oh, come on," he said.

"You know what?" said Elsie, downing her own drink in two gulps. "I'll take you. I could use another one."

"That a girl!" Eugene growled in approval as she stood up.

Lenny looked up but didn't stop playing as she pushed him down the dock toward the lights from Capsize Point. He felt Loretta's eyes on him. The old woman was an ethereal form in the light, sitting with her legs crossed in a long cotton skirt and sandals.

"I remember when I bought him that guitar," she said. "It was after our first was born. I wanted him to know I didn't expect him to stop playing, that he could still do what he loved and have a family."

"That's really cool," Lenny said. "I've always wanted one of these. They have the best sound but they're too damn expensive," he said, examining its shape and fiddling with the knobs.

"Mmm," Loretta said from inside her glass as she took another sip. She swallowed. "You don't think Elsie wants you to have one?"

"I guess she does. She just hates when I spend money."

"Maybe she just worries that you don't worry enough," the old woman said.

Lenny hushed the strings with his hand after strumming a chord. "I worry, I just don't see the point of analyzing every little penny. That can make you crazy. Besides, she spends money on all her hair and make-up stuff."

"Maybe she wants to look good for you," Loretta snapped. "It's hard work keeping a man's eyes off other women."

Lenny stiffened. "She looks good," he said. "She always looks good. I'm just saying..."

"She thinks ahead. Women think ahead, that's all," Loretta said. "You're married now. There will always be that other person to consider."

"You sound like my mother-in-law," Lenny said, chuckling to himself.

He hadn't realized the effect of his words until the dock was silent for too long. He was fingering the strings when he looked up at the old woman, whose face was an angry mask of resentment. She said nothing, but he could see, even in the shadows, that she gripped her drink with dangerous force, and her chest rose and fell with quick hard breaths as if she were stifling the urge to throw it at him. Lenny straightened and smiled politely.

Elsie maneuvered up the path to the veranda where the band was gearing up for another set. Several other guests waved hello to Eugene as she pushed him through the doorway and into the bar. She shook the bangs from her eyes.

"How long have you guys been here?" she asked him.

"Checked in a day before you two," Eugene said, digging out cash from his pocket.

"And you already know those people?"

"A few, yeah."

Eugene named off a couple he had met at the desk when they checked in, a man and his son he met at the bar and a woman in her sixties who was celebrating her retirement. Elsie scratched at the rubber on the handles of the wheelchair.

"God, you remind me of Lenny," she said. "He makes friends so quick. He'll probably be a lot like you when..."

Eugene handed her a twenty-dollar bill. "When he gets old?" Eugene said, one grey brow raised as he looked up at her. "Get me a scotch and soda, and whatever you want, love."

Elsie ordered for Eugene, then added a screwdriver for herself. "You don't have to do that, you know. I appreciate it," Elsie said, curving the bill in her delicate hands.

“Trust me, it’s my pleasure. That Lenny of yours is a great guy. You chose well. He’s smart and good-looking. He’s got a way with music, too,” said Eugene, drumming on the arms of his chair.

“Yeah, he’s good to me,” Elsie said. “Most days,” she added with a laugh.

She stared down at Eugene’s bald spot, the skin shiny and freckled giving way to a gradient of thin lead-colored hair that gathered into the ponytail, spiraling at the end. The old man’s slender fingers were almost graceful as he drummed, his wrists working under the flaps of unbuttoned long linen shirt sleeves.

“That young man treats you like a queen,” Eugene insisted. The drinks arrived, one orange and one brown, the glasses reflecting in the smooth mahogany surface of the bar. “I’ll bet he’s real good at, you know, taking care of you.”

Elise took up the drinks and handed them to Eugene. “What?”

“You know, taking care of your needs,” said the old man with an anxious tone. “You two don’t seem to have a problem in that department. I’ll bet he does real well in the bedroom, huh?” he said, looking away.

Elsie gripped the handles of the chair, her back arching at the remark. She laughed nervously. “Wow, um, I think you’re getting a little too personal, Eugene,” she said.

“Christ, I’m sorry, you’re right,” he said. “None of my business.” He took a sip from his drink and wiped his beard with his wrist. Eugene lifted the glass. “I think I’ll make this my last one, what do you say?”

“It’s all right,” Elsie said.

She smiled behind him as she pushed him out. The band started playing again.

The honeymoon suite was streaked with white beams. The air conditioner muttered and breathed as the newlyweds squirmed under the comforter. Elsie lost another battle, pinned to the crisp pillow and squealing from Lenny's merciless tickling. A mule kick to his thigh and he bucked off her, rolling over onto his back.

"For fuck's sake!" he barked, heaving out a groan of defeat.

Elsie sprang to her knees. "Did it really hurt?"

"No," Lenny said on an airy sigh. "You're a weakling. It's cute." Without warning, a pillow flew in the darkness at his face, a muffled shout of surprise filling the room. He grabbed it from her on the next attack. "Truce!" he commanded.

Elsie was a sleek shadow above him, hair falling from the sides of her face, her arms flexed, pulling on the pillow. She let go and rolled over. "Fine," she said, laying back to catch her breath. "You know something weird?"

"What?"

"I think Eugene was trying to ask how you are in bed."

Lenny's head turned her way. "When?"

"When we went to get drinks. He was like, 'I bet he's good in the bedroom'."

Lenny laughed aloud. "Serious?"

Elsie nodded and she raised herself up onto her side. "Yeah. I think he wanted to know how you are in the sack."

"Did you tell him I'm the best in the business?"

“Gross, Len, no. I’m not talking to an old guy about that stuff. Besides, how do I know you’re the best? I’ve got no basis for comparison.”

“That’s right,” said Lenny, tucking his hands behind his head. “You gave yourself to me and that’s all you’ve ever needed.”

Elsie smacked his forehead. “Ow!” he said. “Quit!”

“Quit being a jerk,” she replied and lay back with him. They stared at the ceiling, the ominous oval shipwreck painting half shadowed in moonlight. “Oh, my God. What if they’re swingers or something? What if it was a proposition?”

“Unlikely,” Lenny said, closing his eyes. “Even if Eugene digs you, I don’t think Loretta likes me much.”

“Strange. All things female like you except for my mom, and me sometimes,” she joked.

“Would you still want to bang me if I was in a wheelchair?” Lenny asked, kicking at the covers.

“If it could be done, sure. I think Eugene is kind of hot,” Elsie said.

“You do not.”

“He’s got sex appeal,” she said. “He’s confident and funny.”

“You’re disturbed,” said Lenny.

Elsie poked him in the ribs. He twitched and squirmed further away from her. “Oh, Eugene,” she began in a provocative voice. “I think that wheelchair can hold the two of us.”

“Freak,” he said, swatting at her hands as she tried to grope him. “Get away.”

A brief wrestling match later she rested on his chest, arm draped over him and streaked red hair in waves on his shoulder. She dozed. Lenny could tell from her breathing that she was

asleep. There was the smell of lavender coming from her hair, some leave-in stuff she always bought in a purple bottle. He reached out to stroke the smooth strands, running his fingers through them. His wedding band, a plain circle with a center groove, caught the moonlight. Lenny took a deep breath, watching Elsie's head rise and fall with his chest, and drifted off into dreams.

The outlines of the suite lingered in his closed eyes, a geometric collage of furniture corners and rectangle doorways. The oval ceiling painting remained in his lids like an eye, itself, the white color used for the crests of waves jumping out like a photo negative. As Lenny drifted deeper the outlines were swept away like sand. The honeymoon suite was gone, replaced by new outlines. Curved windows formed, then the round chamber of the lighthouse and the mass of a wasted mechanical device, rusted and broken on the floor. Lenny grunted in his sleep. Elsie was at the windows, back to him, looking out over Capsize Point. She turned and smiled, bit her lower lip.

She came toward him but didn't meet his eye. She looked lower, instead, and Lenny realized she was wearing her wedding dress. Bare, painted toenails peeked out from the white skirt with each slow step and she pulled the satin sleeves from her shoulders. His dream was like a movie frame, perfectly captured from his perspective, her every move in just the right lighting. Elsie let the dress fall, her breasts exposed, skin smooth and crossed by her hair.

It was then that the frame changed. There was someone else in it, someone seated in a chair before her. It wasn't Lenny that she came to. It wasn't Lenny whose eyes she met. Lenny stared at the back of Eugene's bald head, the old man's neck curved up as he looked at her. His ponytail hung against the cloth backing of his wheelchair, his arms to the side welcoming her to

him. Elsie paused before Eugene. Her hair covered one breast and she gently swept it back behind her shoulder, revealing it to him.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Lenny heard the old man say. “Come here to me.”

The dream turned nightmarish, and Lenny was forced to watch as his wife mounted the chair and bent down for a kiss. Eugene’s mottled hands rested on her thighs and slid up to her hips. Lenny shouted but his voice was mute. He rounded the chair and yelled in their faces but no sound came. There was only the smacking of their mouths as Elsie kissed him, her tongue dipping in and out between his thin withered lips.

“Stop!” Lenny cried out, but couldn’t hear his own voice. He could feel his vocal chords working hard, getting hoarse and sore, but the sound never came. “Stop it, now!”

Lenny gripped his own hair in his fingers, pulling on it and swearing as the old man’s hands travelled higher, his palms cupping her breasts. Lenny heard her groan, and she reared back to offer them to his mouth. He saw it, then, the black tips of Eugene’s tattoo under his sleeve. As the old man kneaded Elsie’s breast the sleeve fell further down his arm. The entire tattoo was visible, black points forming a tribal-like symbol. There were six points on three pickaxe shapes that came together within a circle, a biohazard warning. There were the same colors, red blue and black, the same stylized curves in the design, custom-drawn.

Lenny woke. He felt hair in his grip but it wasn’t his own. Elsie was screaming for him to let go. He shot up from the bed and released her. Elsie was sobbing, one hand on her hair. She recoiled, springing from the bed and backing up against the window. She reached over and turned on the lamp, filling the suite with light. Elsie’s face was red and her eyes were swollen with tears.

“Oh, Jesus,” Lenny said, raising a surrendering hand. “Jesus, baby, I’m sorry.”

“What the fuck is the matter with you?” Elsie choked out.

“I didn’t mean to. I had this fucked-up dream…” he began, slowly getting out of bed.

“You were pulling my hair and you wouldn’t let go!” she said, stepping away from him.

“Please. You know I wouldn’t hurt you, please, babe. Just listen.”

“Just stay away, Len! You’re scaring me right now,” she said between breaths.

“I’m sorry,” he said, stopping. “I’m sorry. I’ll stay right here.”

Lenny remained at the edge of the bed, hovering carefully with one hand raised to calm her. Their heavy breathing was loud, matching the wind outside. At length, Lenny sat on the bed. Elsie sank down into a chair, tucking her feet up under her and hugging her knees. They looked at each other in silence.

“What happened?” Elsie asked him.

“I don’t know,” Lenny said. “I had a bad dream. I thought I was pulling my own hair.”

“Why would you pull your own hair?”

“I don’t know.”

There was another moment of quiet. Some metal gate or swinging lantern creaked outside. The shower dripped. Elsie climbed out of the chair and went to him. He stood and took her into his arms.

“You scared me,” Elsie said into his shoulder.

“I know, I’m sorry,” he told her.

“I hate this place. I hate this hotel,” said Elsie. “I hate this suite.”

Lenny held her, feeling her body with a new sense of gratitude. “We’ll check out first thing in the morning,” he said.

The elevator doors opened to the lobby. The newlyweds hauled their luggage out, dragging their feet and pale-faced from a restless night’s sleep. The young concierge was already looking up in their direction as she if was expecting them. The girl’s eyes stared out from the thick glasses as they approached, and her mouth was a thin stoic line.

“Morning,” Lenny grunted, yanking out the key cards from his back pocket. “We’ve decided to check out a little early.”

The girl’s mouth curved suddenly into a smile, like a sleeping machine stimulated to life. “No problem, Mr. Morgan. Everything satisfactory with your stay?”

Elsie was pulling her bangs into straight strands over her forehead. “The room could use a few amenities, like a TV,” she said. Then, under her breath as the girl turned, “Or a routine check for evil spirits.”

Lenny nudged her. The concierge turned back around and opened the primitive register book, a leather-bound black ledger with an abundance of scruffs and yellowed leaves. Lenny and Elsie peered at it as she flipped through, the first few pages written in rough columns and bleeding ink as if with a fountain pen. Further on the pages were whiter, lines printed rather than drawn and the penmanship took on a ball-point quality. Elsie watched the girl scribble their names under the ‘checked-out’ column, noticing that every entry throughout the book seemed to share identical handwriting.

“There they are!” Eugene’s booming voice echoed. Elsie and Lenny turned, greeting the old couple as they came into the lobby. “Checking out already?” Eugene said as Loretta stopped his chair.

“Yeah,” said Lenny. “Getting a little homesick.”

“Oh, no. You can stay for breakfast, right?”

“Eugene,” said Loretta.

“They have really great blueberry pancakes,” Eugene continued.

All four of them heard the concierge clear her throat. They looked up at her as she adjusted her glasses, dropping them down the sharp freckled nose to peer over them. Her head pivoted at the brass sign on the column and she stared at it, as if she were about to shoot lasers from her eyes. Elsie followed her gaze. *Interference or influence is STRONGLY*

DISCOURAGED.

“They need to get going if they want to beat the weekend traffic,” Loretta said.

“Yes,” said Eugene, his face darkening. “That’s true. You kids should be on your way.”

“You’re all set,” the concierge interrupted with a cold metal smile. “Thank you and come again.”

“I’m sure they will,” Eugene told the girl icily. “Since the staff here is so jovial.”

The concierge’s brace-toothed grin shrank back to a tight-lipped line and she readjusted her glasses. She smoothed the bun in her hair and turned on them, placing the ledger under the desk in a dark, isolated cubby. With that she left the desk, the wall-sized mosaic staring back at them.

“It was really nice to meet you,” Elsie said after an uncomfortable silence.

“We’ll walk you out,” Eugene blurted.

The parking lot had emptied of cars, only a few remaining. The sea breeze stirred wind chimes on a balcony overhead as they piled their suitcases in. Lenny started up the Camaro, the engine making a heavy, train-like chug-chug sound. Lenny and Eugene started another conversation about the vehicle while Loretta and Elsie stood by. Elsie let out a groan of disapproval as Lenny reached in to pop the hood again.

“I hate when he does this,” she hissed to Loretta. “We need to leave.”

Loretta smiled warmly as if from some feeling of nostalgia. “I know. He never likes to end a good time.”

“Do you think we’ll last?” Elsie said suddenly, eyes on her husband.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Loretta sighed, placing a hand on Elsie’s shoulder. “If Eugene and I can do it, you can. You just have to remember it’s you two against the world, like being stranded at sea. When the storms roll in you’ll stop fighting about neglected laundry or checkbooks and realize you’ve got to batten down the hatches. The petty bullshit will fade and that’s when you’ll know. That’s when you’ll find out what it all means.”

Elsie jumped as Lenny slammed down the hood. He looked at her expectantly. “You ready or what?” he said.

“Just waiting on you to stop yapping,” Elsie said.

The highway out of Daytona Beach was crowded with weekend traffic. Cars wearing surfboards like hats cruised with open windows, suntanned, tattooed arms hanging out of them.

Lenny's Camaro barreled down one lane passing several slower drivers. Elsie uncapped a tube of lip gloss and folded down the mirror.

"I have to say those were the coolest old people I've ever met," Elsie remarked, sounding speech-impaired while she traced her bottom lip with color. "Hey," she added, pulling out an extra napkin from the reception, their names in metallic red ink within scalloped edges. "Know something weird I didn't notice before?" she asked.

"What?" Lenny said, his hands unusually tight on the wheel.

"Eugene and Loretta," said Elsie, holding up the napkin. "Eugene starts with E and Loretta starts with L. That's the first letters of our names switched."

"Yeah?" Lenny replied.

"So, don't you remember when we got our yearbook pictures done? We did that with our names. I put myself down as Lauren or something and you put Ewan Morgan. Don't you remember? God, my mom was so pissed."

"Oh, yeah," Lenny said and looked over at her. "She called the school and wanted all the yearbooks redone. Didn't she call the principle a simp?" he said, laughing.

"Lenny, this guy is coming over," Elsie warned, pointing with her napkin hand at a large truck drifting into their lane as he was passing it. "Lenny!"

There was no escape, an SUV closing them in on the other side. Lenny stepped on the gas, trying to get ahead of it in the loud growl of his desperate engine. He pressed his palm to the horn and they both cried out as the truck continued to glide, its axle meeting Lenny's doorframe with a horrifying crunch. The car was launched, clipping the SUV, across the highway in a squeal of protesting tires. In seconds it happened, a smash of steel and a swerve into a concave

median. The Camaro slid and succumbed, flipping once and rolling over onto the driver's side. There was the sound of other cars screeching to a stop, doors slamming and voices calling out.

Lenny blinked the world into focus. His car was a Picasso of wrenched metal and the road was lopsided outside the shattered window. Elsie shifted drowsily. She was draped over her seatbelt and bleeding from her hairline. Lenny tried to move. The mirror in the visor was broken, shards of it in Elsie's hair and lap, one larger piece tinged with blood. Lenny's muscles rebelled against the messages his brain sent to them.

"Else," he said, something crushing his spine and restricting his chest. "We're going to be O.K." He forced another breath into his lungs. "We're going to be O.K."

BLACK ICE

The countryside was cold and colorless as a pencil sketch outside the car window. Acres upon acres of dried corpse-trees skirted the distant sloping Alleghenies. Still life tractors and wood piles were exhibits in cages of barren foliage. The whole world was white.

“Jeez,” Riley said on the end of a yawn. “Why did he have to wait until January to die? We could have at least seen the leaves turning.”

“It’s just like him,” Theresa answered. “I would have been happy if Mom had buried him the way he buried Selma, dumped in a shoe box under the sod before we were home from the park.”

“Yeah, that was classic,” Riley huffed. “Hey girls, the cat got into some anti-freeze but I took care of it,” she said, mimicking a man’s throaty growl.

The girls had known the trip was imminent. Their father’s recent stroke had left him drooling. Riley smoothed her flat, wheat-blond scarf of hair in the window’s reflection. Theresa blasted the heat, all vents on her younger sister who was already swaddled in black clothes from cap to boots. The vents muttered out the warm air from the guts of the 1978 brown Oldsmobile Cutlass, a hand-me-down from their father.

“The funeral home bathroom smelled like old-lady crotch,” Riley said.

“What?” said Theresa.

“You know? Like cold French fries and maxi-pads.”

“That’s disgusting.”

“I know,” Riley said. “That eulogy was hard to sit through. It’s a good thing they had the priest read it, someone who didn’t know him. No one else could have said ‘a devoted husband and father’ with a straight face.” She paused, shifting in her seat. “You think Mom’s going to be O.K.?”

Theresa cast a glance at the rearview. The back seat harbored two medium suitcases packed light. A devil’s food cake was presumably safe, snug in cellophane on the right side of the brown vinyl bench. It had been a few hours since they left Parkersburg, the place their parents retired to after thirty years in Florida. “You’re father wants to go back home to West Virginia,” their mother told them, “where housing is cheaper and everyone speaks English.”

“We have to stop pretty soon,” Theresa said. “We’ll need something else to snack on, and some water.”

“I’ll be fine,” Riley said. “You don’t want me peeing more than I already do. We’ll never get home.”

“There’s a gas station right up here.”

“I’m just glad it’s all over,” said Riley, leaning her head back. “That was a frigging nightmare.”

The girls had once relished their childhood trips to visit family, fascinated by dark tunnels through mountains and roads that vanished behind primeval rock into the unknown. The surrounding landscape was a drastic departure from flat, exposed Orlando where the horizon could be seen from every angle. Here things hid in shadow, lurked in thick woods. Here their

childhood imaginations had once flourished, fed by their cousins' tales of witchcraft, wandering ghosts and Indian rituals.

But the prospect of life there was unappealing, neither sister eager to leave the crowded, sleepless city that had raised them. Parkersburg was a small, bleak heap of unkempt seventy-year-old buildings, a brick grocery store and an old Rayon factory that smelled like burnt pine sap. Every visit to the strip-mined region made the sisters grateful for their warm apartment furnished by thrift store finds, grateful for their parents' blessing to stay behind.

"We have to meet the Mitchells tomorrow, early," Theresa said. Riley looked out the window. "The agency gave them your name last week. I talked to them on the phone. They're really nice, and rich. So, you don't have to worry about the baby going without." she said.

There was a halt in the air, a stumble of the heater. "Yeah," Riley said to the window.

The girls had escaped, fled the slumping Northern two-story with the parched yard and drafty rooms where they spent two nights of restless sleep. In the three years since their parents had moved, the house was already steeped with the stench of cigarettes. Their father had called it a 'steal', built in 1948 with keyholes that could be peeked through and a rusting bathtub with legs. "Smells like old books," Riley had said of the guestroom. The familiar 1970s furniture seemed foreign in a place other than their childhood home. The coffee table with Riley's crayon drawings underneath seemed out of place on the russet carpet. The pastel confetti design of the couch upholstery was a hideous contrast to the wood paneling and dingy floral wallpaper.

At the funeral reception, the relatives gathered on the slanted porch and in the driveway to smoke, dressed in outdated suits and slurping coffee. Inside, they perched along the walls,

picking from the buffet of finger food and scooping up three-bean salad. The remnants of Florida life haunted with shell-shaped trivets and potholders with palm patterns. The girls' mother, from whom Theresa took her stout strong figure and walnut-colored hair, drifted about the tables with one palm on her cheek, echoing her infamous mantra.

“What’s missing?” the woman said, seemingly more rapt by the dwindling cheese cubes than her husband’s first few hours under fresh soil.

“Nothing, Mom,” Theresa said. “There’s plenty.”

Her mother looked over at Riley, who was eating only the olives from a divided tray. “It’s good she’s finally putting on some weight,” she said. “You’ve looked after her.”

Theresa cleared her throat. “Yeah.”

“Your father was so protective. You remember what he was like after what happened,” her mother said, reaching down to shift the trays and pull at the table cloth. She usually brought up the only instance of advocacy their father had ever shown when the girls were feeling least fond of him. The time he almost killed the man who violated his daughter seemed an appropriate memory to evoke their sympathy. “I think that’s why he was never affectionate with her,” she said. “I think he was afraid to be, you know?”

“Mmm,” Theresa answered dryly.

The relatives gawked at Riley, remarking how well she turned out. They had all waited, aunts, uncles and cousins, for the child to go bad, to withdraw. After something like that, a girl was spoiled, no use as a grown woman. Molestation ruined lives, made therapists richer. The sisters kept their secret -- just how much of a woman Riley had become neatly tucked away under the black fabric and carefully planned attire. There had been a boyfriend, a mistake, and

now a remedy. They'd agreed on adoption, neither of them willing to consider the thought of vacuuming a life right from a person's insides like a stubborn carpet snag.

Riley wandered over, sliding along the folding tables and catching Theresa's 'let's get the fuck out of here' glance.

"You're sure you won't take anything?" their mother said, gesturing at the hoards of meat casseroles, baked macaroni and iced pastries.

"I'll take the chocolate cake," Riley said.

The exit was quick, a swooping motion, a hug for the widow and fast down the ice-slick porch steps. The creak of the Cutlass doors startled the smokers into a long curious stare at the two young women, still in funeral dress, backing the brown beast down the dual strips of gravel.

The general store was just outside of Wytheville, advertised in painted letters on a sign jutting out from the snow-dusted roadside. The girls were like crows in the aisles, black coats over black sweaters amidst the sleepy shelves of dry pasta and canned soup.

"That be all?" said the clerk. She was a middle-aged stick of a woman with hay for hair and a deep smoker's voice. Theresa brought out some cash while the clerk eyed her. "So, who died?" the woman asked, nodding at her sable outfit.

Theresa looked up. "My father," she said.

The woman frowned. "I'm real sorry," she said.

"It's O.K." Riley said, tapping her box of Snowcaps on the counter. "He was kind of an asshole."

"Riley," Theresa scolded.

The clerk was blank for a second, looking from one sister to the other as if waiting for a punch line. In silence, she rang up the items.

“That’s not very nice,” the woman remarked.

“Yeah, well, neither was he,” Theresa said.

As the clerk put them into a bag, she glanced out the glass door where the Cutlass could be seen, Florida plates in the cold afternoon sunlight. Theresa picked up the look on her face, a conversation the woman wanted but she didn’t. She placed a hand on the counter and thrust the money at her.

“You girls from the South?” she asked, taking the bills slowly.

“Born and raised, thank God,” Riley answered. “Our parents are from here, though.”

The clerk spoke between the punched buttons. “Guess it’s different there,” she said.

“Where I come from, kin is kin is kin, even the sons-of-bitches. You should both take time out to mourn him proper or you’ll regret it.”

Theresa took in a measured breath. “Thank you, Ma’am, we’ll consider that.”

Riley rolled her eyes and popped a couple of Snowcaps. The cash drawer finally opened, but the clerk hesitated. Green eyes under clumped mascara surveyed the girls. She had the change in her hand, nails with peeling red enamel lined up along the edges of the bills. There was the ghost of a smile on her thin mouth, resolute, like she had just decided something important.

“You should take the back road toward the 77,” the clerk said in a quiet voice. “Exit 14 just up a ways. It will save you heaps of time, just watch out for the glare.”

“The glare?” Riley repeated.

“There’s a spot on the ridge where the sun hits with a glare something fierce. This time of day and the right moment, you girls could find yourselves in a world of hurt.”

“Thank you,” Theresa said, impatient enough to take the bills from the woman’s hand.

Riley grabbed the bag and Theresa stuffed the change into her wallet. The girls pushed open the door, the rusted bells hanging from it giving off a strangled ringing.

“Have a good one,” the clerk’s throaty call echoed.

The road narrowed into a wet, charcoal-colored ribbon. Theresa navigated a solitary route to the highway, the ancient rock ledges and shadowy foothills giving way to various signs of country life. The roadside was flecked with forgotten debris, old rusted segments of railings, tractor tires and fossils of car wrecks; warped fenders and cracked hubcaps rusting in the piles of snow. The radio played static-plagued classic rock, the only tolerable station they had found on the Bluegrass-dominated dial.

“So, I guess we’re taking her advice,” Riley said, shaking Snowcaps from the box into her mouth.

“It would be smart if we want to keep that appointment tomorrow,” Theresa said.

A thin curl of smoke ascended from the leafless tops of the snow-custed trees. Crumbling barns with boarded windows materialized in the clearings. They passed under the shade of higher cliffs and the Cutlass pattered uphill. The landscape seemed to turn on its side, trees pointing straight on diagonal slopes. A sign peeked out from the snow bank, yellow, dirt-smearred and glassy.

“Bridge Ices,” Riley read aloud. “Sounds like a dessert.”

“Are you warm enough?” Theresa asked.

“I’m fine,” Riley said, staring out the window. “It’s so weird. We’ve never been up here in winter. I’ve only seen trees like this when Wal-Mart puts up their Christmas displays.” She pointed at the tall pitch pines like pins in the rising boulders. “It looks like powdered sugar.”

Theresa smiled. “Yeah.”

The silence of winter took up the air, the old car’s inept exhaust trailing its pollutants along the frosted fences. The prehistoric shade of damp-dark rocks and protruding ridges reached over the pavement like some watchful spirit.

“Ter,” Riley said. “We need to talk.”

“I swear to God you’re like a Cocker Spaniel. If you have to pee again...” Theresa started to say, but stiffened suddenly as the car barreled onto a bridge that crossed a shallow ravine. “Shit,” she said as the car lost traction and slid. All four tires rebelled, seizing and skating sideways across the bridge. “Shit!” she said again, the world a smear of white and gray as the car spun, trunk-first, toward the embankment at the edge of the railing.

“Don’t brake!” Riley blurted, gripping the chipped dashboard in front of her.

“I’m not!” her sister snapped back.

They both screamed as the car quaked and crunched something under it as it came to a rough halt on the embankment where it leaned, crippled, to one side. The windows fogged with steam from frantic breathing. Riley and Theresa were afraid to move. The car was still running, the smell of hot rubber and metal wafting in through the vents. The high jagged outcropping that formed the ridge faced them on the other side of the road.

“You O.K.?” Theresa said. Riley nodded, her hands still on the dash. Theresa checked the gauges, vintage rectangular consoles with needles that moved horizontally. “I think we lost a tire.”

With that, she pushed open the door. Riley moved to get out but was halted by a gesture. Theresa moved around the car, finding the mangled tire on the back left, pierced by an inch of rebar sticking out of a crumbling piece of concrete. There was no plugging it. Riley cranked down her window.

“What is it?” she said, poking her head out.

“Fuck,” Theresa said. “Fucking piece of shit.”

She looked up at the wet road. It was smooth like polished onyx, no snow or ice, just black and flat. It stretched on around the ridge, the chapped forest thin enough to see through from where the car stopped. Like a perfectly placed opening, the trees parted for a small farmhouse, the source of the curling chimney smoke.

“What did we slide on?” Riley asked.

“Hell if I know,” Theresa said. “But we don’t have a spare.” She looked left and right, the stony ravine yawning into shadow below. “I’ve got to go get help.”

“What?” Riley said, shoving open the long car door. “Are you kidding? From who?”

“I don’t know,” Theresa answered, reaching in for her purse.

“You know the only people out here are the ones who keep the body parts of their victims in glass jars in their refrigerators. They’ll make a necklace out of your teeth,” Riley said.

“Close the door,” said her sister, pulling her cell phone out of the purse. “Son of a bitch. No signal. That’s a shock.” Theresa looked up at the farmhouse, an eerie Americana portrait

framed by spidery branches. "I'm going up to that house to see if we can't get a ride back to the store."

"Can't we call Mom?" asked Riley.

"Not from this," she said, stuffing the phone back in the purse. "and she's hours away. We can't keep the car running and warm for that long."

"What happened to the spare?"

"Dad already used it a long time ago," Theresa said. "He said he'd get us another one before they left but he never did."

"I'm coming with you."

"No, you're staying in the car. It's too far to walk and too cold."

"Theresa!"

"Shut up and close the door, moron," Theresa said. The car door slammed indignantly and Theresa made her way up the road. "I'll be right back! Stop pouting!" she shouted over her shoulder.

"This is stupid!" Riley replied from the open window.

Theresa walked the blacktop toward the side road ahead, the air like ice in her nose and lungs. The emaciated fingers of trees made lines on the snow bank, and soon the Cutlass was out of sight behind the skeleton of the woods. The sisters separated.

Riley stewed in the huge front seat, turning down the heat on the faux wood-paneled console. She yanked off her cap and shifted on the vinyl. One hand went gently to her abdomen.

"Stupid!" she said aloud.

Once again she was forced to stay and wait while someone worked to care for her. She was always the skinny fragile girl, too weak and small to do for herself. Riley was the perpetual Holder – a flashlight for car work after sundown, open plastic bag for the lawn waste, the end of the measuring tape, the front door while the groceries were carried in. Sometimes she would grab for the heavy things, a jug of milk or a case of soda, but someone would take it from her. Now, she had something no one could help her carry, but someone was going to take that, too.

Riley stared at the chip in the dashboard, listening to the engine murmur. The radio station played Pink Floyd's "Brain Damage". The sound mingled with a louder rumble. She blinked and leaned forward in the seat. Her body stiffened in alarm as the rumble got louder. A truck came chugging slowly across the bridge. It was a monster against the pure white, serene scene, a shade of maroon eaten up by peeling paint, rust and claws of crusted dirt on the wheel wells. Soot-colored smoke choked out of the exhaust and a mess of tools and equipment was packed like a group of hitchhikers in the bed. It slowed and veered, easing to a stop at the edge of the bank.

The truck door opened. Riley shot up in the seat and cranked up the window with industrial force. Her hand snaked out to pound down the metal knob that locked her in. A man climbed out and coughed something up, spitting it casually onto the ground. He looked at her once and put on a pair of grease-covered work gloves. His face might have been young, even handsome, but was masked by smears of dirt and overgrown black brows. He was scrawny, the thin outline of legs under jeans and high sunken cheekbones dropping to a square jaw. He tromped over to the car in mud-caked boots, casual and unaffected by the cold.

She smiled uneasily as he approached. His open coat revealed faded, mismatched layers of plaid on plaid tucked in behind a metal belt buckle that read RANGER in Western font. He leaned down and knocked. Riley fumbled for the crank and rolled it down an inch.

“Trouble?” he said with a shred of sarcasm.

“Uh, my sister went to get help,” Riley answered.

The man was bent over, gloves on his knees. His face was tan and rugged, grooved here and there at the eyes and around the mouth. Feathers of oily black hair hung out of a camouflage cap with a WV logo. A necklace dangled between his shirt buttons, a coarsely hammered silver pendant in the shape of a bear claw.

“Yeah?” the man said, turning to spit again. “And where is help?” Riley’s breath caught in her throat. She could say nothing, but pointed instead to the farmhouse through the trees. The man glanced behind him. “That’s my place,” he said, and straightened up. “Why don’t you turn off the motor and come on out of there? Show me what we’re dealing with.”

The man vanished around the side of the car. Riley found she was obeying his suggestion, turning the key and throwing open the door, panicked that he was out of sight. She found him squatting at the ruined tire. He had taken his cap off as if paying respects to it, revealing the pressed hair underneath.

“We slid,” she said. “I guess we hit that block.”

He looked up at her. “You and your sister drive in cold weather much?”

“Not at all,” she said. “We’re from Florida.”

The man turned back to the tire, wrangling the block from out of the rubber. “Here for vacation?” he asked.

“Funeral,” she said.

“Family?”

“My dad.”

“Sorry to hear that,” he said.

“We weren’t close,” Riley answered.

The man pulled and yanked, making steady progress as the block came loose. “Let me guess,” he said between pulls. “Garden-variety Never-There-Dad, slept around, drank rivers of booze, wished you were sons and didn’t hide it?”

Riley blinked with surprise. “Yeah,” she said. “Pretty much. The day I got my period he bought me a football and a jock strap as a joke.”

The man was chuckling now. He gave another yank and the block came free. He tossed it by its rebar to the side of the embankment. “Those bastards are a dime a dozen. He beat on you?”

“No.”

The man stood up and walked past her toward his truck.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

“I got a tire at the house that should fit that heap.”

“Hey,” Riley called, chasing a step after him. “My sister!”

He turned around, looking at her square. He smiled, teeth stained by tobacco, one silver on the bottom row. “Just sit tight. I can’t help you both at the same time, can I?” he said, then patted Riley twice on the shoulder. “You’ll be all right without her.”

With that, he climbed up into the truck. The beast choked to life, gurgling like its owner and ejaculating smoke from the tailpipe. There was a loud bang as it backfired suddenly into the

still air. Riley started and backed up onto the bank as a dozen crows, perched on the branches jutting out from the rock, sprang up into flight. They complained, their odd call like an infant's short, annoyed outcry. The crows lifted and scattered high like black confetti.

Theresa trudged up a hill toward the farmhouse. The side road bent and morphed from blacktop to a white blanket of a yard smattered with the remains of dead weeds, their soggy ends upturned through the snow. The house was dilapidated, a two-story mishmash of boards and tarpaper rounded by a long front porch. An old dark red truck was parked outside the attached barn, loaded with tools and crusted with mud. Theresa stepped over a rusted-through muffler and several cut logs. Her heart jumped as someone appeared from the barn. The daylight was just beginning to turn, the sun a blood-orange shade of Mercurochrome.

A man was unloading the truck, plucking out scraps of metal and a post-hole digger and carrying them into the barn. He hadn't seen her.

"Excuse me," she called as he disappeared inside.

Theresa waited. He didn't return. She poked her head inside. She expected corrals and animals, buckets of feed and farm tools. Instead there were nests of car parts and junk metal, road signs with bullet holes nailed to the walls and a pile of tires and rims. A threadbare Ozzy Osbourne banner was hung by a large window that looked out on a back yard. Spots on the walls were marked with what looked like Native American symbols in colored chalk. There was a map of the region, corners curling, tacked to the back of the door. Music echoed from an old radio on a work bench in the corner.

"Help you?" a voice said.

Theresa jumped. The man stood behind her, adjusting his cap. He was heaped in washed-out flannel and a coat with a tear at the elbow, black hair stuffed up in a camouflage cap like he was hiding the remnants of a mutilated raven. He stared at her from beneath one lush dark eyebrow with eyes the same color, his look unabashed and piercing. His face with sharply drawn with steep cheekbones and a straight line for a mouth.

“Hello,” she said, exhaling steam. “Me and my sister broke down back there,” she explained, jabbing a thumb out the barn door. “I think we need a new tire,” she said, her eyes flicking to the pile of them behind him. “I have money,” she added quickly.

At that, the man hacked and choked, spitting a dark brown paste aimed at a metal pan near a stool with an ash tray perched on it. He missed. “What are you driving?” he asked.

“Cutlass, 78,” Theresa answered.

“Hmm,” he answered in a bark. “Let’s have a look-see.” He crossed the barn to the pile of tires and stared at them. Theresa ambled slowly over behind him. He sensed her and took one look back. “So, where are you from?” he said, squatting down to examine his collection. “Most folks who brave my stretch of road are from out-of-state.”

Theresa frowned. “Florida,” she said. “Someone told us this was a shortcut.”

The man laughed, slow and mocking as if at a private joke. He adjusted his cap. “Just Time’s way of telling you you’re not in control. You come all the way from Florida without a spare?”

Theresa shifted her weight, impatient now. “The car belonged to my dad. He used the original and never replaced it.”

“And where is he now?” he asked, rolling out a tire.

She hesitated. “He died four days ago,” she said.

“My condolences,” said the man. “He lived here, then?”

“Yes.”

“Let me guess,” he said, rolling the tire back. “You girls got up and out, wanted to be out on your own. I don’t blame you.”

“Actually, it was the other way around,” she said shortly. “Sir, I don’t mean to be rude, but my sister’s by herself and I’m not really much of a talker.”

The man laughed, a gurgling sequence of croaks, as he examined another tire. “Unless you can be in two places at once, you’ll have to wait.” The sun dimmed outside the window and a shadow crossed the frigid dirt floor. “Parents leaving the children? There’s a new one. I’ve got it now. You didn’t want to be *that* sister.”

“Excuse me?”

The man zeroed in on a choice, a large Goodyear leaning up against the wall under the banner. “You look early twenties,” he said in the middle of a strain to pick it up. “Sister’s younger, right?”

“Yeah.”

“You were old enough to be on your own, she wasn’t. Probably rescued her from having to go along. You didn’t want to be the one who turned your back. This will do,” he said, bouncing the tire on the ground and rolling it toward the door.

“Sir?” Theresa called after him, following him to the door.

“I’ve got to go to the house to get my jack,” he told her. “Wait here.”

He stopped the tire and turned toward her, so close Theresa took an instinctive step back. Then, he laid a gloved hand roughly on her shoulder. Theresa flinched, looking up at the dark liquid eyes under the dense brows. “This will only take a minute,” the man said with a sudden tone of compassion, like a doctor soothing a child before a painful shot.

A loud noise abruptly rang out over the hill, a gunshot sound that sent a flock of blackbirds up from the trees. Theresa jumped, eyes wide in alarm.

“What the hell was that?” she said, moving toward the door.

The man bent back down over the tire. “Probably someone scaring the crows off his land,” he said. “Happens all the time.”

He whistled as he rolled the tire out, a hollow wind following his vanishing and tossing wisps of snow in streaks onto the barn floor. A Pink Floyd song came on the radio. Theresa stood by the door, eyeing the flank of woods worriedly. A bright brass light arrested her from behind and she turned toward it. The sun was inching slowly down the weathered glass panel of the barn’s back window, streaking its beam between branches. Theresa put a hand up to her eyes. The light pierced in onto the wooden walls, blinding yellow-orange that drowned the shadows of corners and faded everything like a negative exposed.

Theresa crossed the room to the window where the banner hung. She shut her eyes, then opened only one in a squint to look outside. At the edges of the glare a figure moved in the yard behind the barn, back and forth across the beam turning it on, off, on. She leaned forward at the murky glass panel. Through some trick of the eye or effect of the light, she thought she saw grass. Theresa turned and walked toward the open doorway at the back of the barn. The rafters broke the sun into shards of brilliant amber as she approached the doorway. An unnatural wall of

warmth met her there, a humid, stifling wave that sucked up the icy air in her lungs, nose and throat. She choked and coughed. The figure cut the beam again, and the scene finally began to focus.

The bright white edges softened into the corners of a yard carpeted with flattened grass. A yellow aluminum shed took shape, then a pair of sable palms and an overgrown gardenia bush where an armadillo rooted in its fallen leaves. Theresa blinked rapidly as if to rid her eyes of a mirage. She saw the figure now, a man in loose, faded blue jeans bending down, then up, down again. He was shoveling. She knew then as she breathed in a waft of summer air thick with flora, soil and sweat that she was hallucinating. The man was her father.

Riley stood at the roadside as the truck putted out of sight around the corner. The afternoon was waning. She went back to the car and climbed in, rolling up the window and tucking her sweater in around her. The plastic vents blew her hair at one ear with heated air and she sang softly along with the radio.

“And if your head explodes with dark forebodings, too,” she sang in a whispering soprano. “I’ll see you on the dark side of the moon.”

The sun touched the tree tops, its flaming ball crossed by their spindly upper limbs. It slid languidly down in a slow fall and Riley tracked it like a glowing blob in a lava lamp. It reached the rocky crown of the outcropping across the road where the trees cleared.

Through the windshield it shined relentlessly, bright fire-colored light that filled up the car with atomic brilliance. Riley made a noise, a grunt of disapproval, and folded down the visor.

She was too short in her seat for its benefits. She leaned up and sat straight but the sun dropped lower.

“Son of a bitch, she wasn’t kidding,” she said aloud, blocking the glare with one hand. She shut her eyes and turned her head. The heater seemed to suddenly stop its guttural hum and Riley reached forward with the other hand, groping for the knobs and tapping at the vents. “Dammit, what now?”

She tried to open her eyes but the front seat was still washed in light. Her whole sleeved arm was in front of her face, a black bar between her eyes and the glare. There was something in the air, the smell of a burned wire from what she guessed was a tired heater. Riley felt a sting in her chest, a pang of abrupt familiarity with an old scent. It wasn’t a wire. She blinked, flipping up the visor, desperate to focus her surroundings. The outline of the windshield came back, the seats, the console and steering wheel. She felt for the dashboard in front of her. The jagged chip was gone, the entire surface smooth. She placed the smell with frightening certainty.

There was someone in the car with her, a hulking shadow in the driver’s seat. The air was warm, but not the mechanized warmth of a car heater. It was seasonal, springtime, and overwhelmed with the bittersweet odor of Macanudo and liquor-tainted breath. Riley felt her pulse sprinting in her neck, her layers of clothes suddenly oppressive as the figure next to her slowly materialized. First it was the suede patch on the elbow of a brown suit jacket, then the thinning blonde hair flecked with grey, damp at the ends from sweat and plastered to a tan neck. He was gripping the steering wheel so fiercely that his knuckles were white.

Riley knew the suit he wore, a relic taken from the depths of the closet on only three occasions. It was too warm for Christmas Eve service, and too late in the day for Easter Sunday.

The court date was April 7th, marked on the kitten calendar in the wallpapered kitchen. She remembered the blue flowered dress her mother chose for her the day she took the stand. She had rehearsed the facts with her lawyer, the ‘difference between a lie and the truth’. Riley held her breath, not daring to look out the windshield. She already knew where she was. The world took on a filtered light, everything topaz-hued like a television color setting gone too orange.

“Dad?” she said.

Theresa moved forward across the lawn, weighed down and sweating in her winter ensemble. He was alone, squatting at a rough hole he’d dug near the shed. A pile of dirt was at his side. She’d forgotten how young he once was, forgotten the beige color of his hair and his rugged face unmarked by a map of wrinkles. She thought of his corpse, sunken purple cheeks and wiry peppered hair against the satin pillow. Her mother buried him in that ridiculous brown suit from the seventies, its color a nemesis for his post-mortem ashy complexion made clown-like by rouge. She could barely remember the man in front of her, no more than forty, as if she was reliving a moment in some old photograph.

Theresa observed him. A visitation, she thought, her mind’s conjuring of some last wish-fulfillment or chance to tell him something. She was no stranger to visions, a retired dabbler in pot-smoking and occasional acid tripping. But this was controlled, coherent, a flashback, but not hers. Her father didn’t speak to her nor did he look up. A lump of fur lay near the dirt pile, the stiff carcass of a black and white cat, mouth ajar, waiting to be buried. Theresa’s breath caught in her throat and the smell of rotting flesh finally reached her. She put her sleeve up to her nose and her eyes watered.

She knew this particular afternoon. She and Riley wouldn't be home from the park yet. It was the summer he was unemployed, using the mornings to sand down the Cutlass for some body work. He would assign each daughter a panel and showed them how to work in circles. Theresa remembered how grown-up she felt, fine dust from the paint powdered on her hands, the marks of actual labor. She and Riley saw it as a way to prove to him that he didn't need a son. It was after he started leaving them to it, alone in the garage, that Theresa realized he was having an affair with the Avon lady who brought her mother's supply of Skin So Soft. "I'll be right back," he'd say after three beers and vanish for half an hour down the street.

Her father dropped back against the side of the shed and plucked a cigarette from the pack on the ground. "Girls," he said, putting the cigarette in his lips.

Theresa straightened to attention at his voice. She looked around but there was no one else in the haloed afternoon. He flicked open his gunmetal Zippo and lit the cigarette. "Selma's gone to heaven," he said, drawing in a drag. "Selma...fuck." Her father blew out the smoke, then gestured with the cigarette hand as if making a speech. "The cat passed away today, girls. She was poisoned by the neighbors, Jesus Christ," he said, stopping himself and shaking his head.

He took another drag and looked down at the cat. Theresa knelt across from him and followed his gaze. Selma's whiskers were warped and flaccid. Her eyes were half-shut, the retinas bent and misshapen like dried-out contact lenses. Her fur stirred in the breeze. "I'm sorry, girls," her father said, his voice changing. Theresa looked up at him. "Selma got into something in the garage. I spilled some antifreeze." he said, staring at the cat with a distance in his blue eyes. "The antifreeze got knocked over."

The cigarette grew a long ash and broke off as he leaned forward. He placed his huge rough hand on the cat's belly fur and stroked it gently. Theresa stared, bewildered, as her father petted the cat's corpse and rubbed its ears, the lifeless face aimed up at him. It was he who'd found her trapped in the undercarriage of the Cutlass when she was a kitten. It was his toolbox she picked as her favorite place to sleep. Selma's tongue hung white-pink and shriveled from between her fangs.

"Dad," said Theresa, but he didn't look at her.

He put his cigarette out in the dirt and lifted the cat to his lap. Selma's head flopped to one side and he cradled it in the crook of his arm. "Stupid fucking piece of shit cat," he said. He stroked Selma's head and scratched under her chin. Her mouth was already crawling with tiny ants that darted up and over her father's wrist. "Girls, the cat got into some antifreeze," he said, the cold tone she knew well returning. "I'm sorry, but she's gone. I already buried her out back."

"Dad," Theresa said, standing up. "Dad, it's O.K."

The sun crouched behind the yellow shed, tipping the weathered roof in saffron and shining once more in Theresa's eyes. She squinted and stepped back a few paces, briefly aware of her father's figure lowering the cat into the hole in the ground. The glare came again, drenching everything in light. A sudden torrent of chilled air swallowed up the scent of overgrown sod and Selma's rot. She took another step back, hearing the crunch of snow under her boots and breathing in the winter like needles in her throat.

"You about done?" said a voice.

The line of pitch pines reclaimed the horizon. Theresa blinked at the disturbance. Her eyes were fixed wide on the promptly changed yard before her, the stretch of snow like smooth

icing where the patches of crabgrass were only seconds ago. The stark white vista was empty again of life and movement, only the hollow wail of the wind coming down from the Virginia foothills. The man with the camouflage cap was at the doorway of his barn. He leaned with moderate patience on its frame, like someone waiting to use an ATM or telephone. He cleared his throat and spit again.

“What?” she said, blinking away cold beginnings of tears.

“Won’t find a tire out here,” he said, gesturing for her to come inside.

Theresa turned, brown hair blown across her forehead. She looked at him with a glimmer of accusation. There was a question waiting, an absurd one. “Did you...” was all that came.

“Ready to go, then?” said the man with a spike of sarcasm.

They eyed each other, curious detective and stubborn criminal. There was something deliberate about it all. She could hear the radio playing the last few lyrics. *And if the cloud bursts, thunder in your ear...* Theresa finally nodded.

“Yes,” she said.

Riley felt the winter dissipate from the air in the car. The driver’s side window was down. She was unmoving in the seat, eyes on her father’s statue-like vigilance. There was something between them, the shadow of an object in the nimbus of the setting sun. It was a long stick that jutted from the floor where her feet were. She looked down to find the spade of her father’s worn shovel, the one he kept in the shed. Riley’s breath came short and fast. That ominous afternoon came back to her in a surge.

When they all returned home from the trial her father had swept up the shovel and got back in the Cutlass. She remembered her mother on the phone with the police, telling them she knew ‘exactly where he’s going’.

“Dad?” Riley said in a stifled whisper.

He stared out the windshield, his handsome suntanned face tinted by the twilight. Riley swallowed the dry air in her throat and matched his line of sight. The street was empty, a quiet neighborhood where families were at dinner, television screens glowing in front windows. There was the house, brick-paneled and littered with plastic yard ornaments. There was the house where she spent the summer before first grade at a day care run by Henry and Eloise Pickering, a retired couple in their fifties with a large back yard and a thirteen-kid client list. She had been too young to go to camp with Theresa and they didn’t charge much.

“Dad, we have to leave.” Riley said to him. Her father glanced in the rear-view mirror. She jumped as his rough hand reached out to grip the handle of the shovel when a car came into sight. It passed. He relaxed, but his hand stayed. He brought the handle closer to him and Riley scooted frantically over and pulled her feet in. “What are you doing?” she said.

“You son of a bitch,” her father hissed, his huge hands clamped around the shovel, twisting his palm around it. “I’ll cave in your fucking face, so help me.”

Riley was perplexed, never more frightened of him than now. Only once had she been afraid he’d hit her, woken in the middle of the night by loud banging on her bedroom door. Her father had pointed down at his bloody toe, the nail twisted and cracked by the edge of the vacuum cleaner she’d been asked not to leave in the hall. He’d been half-asleep and hung-over

on his way to the bathroom. His voice was a storm, cursing and monstrous then like it was at this moment.

She looked back up at the house, the stone walk she'd taken every day up to the screen door. Eloise gave them all cookies, the flower-shaped ones with holes in the middle. After naptime they went outside to the swing set. Henry would call Riley into the den and pull her onto his lap. He took up the biggest picture book from the stack to hide what he was doing. He told her she was the prettiest, keeping her with him until Eloise would pass the room. "You'd better stop it, Henry," she'd say.

There were sweat pits under her father's arms. The oaks that dotted the narrow road cast shadows and dropped acorns on the pavement with a quiet tapping. Her father drew a deep breath in through his nose.

"Come on, goddammit," he said.

The Pickering driveway was vacant. They hadn't come home yet from the courthouse. The judgment had taken their business, but Riley's testimony alone wasn't enough to convict. At five years old, she didn't know. The urinary tract infections and raw skin at bath time made her parents ask the questions. The answer turned them into manic, outraged strangers, her mother weeping, yelling and shaking her. *Why didn't you tell us?* Riley couldn't understand what she'd done wrong. It was just one more unpleasant thing an adult made her do, like forcing down a whole helping of Aunt Fran's egg casserole or having her temperature taken in the rear-end.

"Just let him go," Riley said, eyeing the shovel.

"I'm sorry, baby," he said suddenly to the windshield.

"Dad?"

“I’ll kill him, chop his fucking head off like the snakes.” he said.

He jerked the splintered stick back and forth in his hand. It was then she knew why he’d chosen the shovel. Its sharp end had decapitated five black racers and one rattler that had ventured onto their back patio. Riley remembered then, a thousand whiskey sours ago he had once been her hero. He struck the handle on the dashboard with a horrifying primal grunt. Riley sucked in a breath and recoiled as far over in the front seat as she could go. He struck it again and harder as if hacking at a tree. The whole surface rattled from the impact, his blows so forceful that a dent was forming.

“Stop!” Riley cried out, her sinuses swelling with tears. “Stop it!”

His rugged, tanned hands clenched in rage. The blue eyes she’d inherited were glazed with near-madness.

“Fuck!” he said as he whacked the dashboard once more.

A tiny black flake flew from its facade, leaving the familiar fissure. Riley was sobbing, pasted against the passenger window. Her bowed his head and traced his fingers tightly through his hair as if about to rip it out. The light gleamed through the glass, father and daughter heaving in the stifled heat of the old car. The siren startled them both.

The police unit had eased up behind them, primary blue lettering and a quick bark on the megaphone. The officer, a young man with a mustache, approached the window. Her father wouldn’t look at him.

“Sir,” said the officer. “Do you live here, Sir?”

“No,” her father said quietly.

“Is everything thing all right?”

“I’m fine.”

The officer glanced down at the seat beside him. Riley finally saw the flask wedged in where the seatbelt was tucked. From the side mirror, another unit could be seen rolling to a stop.

“Been drinking?” asked the officer.

“Yeah,” her father answered, finally looking at him level. “But I’m not driving, am I? Nothing wrong with sitting in my car, is there?”

“Your wife called us, sir,” the officer said gently. Her father halted. The look on the young man’s face was telling. They knew why he was there. They knew what he had planned, and they wanted to leave him to it. The officer gave a look at the other squad car and nodded. “I’m giving you a warning,” he said. “I think maybe we should take you home, have someone come get your car. Don’t want you to get yourself into any trouble. What do you say?”

Riley blinked, wiping her running nose as the sun coasted down the window behind her. The garish glow struck the mirror on her father’s side. She turned from it, hearing the clunky mechanism of the car door as it opened. The officer muttered something like ‘there you go, sir, watch your head.’ Like a thin stripe across the blinding white-orange, the long skinny silhouette of the shovel handle dropped to the side. Riley shielded her face, sure she could still feel the spade at her boot as the sunlight dropped out of the mirror. Under the cover of her arms her breath was steam again against the wool sweater.

The cold crept in, freezing the sweat on her neck and infiltrating her clothes. Riley was trembling, her breath still coming fast and hard as the glare passed and the grey tones washed out the amber. The car seats seemed to fade rapidly before her eyes, the steering wheel stained with grease finger marks and the faux wood finish of the console scuffed in a few more places. Riley

wiped her eyes. The shovel was gone. The massive Florida oaks and sleepy neighborhood was replaced by the skeletal winter woods beyond the skid marks on the road.

Riley's eyes darted about. She looked up cautiously like a spooked animal. The driver's seat was empty and the Pink Floyd tune was ending. She reached out to touch the worn-out vinyl, suddenly desperate for the smell of Cutty Sark and settled-in cigar smoke. Her fingers went to the dashboard. In a quick sequence of moves she had thrown open the door, gathered her hair behind her and leaned into the snow to stain it with vomit.

Theresa held on to the doorframe of the old truck, her spine stiff against the bench as the driver seemed to catch every bump and pothole. The rigid, severed black foot of a crow hung by a leather cord from the rear-view. The man was whistling again over the radio chatter. The sky was darkening. She stole a glance at him, noticing his silver necklace, some kind of paw print pressed into a flattened disk.

"There she is," he said on the end of another short hack as they approached the Cutlass.

The car sat, pathetic and limp in the snow bank as the sunset lingered on its rusting hood. Riley stood on the roadside and gave a half-hearted wave. The man made a rough turn onto the side of the road and stopped short, sending Theresa jerking forward. She recoiled, revolted by the crow's foot as it swung toward her head. The man huffed a hard warm breath into his gloved hands and clapped them together. He pushed open the door and swung out, wet boots hitting the ground with a heavy thump. He was already rummaging in the bed of the truck in a clamor of metal against metal. Theresa climbed out and rejoined her sister. Riley had turned off the engine.

"That was quick," Riley said, nodding toward the truck.

“The guy has a pile of tires at his place. He’s going to put one on for us,” said Theresa.

“I guess there are a lot of wrecks on this road,” said Riley, jutting her chin at the gaping ravine and the scraps of fenders and taillights. “Way to capitalize.”

The RANGER on the man’s belt buckle cast a gold gleam as he turned around. The girls moved back as he went to work shoving the jack under the car. He whistled loudly over the sound of its intermittent creaking.

“How much did he say?” Riley leaned over to whisper.

“He didn’t, yet,” Theresa replied out of the side of her mouth.

He had the car up in moments, wheeling off the bolts of the rim and pulling it off with a growl. They stood awkwardly while he stomped back to his truck and plucked a long crow bar from the nest of tools. He tossed it over, startling the girls back further. The man jerked down the bed and slid out the tire, bringing it to the ground and rolling it recklessly down the bank.

“Just take a minute!” he called to them.

With that, he positioned the rim on the ground and wrestled the tire over it, shoving, pulling and wrenching it like a bear with the skin of its kill. He kicked at it, then swept up the crow bar. The man wiped the fringes of black hair from his forehead and tucked the hooked end under the rubber.

“Jeez, I hope he’s not going to use that to bludgeon us,” Riley half-joked.

They were out of his ear-shot now. Theresa shot a look at her. Riley’s pretty face was patched with red, the eyes swollen and moist. She swayed a little on her feet. Her hair was pulled over to one side, hanging just so over the side where Theresa stood.

“You all right?” Theresa asked, reaching out to flip it behind her shoulder.

Riley shrugged her away. "I'm fine."

Theresa's brown brows drew together, unsatisfied. She knew the weak posture, the unfocused stare. "Did you throw up?"

Riley's eyes flicked up at her, guilty as a child's when caught at mischief. Her mouth opened and she stuttered for an answer. "Yeah, a little," she said. She smiled casually then, and put a hand on her gut. "Occupational hazard."

"You're five months," Theresa said. "That stuff is supposed to be over by now."

Riley swallowed. The sisters locked eyes, each searching the other for a secret.

"Almost done!" the man called. There was a loud pop of rubber and scrape of metal. The tire was on the rim. "You girls are lucky," he said, nodding at the steep ravine that seemed to breathe in and out with the wind. "This bridge likes to have its way with people."

The girls stood by while he lifted it onto the car, spinning on the bolts with natural ease. In moments he was done, clapping snow from his hands and lowering the car back to the bank. He chucked his tools back in the truck but didn't take the mutilated tire. Theresa stepped forward and dug a hand into her purse. The man turned and adjusted his hat, smearing the strands of hair behind his ears.

"What do I owe you?" she said.

"Oh, yeah," the man said as if payment was some last chore that burdened him. "Um," he said, looking around at the road as if the answer was somewhere in the landscape. His gaze rested on the Cutlass again, peering into the back window as if he'd spotted a gem. "Take that chocolate cake off your hands and we'll call it square," he replied.

The girls looked in at the back seat. The suitcases had leaned and fallen in the wreck, half on the seat and half on the floor. The devil's food cake was surreally unharmed, sitting prettily on its designated side with cellophane still clinging to its clear icing. The sisters traded a look.

"Are you sure?" Theresa said.

"Miss, I live on canned goods and powdered milk. It's too far a haul for something fresh-baked and I don't waste fuel on an oven," he said impatiently. "We got a deal or what?"

Theresa stared, open-mouthed, until Riley gave her a nudge. "Whatever you say," she answered finally. "We really appreciate this," she added, opening the door and taking out the cake for him.

The man was smitten with it, taking it from her like a fragile newborn. "That's the stuff," he muttered, opening his truck door and laying it on the bench. He climbed in and started up the truck. Another loud bang pierced the coming evening, the black exhaust staining the snow at the edge of the bank. Both girls drew back, Theresa instinctively gripping Riley's arm. The man leaned an arm out the window.

"You ladies take care," he said. "I've seen black ice do worse to most folks. Someone was looking out for you today."

He put the truck in gear and tipped his hat, smiling wildly with his silver tooth. The man took off down the road, leaving the smoke in his wake as the truck turned the corner. The girls stood on the bank as the moon started to rise, lusterless white light bathing the higher rock.

"Riley," Theresa said quietly. "Did that guy come by while I was gone?"

"Yeah," she said. "He got the block out from under the tire," Riley told her, pointing at the concrete he had tossed aside. "Didn't he tell you?"

“No,” Theresa answered, her gaze resting blankly on it.

With that, she got into the car. Riley followed and the engine turned over. Theresa turned on the heater and eased the car up the bank. She turned the old Cutlass onto the road. Their demolished tire rested on the ground, joining the rest of the debris that littered the skirt of the bridge. The sky was darker now, shadows rising in the woods. The outcropping became a wraithlike black shape out the windows as the moon climbed. She clicked on the headlights.

“Ter?” Riley said.

“Yeah.”

Riley took up her snowcaps and stared at the box, tracing the logo with her finger.

“He wasn’t all bad, you know,” she said.

The engine leveled into a hum, the heat a cloud of steam from the tailpipe that looked like a spirit loitering at the back of the car.

Theresa put the car in gear. “I know,” she said.

“Ter?”

“Yeah.”

Riley hesitated, turning the box slowly in her small hands. “I don’t want to meet the Mitchells tomorrow,” she said. “I’m not giving it away.”

The car was warm again. The boney trees opened up in front of them and the hollow call of an owl could be heard. The Alleghenies vanished into darkness. Only the barely visible outline of their peaks remained looming in the distance. Theresa didn’t look over.

“You’re sure,” Theresa said. It wasn’t a question.

Riley looked up. "I'm not like him," she said. "And neither are you. I think we should stop being so afraid."

Theresa met her sister's eyes, large and doll-like with quiet wisdom behind them. She remembered when this delicate creature kicked her from her mother's womb, kicked her hard as she put an ear to the stretch-marked skin. She should have known, then, that Riley would need only so much protection. They were who they were because he was who he was.

Theresa checked the rear-view, leaning suitcases obscuring the bridge behind them. The road glowed red in the taillights and she took her foot off the brake. *Kin is kin is kin.*

"O.K." said Theresa.

She drove carefully away down the winding blacktop, the bright lights of the tired old Cutlass slicing the dark. The sugary smell of the devil's food cake still lingered. Riley looked back, eyeing the space between the luggage through the window. She could see the smooth frozen slab of the bridge like looking through a keyhole. On its deceptive surface the moon was reflected, a pale watchful eye against a backboard of stars.

PLYWOOD KINGDOM

We waited until evening to go shopping. The grocery store is a disturbed ant hill, people scrambling over one another for the last pack of bottled water and batteries. Hurricane readiness lists are taped up by the registers. My hair still smells sickly, ammonia-floral from the red streak job I gave it a few days ago. I thought for sure Lenny hated the color it but he hasn't said so. Change usually makes men short-circuit.

Trey tosses a package of oatmeal pies into the cart. There isn't much left in the snack aisle. There are opened bulk boxes on the scuffed tile floor, people too desperate to wait for the stock shift to load them onto the shelves. Lenny starts a football game with Trey, telling him to go long for a cylinder of those Latin cookies.

"Woman!" Lenny says to me as he backs up over my shoe. "We're trying to play ball here."

"You're going to break the cookies," I say.

"Small price for the thrill of the game," Lenny says with mock gravity.

"Oh, my God, will you guys hurry up? This thing is supposed to make landfall in six hours and we have nothing but junk in here," I tell him.

Lenny catches the cookies and hauls them back. Trey jumps for them at the other end of the aisle. “Sweet!” Lenny compliments. “Excuse me,” he says to me, raising a hand. “I don’t appreciate your attitude. I think the rudeness is uncalled for.”

His tone of voice is serious. A woman looks over, her toddler in the cart seat. Lenny catches another throw.

“We need toilet paper,” I say.

“Gone,” says Lenny.

“You’re fucking kidding.”

“It’s in the cart, freak,” he tells me, nodding at the rolls peeking out from beneath the potato chips.

“Jesus, so unfunny,” I tell him.

I get the cousins to the check-out line. The cashier is young, pretty, frantic. Here it comes. Lenny says hello. She flashes a smile.

“So, do you get, like, first dibs on stuff because you work here?” Lenny asks, plucking out the debit card from his fraying, skull-themed wallet.

“I wish,” she says.

The clerk slides our items over the laser, each one beeping in sequence with the chorus of other checkout lines, some pissy customer’s rant heard five down from us. A baby cries.

“That sucks,” Trey joins in. “Can’t you steal it or something?”

The boys begin their comedy routine, always edging flirtation, making the clerk blush and laugh. I stand stoically by, watching the backs of their heads like black mops, Lenny’s hair longer and pony-tailed. The detector goes off by the exit. I catch the guys eyeing two college

girls with UCF T-shirts and rolled-down gym shorts that stop at the door. The girls hesitate, looking at their bags and back at the registers. No one takes action so they keep going. The clerk rings us up, tells Lenny the total.

“How about a fiver now and I’ll pay the rest later?” he says. She laughs. “How about an autographed photo? We’re musicians,” Lenny says, throwing an arm around Trey.

“Yeah, starving ones,” I throw in.

“Don’t listen to her, she’s just the groupie,” Lenny says, jutting a thumb at me.

“Just pay the poor girl,” I say.

The woman with the toddler is behind us. She looks sympathetic. She thinks I’m in an abusive relationship. No one gets us. It’s theatrics. Most people who meet Lenny and me think we’ll never last. We’ve been together since high school, eight years. The clerk looks at me, wonders which dark-haired clown is mine. Trey lays it on thicker than Lenny, leaning in on the counter and putting up an act. Lenny just sticks to jokes, stays genuine.

“Fine,” Lenny says with mock-resentment, taking the cash from his wallet.

“Hey, cool tattoo,” the clerk says to Lenny.

The order of things shifts as she reaches out to grab his arm. Did she guess wrong or is it a challenge? I size her up. Challenge. Dammit, now I have to throw down.

“Thanks,” Lenny says, glancing down at the biohazard emblem he got at sixteen.

Trey butts in. “I drew that for him,” he says, pointing.

“He’s really good,” I tell her. “Babe, didn’t the guy at the tattoo place want to hire him when he saw the sketch?” I ask Lenny.

It's not that difficult really, to claim him. I don't have to get catty. I just have to showcase a little history, throw in some pet names. The clerk lets go, takes his money.

"Oh, really?" she says with faux enthusiasm.

"Shit," I continue. "We still have a couple of windows that need plywood. We got enough sheets, right?"

"Yeah, I think," Lenny says. "I'll put them up when we get home."

Yes, bitch, we live together. I toss one more in for posterity. "You did our bedroom windows already?" I say.

"Yes," he answers on a whine like a child being nagged.

Lenny knows what I'm doing. He lets me, likes the show.

"You guys drive safe," the clerk says as we push the basket away.

It's already raining, droplets on the windshield of Lenny's old Camaro making a Monet out of the street lights and passing cars between the swipes of the wiper blades. We pass the gas station. All the lanes are blocked off by yellow tape and a sign written in thick marker on the squeegee box reads NO MORE GAS. Lenny already filled up days ago. The guys at the garage let him have a couple of days off and the craft store where I work closed early. Trey is in the back seat singing along to the radio, badly.

"Dude, my ears," I tell him. He leans up and sings the AC/DC tune loud and right at me. I recoil. "My God, it's a good thing you play bass!"

Trey is the third wheel, our sitcom sidekick, Lenny's goofy cousin from Trinidad. The differences are subtle. Trey is darker, like a Brazilian, and Lenny's light. Lenny lost his parents'

accent long before I met him, and Trey's still rears its head on certain vowels. When he is particularly fired up, he calls everyone 'dread'. Trey's dad is a petroleum engineer and used to send him up to stay with Lenny while he was away on jobs. After high school, Trey found an art school in central Florida so he wanted to move here. He needed a job and a place to stay. Lenny and I had a cramped apartment and our first year was almost up.

It all happened in a blur. Lenny pitched the idea like a pro, the three of us renting a house together. One extra paycheck would do the trick, and I was smitten with his vision. Lenny's tools would be in a garage instead of shelved in the living room. I wouldn't have to listen to the hip-hop the frat boys upstairs played at two in the morning. The only loss, primarily Lenny's, was the view of the building next to us where a girl got undressed in front of her window at the same time every night. He would invite friends over for it. It was a sacrifice they all mourned when we moved out.

Trey is a fairly decent roommate. He pays his rent on time, takes the trash out and can make macaroni pie and beef curry. He had taken a couple of classes at the art school but his grades were less than ideal. He decided to take a semester off and go full time at the movie theater, so we all had the benefit of his free tickets. But, there is this one weird thing that Lenny warned me about. Trey has a bit of a sleepwalking problem. The stories are that he is usually found standing outside, stripped to his underwear and muttering nonsense. I was paranoid at first, every midnight trip to the kitchen plagued with the vision of that long rail body mostly nude in the refrigerator light. But, in the three years we've lived together it only happened once.

It was a Saturday morning and the cat woke me, little pads on the comforter and whiskers on my face. I got up to feed him and noticed sunlight from under the door leading out to the

garage. We all sleep late on weekends so I wondered what was up. Trey had raised the garage door. There he was in his tighty-whities, looking out at our street, arms at his side.

“Trey?” I said. At first he didn’t answer. He was shaking his head. “What are you doing up?” I asked him.

“I can’t get my head around it,” he said. “Just can’t get my head around it.”

I risked a step forward. “What?”

“I can’t believe he’s gone. Fucker wasn’t wearing a helmet.”

“Who?”

“You always wear a helmet, dread, always. Can’t forget the armor.”

I was already rushing back inside to wake Lenny. I stood back while Len ushered Trey back to his room. He did it so naturally, like it was the hundredth time, like a father putting a child to bed after a nightmare. I stood in the hallway while he settled Trey back onto his black bedspread.

“Is he all right?” I whispered to Lenny.

Lenny turned and put a finger to his lips. From his tone of voice I could tell he was asking Trey questions.

“Charley,” said Trey. “Can’t forget the armor.”

Charley was once a good friend of ours, a late night staple who always came over with a pack of Modelo and learned to ride a motorcycle from Lenny. Only a couple months after Charley got his bike he met a girl and vanished off the map. We hadn’t seen him around for a long time and he hadn’t called. Lenny and I went back to bed after Trey fell asleep. Later that day the accident was on the news. They showed Charley’s yearbook picture and everything. He

lost it on I-4 and hit the guard rail. His girl was on the back but she lived, broke a hip or something. Charley hit the rail with his head, caved in his skull. The paramedics said the rest of him was pretty much unharmed. The helmet would have saved his life.

I was pretty creeped out by Trey for a while but Lenny tells me that's just a weird thing he does. When he finally woke up he remembered nothing, shocked when we told him about Charley. Trey knows he sleepwalks when he wakes up in his underwear, his usual bedtime garb made up of baggy shorts and superhero T-shirts. He doesn't know about his own premonitions, though, and Lenny doesn't see the use in telling him.

The wind picks up speed on our way home, making the car sway and the rain bend. The neighbors are pulling their porch furniture inside and putting the last few boards on their windows. The car doors are hard to open and the plastic grocery bags flap wildly as we dash inside. The trees out back are already moving like Stevie Wonder at the piano. We turn the news on. Jim Jenkins is the weather guy we've gotten to know well. He has a hell of a brush-over dyed brown and a flat wide nose. He always sounds like he's stuffed-up and we've seen him wear the same blue paisley tie three times this week.

"Jim looks tired," Lenny says.

"Yeah, poor guy," I say.

Hurricane Aida is approaching the coast, the big bright green blob a rotating swirl on the virtual map, rain bands over Daytona Beach and Ormond. Jim performs his magic, makes the screen change with his hand-clicker and gestures over the areas highlighted with warnings. His nasal monotone trains us to pick out the more important information. 'Hit East Orlando at about

ten o'clock tonight' and 'winds at a hundred and thirty miles an hour' make us perk up. The guys leave me to put away the food and perch on the couch arms to watch the rest of the newscast.

"This is the end," Lenny says dramatically. "We are all going to die tonight. Can I at least invite the store clerk over for a threesome?" he says, looking over his shoulder at me.

"What about me, man?" says Trey.

"I'll pass her your way when we're done with her," Lenny assures him. "I won't let Elsie wear her out, I promise," he says, jutting a thumb at me.

"We have to make sure Ringo doesn't get out," I remind Lenny, referring to our cat.

Ringo reclines on one of the six oversized speakers placed like Stone henge all around the living room in between bookshelves and furniture. He yawns and stretches, his orange ears retracting for a second then popping forward again.

"Hey, do you think if we toss him high in the air," Trey begins, pointing at the cat, "he'll get sucked up into the storm and rotate back to us?"

"Dude, that would be so cool," Lenny answers.

"You guys are retarded," I tell them, stashing away a box of crackers.

"We're so doing it," Lenny says. "Right when the storm comes. Maybe we can even fly him like a kite. Kitty, kitty, kitty," he calls.

Ringo flicks his tail but doesn't budge. I wouldn't put it past them. Trey and Lenny were partners in crime long before I came along, indulging in stupid nighttime pranks and stunts that usually sent them tearing through the woods between neighborhoods and hiding behind houses from whatever police unit took the call from their victims. Lenny still has pieces of his 'uniform'

tucked away in the closet, a set of black and camouflage clothes he wore on the nights he and Trey got bored and snuck out during summer to terrorize unsuspecting suburbians.

The story I've had to hear a million times involves a wooden yard cow and a group of rednecks. Lenny and Trey were about thirteen, spending the night at a friend's house in Bithlo. The three of them were roaming the woods between trailers and houses when Lenny heard southern rock blaring from a lit back porch. It was his bright idea to screw with the half-drunk residents. He crept up to the yard, grabbed the yard cow and tossed it high into the air. Trey yelled out "Moo!" and the boys ducked out of sight just as the cow smacked the concrete slab with a loud thwack.

A large, tank-top clad man burst out through the screen door, fists at the ready. He eyed the scene but could find nothing but the battered lawn ornament lying sideways on the ground. The man muttered obscenities and trudged back inside. Of course, they had to do it again. Lenny waited, crept out of the woods and up to the yard. "Moo!" Thwack. Three of them came out that time, cursing and shouting at the woods, pointing with their beer bottles at the dark flank that hid Lenny, Trey and their friend. One had a baseball bat.

"I'm calling the cops, mother fucker!" the large one said to the air and went back inside.

"Show your face, pussy!" another called out.

Lenny swore he'd never been so close to pissing himself when the one with the bat inched up to the woods. The boys were all dressed in black and crouched behind a fallen tree trunk, but Lenny is still convinced that the guy saw him, looked right at him, and slowly turned. It was the friend who ruined everything, a skinny kid whose dad, ironically, worked at the T.G. Lee factory. He panicked and sprinted, cracking every loose branch under his boots.

“Godammit!” Lenny said and grabbed Trey by the collar, yanking him up from the ground.

The redneck with the bat was alert again. “Hey!” he shouted after them.

The boys ran like hell. Lenny always adds the part where he was sure ‘that dude’s footsteps were right on our heels’. They all came to a halt when the skinny kid hit a low branch, smacking his forehead in the darkness and falling back onto the dirt. When they stopped for him they realized there was no one after them. The porch light was distant and there were no other sounds in the woods but their tired breathing.

This is one of the gems I get to hear in new company when the cousins are together. Lenny is the better story-teller, more reliable because he doesn’t embellish the way Trey does. The two of them have a set dynamic when they tell it, the same rise and fall of details, the same interjections. When I first met Trey I was jealous of it. It seemed to take forever for Lenny and me to have our own stories, and somehow they still pale in comparison.

The plywood starts to rattle outside on our back patio. The plastic chairs are stacked in a tower that looks like a person standing there. The house lights flicker for a second. I figure it’s time to get out the candles just in case.

“Oh, damn,” Lenny says. “Time for the show.”

He digs out his cigarette pack from his pocket and slides open the glass door. Trey follows. I see the tiny glowing embers of the cigarettes as they light up, the ends glowing bright when they each take a drag. The wind starts to howl and the front door hiccups from the suction. I get the candles out of the drawer in the kitchen – an array of old decorative votives and pillars with a variety of scents. I case the house, placing one in every room, and then I join the guys.

There are two glass doors that open onto the patio, one from the living room and one from our bedroom. A large sheet of plywood hides the one to our bedroom. The guys left the other unfortified so they could come out and smoke. Lenny and Trey are playing with the flashlights, clicking them on and off and shining light in each other's faces. Trey shines his at me.

"Dude," I say, squinting. "Is it safe out here?"

Trey shines the light on his own face and makes a claw with his hand. "Only if you are already dead!" he says in a hissing voice.

"Storm won't be here for a while. Just wind for now," Lenny says. "Maybe we'll get a tornado. Shit, remind me to turn the AC down all the way."

"I think that chick wanted me," Trey says on the end of a drag. "The one from the store. She was eyeing me, trying to be cool but I know she was thinking about it." It's too dark for Lenny and me to trade looks, the usual ritual when Trey gets on like this. "I got her and the one from the Roti shop now. You know the Guyanese girl with the big earrings? She's always all on me, dread. Maybe I can hook up with both of them."

I know the Guyanese girl. She works at the West Indian restaurant we three visit every weekend for the guys' fix of island cuisine. I've been eating Lenny's mom's food since I was sixteen so I'm pretty familiar with the menu. It's always a treat to order after being leered at by the irregular patrons who wonder what the white girl is doing within ten feet of all those spices. I request dhall puri, phoulorie and aloo pie with as much fluency as I would a cheeseburger, and usually add what they call 'plenty pepper'. When a white girl says plenty pepper it seems to

cause an upset. Some just stare at me and some whisper and laugh. They are usually in awe when they see me handle a Roti or pile more chutney on my doubles.

Lenny is light enough that he sometimes gets questioned. They say things like, “You know Roti, boy?” and “Look a’ dee white boy eatin’ wid plenty pepper!” Lenny amiably explains that his parents are from Port of Spain and that he grew up in the States. Trey usually vouches for us and it doesn’t take long to guess he and Lenny are related.

The girl Trey refers to is the one who makes his shrimp Roti and smiles politely when he over-compliments her work. His Trini accent comes out when he speaks to her. Lenny and I usually retreat to the table to watch cricket on the TV while he fumbles out his version of flirtation, which is usually just a painful overload of crude jokes and comic book history.

“Dude, don’t do them both. It’s nothing but trouble,” Lenny says, keeping his cigarette in his mouth as he pulls on a sheet of plywood to make sure it’s stable. “I mean, I’ve already got her and another chick and it’s a pain in the ass,” he says, the shadow of his head nodding at me.

“I’d be more than happy to drop out of that equation,” I say.

“Don’t be so sensitive,” Lenny says, and stops to take a drag.

The rain starts to sweep in through the screens, forcing us to the corner of the patio where we put the old couch. The pond out back is lit for a moment by the moon, now higher in the sky. The matchstick forest of trees sways around it, rain beating the surface of the water. The frogs that usually keep us awake with their chorus of low tea kettle whistles had hushed the night before. The swarm of September love bugs that hovers in the air like black snowflakes seems to have vanished as well. The sky looks like marble ice cream, the clouds stretched and pulled by wind in fast-moving streaks of white and grey.

“You all right, babe?” Lenny asks, rubbing my shoulder.

He must have felt me shivering. The three of us are on the couch now, cramped and crouched away from the rain like a band of rodents. I nestle closer to Lenny and he puts his arm around me.

“Yeah,” I say.

Trey makes a joke and Lenny laughs. My ear is pressed to his chest and I feel his low voice resonate. Trey has a barking laugh, harsh and loud, always in threes, *Ha! Ha! Ha!*, punctuated by a deep breath in between. I remember the first time we were all crowded like this. It was my nineteenth birthday and Trey’s first trip to Disneyworld. Lenny and I had already been a dozen times. My dad worked as a prop master for the company he called ‘the mouse’, maintaining the figures on the rides with fresh coats of paint and plaster. Free tickets were always stashed in an envelope in his file cabinet. Despite our familiarity with the park, Lenny and I forgot that the Doombuggies on the Haunted Mansion ride only seat two.

The cars look like hollowed black olives and ease by on conveyers for people to board. Lenny, Trey and I scrambled up to one and crammed in, realizing only too late that we were in for a long, uncomfortable ride. My pelvis bone was jammed in Lenny’s for the first half, and when the backwards drop down the mansion staircase came I turned sideways, my view of all the mechanical ghouls obscured by part of the car. I should have known, then. But, I was under the impression that metaphors and foreshadowing only existed in fiction.

“Your hair smells weird,” Lenny says, sniffing my head.

“It’s the color,” I tell him.

“Oh.”

Jim Jenkins can be seen through the glass doors. I watch the slow drag of the storm behind Jim's dark suit on the tube television my mother gave us. It's getting late. The update shows the blob over the coast now. Something moves outside, rustling over the wind in our neglected palm bushes.

"Get out of here, fucker!" Trey shouts at a raccoon that peeks in through the screen. He shines the flashlight on him and he bobs up and down on his hind legs. "Let me get my paintball gun," Trey says, lifting off the couch.

"No!" I say. "Leave him alone. Plus, how are you going to aim in this wind, idiot?"

"I'll just shoot a whole bunch of rounds off," Trey says. "I'll hit something."

Just then there's a bright flash of lightning, illuminating the whole yard like a brief second of daytime. The crash comes next, a piercing crack that rattles the glass doors. That peculiar instinct to duck takes over and we are crouching again.

"Holy crap," I say.

The aluminum awning over the patio pops out like Tupperware as the wind comes violently in and under it. It pops back again and the rain gets heavier. The raccoon is gone. We all scurry in for a moment to watch the news. Lenny adjusts the thermostat while Jim Jenkins reports that east Orange County is getting the strongest of the rain bands. Severe thunderstorm warning. Little red flags with two black squares litter the map. Hurricane watch. Hurricane warning. The roads are unsafe, tolls are lifted and a curfew is in effect.

Now they switch to some poor dolt in a raincoat, an underling made to report from the coast. The palms are skewed like funhouse props behind him and he shouts through the wind. He uses prose language to describe the carnage; "As you can see, these relentless winds are

capsizing small crafts and bending lampposts like paper clips!” Another crack of thunder shakes the house. Ringo is MIA, likely in the back corner of the closet, his usual retreat from the vacuum cleaner. Branches of bushes can be heard scraping the windows in Trey’s bedroom.

“Looks like we’re in the shit now,” Lenny says, kicking at some mulch that has blown in from under the door onto the tile foyer. “Probably another twenty minutes before it hits us.”

“Should I light these, then?” I ask him, pointing at the pine-scented candle on the coffee table.

“Might as well,” says Lenny.

It doesn’t take long for the house to get cold, and to smell like pine, hazelnut, pumpkin spice and clean linen. They asked me if we had candles. The technical answer was ‘yes’. Now they could smell one season of the year per room. Soon we are back on the patio. Objects fly by in the darkness, pieces of branches and debris. The sound of the wind is a perpetual rushing like a waterfall, so loud we take to miming to communicate. The awning pops in and out again and Trey becomes obsessed with one of the trees out back. The trunk is threatening to split, and the periodic sound of the wood cracking is his cue to check its progress with the flashlight.

There are distant flares of turquoise low in the sky, little bursts of color through the trees. I point at them and Lenny has to lean into my ear.

“Transformers!” he says.

Just then there is a ripping sound, like really loud Velcro. It’s short and staccato, one then another, then two more at the side of the house. Trey launches up from the couch to investigate. He shines his light at our neighbor’s house. Something flits by, black and small as a bat and accompanied by the sound.

“Holy shit!” Trey says, aiming his light at the neighbor’s roof.

“What the hell is that?” Lenny yells.

Trey yells back, “Shingles!”

Aida has arrived and it’s crazy that we’re outside. The rain blows in through the screen and mists us. House lights from across the pond flicker. The glass doors have started to fog up and the plywood makes a knocking sound against the windows. There’s the wood cracking again. Trey crosses the patio with his flashlight and shines it on the woods, finding his tree. The long thin trunk is already fractured, the splintered wood hanging and bent like claws. It cracks again in the flashlight beam, down to a few centimeters now.

“There it goes, dude!” Lenny shouts.

Sure enough the trunk creaks and groans, its top half finally giving way and falling onto other foliage with a sound like leaves getting kicked around. The white beam exposes the raw wood that’s left, fresh and broken and drinking in the rain. That’s when the power goes out. That comforting hum of electricity goes quiet with a muted pop and Jim Jenkins vanishes. The whole grid shuts down, all the houses dark and somber in the moonlight across the wrinkled water.

“That’s it, I guess!” I tell the guys. “I’m going inside!”

The house is a tomb without power, the air immediately stagnant. The candles have created a sort of cough syrup aroma. I take one and case the rooms looking for damage or leaks. The bedroom is sound, plywood secure on the windows and the glass door. The master bath has a wet spot on the ceiling over the shower the shape of a peony. Trey’s bathroom, other than his scattered stubble hair on the counter next to his shaver and crusted toothpaste in the sink, is in good shape. I reluctantly check Trey’s room, the candle flame catching his montage of posters

and sketches. I usually keep a distance from his room, only going as far as the hallway as if there are Voodoo barriers on his door.

A guy's room has its own life, its own secrets, and there's only so much about Trey I care to know. As if the barrage of information doesn't come pouring out of him, nonetheless, agonizing dissertations on Jack 'The King' Kirby and the creation of the original X-men ruining my favorite TV shows. It doesn't matter that I tell him I don't care about that stuff. He tells me all about it anyway, every storyboard frame from his favorite episode, his long limbs flailing to mimic throwing a thunderbolt or tossing an explosive gadget at a foe. Trey's room smells like smoke and cologne.

I go in this time, eager to check the gap in the plywood over his window. It shoots a rectangle of moonlight and I peek through. The cul-de-sac is littered with branches, trash cans tipped and rolling across the pavement. It looks like the floor of a concert hall after a local rock band has pleased its loyal listeners. Shreds of leaves fly by the window. The tree in the front yard is bowed from trauma. I back up from the window and shield the candle on my way out of his room. His bass lies on the bed, wires like vines on the fraying carpet and fortunately unplugged.

It was Trey who told Lenny that his parents were splitting up. Lenny's mom and dad had gone to stay at a timeshare one weekend and Lenny and Trey invited friends over. The small group of fourteen-year-olds had scored some beer and micro-waved hot dogs. After about three in the morning they all passed out in various spots around Lenny's house. Lenny says he found

Trey out on the patio in his skivvies, standing barefoot on the orange Chattahoochee stone looking up at the sky. It was the first time Lenny saw him sleepwalk.

“It’s fucked up,” he said to Lenny. “I’m sorry about your folks. It happened to mine, too.” Lenny tried to get him to talk straight, to make more sense. At first he had no idea that Trey was even asleep. “They try to tell you it isn’t your fault but you’re going to think it, anyway, man.” He touched Lenny’s shoulder to comfort him as if it had already happened. “If you choose your mom, we can still jam in the garage.”

Once Lenny figured out that he was sleepwalking, he thought it was all part of some random dream Trey was having, a window between drunk and hung-over. Lenny got him back inside, put him on the couch and tossed a blanket over him. When Lenny’s parents came back, they dropped it on him, told him they went away that weekend to work out a Marriage Settlement Agreement. His dad was moving to West Palm Beach and his mom was keeping the house. They told him it wasn’t his fault.

I hear the guys come back inside. There’s the rustling of packages, cookies and crackers, the trash can lid opening and closing. I catch the end of another one of Trey’s get-rich-quick schemes that involves screen printing T-shirts that read “Hurricanes Blow”. Lenny switches quickly to music. This time it’s the differing guitar styles of Zakk Wylde and Randy Rhodes, and how Lenny plans to name our children after one or both of them.

“The poor kid is going to have to explain the spelling his whole life,” I chime in as I place the candle back on the table.

Trey shines his flashlight on the box of crackers and plunges his hand in. He comes out with a large card stack of them and eats two at a time. The three of us listen as the winds start to

diminish and the rush of the rain subsides. The boards on the windows get quiet. The cat paws at a string in the carpet, his black pupils filling up his eyes.

“Sweet, it’s over,” Trey says.

“I think it’s the eye,” Lenny answers.

We go outside. Rain gently stipples the pond, a few light gusts racing over the surface. The indoor-outdoor blue porch flooring is rimmed with a curving line of water stains. I use my watch light to check the time. Just past midnight. Aida is a fast-moving storm and I guess the eye won’t give us much before wailing on us all over again. Lenny and Trey light up again, the lighter flame washing both faces in orange for a few seconds. For once, they are quiet, looking out at the shadow of our back yard. They smoke in silence.

“Well,” says Trey, smashing out his cigarette into the pile of butts in the ash tray. “This is boring. I’m going to bed. Wake me when the power comes back on.”

“You going to bed, pussy?” says Lenny as Trey opens the door.

“I’m fucking tired, dread. Wake me up tomorrow,” he says.

The glass door closes and Lenny puffs the last of his cigarette. He and I are alone on the patio. The clouds rotate above the house, a wide wall of dark grey, thick like dryer lint. Lenny seems uneasy.

“What’s wrong? You’re stuck with me now?” I tease.

“No,” he says. He opens the patio door and flicks the butt into the wind. The pinched filter is a tiny speck of white, yanked to the right and sucked away. “You want to go to sleep, too?” he asks, not looking at me.

“We can,” I say.

He's acting weird. Sometimes he does this when we're fighting, keeping Trey around as a buffer and panicking when he finally leaves. But, we aren't fighting. Lenny closes the door and locks it. He helps me up from the couch and we go inside.

Our room smells like Autumn, pumpkin and cinnamon. The candle is orange, the sides melted down uneven in its jar on the master bathroom counter. Lenny undresses and I stare at the mirror. My red streaks are copper-colored in the light. It isn't long before he's behind me, hands with slender, fret-friendly fingers under my shirt. I don't much feel like it because he's being distant, but what the hell else can we do without electricity?

The eye seems to be passing outside, gusts coming in strong intervals now. It's hot and airless in the room, both of us sweating and flushed on the queen-sized comforter. Our breathing is so loud without the noises of the house – the air vents, the ceiling fan, the humming of the computer. It's just us, every sound we make amplified by the stillness even over the storm outside. I finish on top and collapse on his chest. My hair sticks to my face and stinks even stronger of perfumed dye. Lenny sighs with satisfaction and lays a hand on my back.

“Now, that's a hurricane party,” he jokes.

“Dork,” I say, flipping my hair as I rear up to rest on my elbow.

Lenny stares at me seriously, like when he finishes tinkering with the Camaro. He'll wipe his hands on a shop towel and look hard at the engine, admiring, making sure everything is in order. He reaches up to touch my hair in the candle light.

“I like your hair,” he says.

I hear myself huff. “You do?”

“Yeah, it's hot. I like the streaks.”

I shrug. “Wow. You haven’t said so. I thought you hated it.”

“I think I might cut mine. I think it’s time.”

“Cut your ponytail? Why?”

“So it will look nice for the wedding.”

“What wedding?”

“Ours,” he says.

The sky gripes with thunder outside and the wind starts to tear at the boards. It makes a hollow pounding sound. I search Lenny’s face, the dark puppy-arch brows and the big open brown eyes showing no signs of a joke. He doesn’t smile. I feel my face get hot and my leg sweats against his.

“What the hell are you talking about? Are you serious?” I say.

“Yeah.”

“Are you proposing to me?” I ask him.

“Yeah,” he says. His chest is moving up and down rapidly. He’s nervous. Christ, he’s actually nervous. “I always knew we would get married but there was never a good time. Skip promoted me last week and I thought maybe we could swing something really nice. My dad said he would help out. Plus, this way you could get more financial aid and do those web design classes.”

I didn’t answer him. I had thought about it, marriage, but I didn’t bring it up much. I know his folks splitting up jaded him and I didn’t want to be one of *those*, those stupid bitches that badger their boyfriends for years, recruiting family and friends to hound him into submission

until the poor asshole feels so guilty he finally proposes just to shut them all up. I didn't want to be engaged to someone who had to be worked over.

"You can say no," he offers finally.

"Oh, no, no," I say quickly. "Of course I'll marry you, idiot."

"Then, what's wrong?"

Lenny had made another sales pitch, laying out pros and cons. He probably rehearsed it a hundred times. He knows I'm practical, knows I want to hear logistics. But, this was different. Maybe I'm not so sentimental but I also don't want Lenny to think I'd marry him just for his solid presentation.

"I don't know," I say. "You just sound like you're reading from a play-book or something."

"Oh," he says. "I guess you want romantic."

He squirms out from under me and reaches over to his night table to pull something out of the drawer. It's the round box he keeps his guitar picks in. He opens it. The son of a bitch bought a ring. The room seems suddenly dream-like, some strange far away cell closed in by soggy sheets of plywood that hide the treacherous storm. For once, we are quarantined, our own castle carved out of circumstance even only for this moment.

"Holy shit!" I say, slapping him on the bare shoulder. "I can't believe you."

“Ow! Try it on,” he says. “I had to steal one of the rings you never wear to take to the jeweler so he could size it. I hope it fits.”

The ring is pretty, a smooth band with a groove running the circumference that meets at a little diamond. It’s imbedded, not mounted. It’s unconventional, unique. So this is it, what I waited for and wrote about in my stupid little diary while hugging a Cabbage Patch doll. I’d given up on it early, sweeping the prince analogy under the rug of reality long before Lenny showed up in high school with his clumsy charm. We are both part of a different generation, spoiled cynics whose major milestone is the death of Curt Cobain. Somehow our moment is ideal, perfectly anti-establishment, naked by candle light in the middle of category-four Aida.

“I can’t believe you did this,” I say, slipping on the ring. “We can’t afford this.”

“My dad helped me get it,” Lenny says. He slides back over the covers toward me. “Don’t worry, I’m paying him back. You like it, right?”

I look over at him. “We had sex first in case I said ‘no’, didn’t we?” I ask.

“Kind of,” he says. “In case I scared you off or something.”

“You actually thought I’d say ‘no’?”

“It’s possible. Maybe the life of a rock star wife is too much for you,” he jokes.

Suddenly, it hits me. “What about Trey?” I ask.

Lenny’s bright mood fades. “Yeah, I have to talk to him.”

“He doesn’t know?”

Lenny shakes his head. “We could let him stay for the rent money but I really want the place to ourselves. I mean, think how often we could hang out in the living room like this,” Lenny says, gesturing at his naked body and mine,

“That, and he’d stay with us forever if it was up to him,” I say. “He’s never going to get himself together living with us. We’re his comfort zone. Hey, should I not wear this until we talk to him, then?” I ask, showing him the ring.

“Nah, he won’t notice. Just wear it, I know you want to.”

“It’s perfect,” I say, holding it up to the light again. I lean over and kiss him. “You know I love you and all that shit, right?”

“Yeah,” Lenny says.

“You want some water?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

I hop up from the bed and pull on some gym shorts and a T-shirt. The rain beats the windows and the candle flames are disturbed as I open and close the bedroom door. The living room smells like Christmas pine. The refrigerator is dark but still cold, so I double-fist two bottles we scored from the grocery store and head back to the room. It suddenly occurs to me that I don’t see the cat. I give the room a quick once-over. Ringo isn’t in our room and he isn’t in any of his usual spots. I think for a second that Trey may have executed his sinister plan and I check his bedroom door. It’s open.

“What the hell?” I say aloud.

I stalk toward it, the absence of Trey’s signature snoring making me uneasy. It’s usually a loud, grunting intake followed by a long hissing. Saturday nights he passes out on the couch and snores over the sound of the T.V. It’s also a handy alert on mornings when I don’t want a level-by-level description of his new video game. If I don’t hear it I know he’s awake so I make my kitchen trips short and covert. If I do hear it, I can make coffee in peace.

Trey's bed is empty, sheets twisted and pillow tossed on the floor. Ringo rests in a pumpkin shape at its foot, neck extended like a Hungry Hippo and eyes shut contentedly. I can tell he's been there a while. The cat takes at least ten minutes to pad in a circle before getting comfortable, even longer to settle to sleep. The water bottles are already starting to drip their condensation down my arm. Trey's boxers and T-shirt are a pile on the floor.

"Oh, fuck," I say. "Lenny!"

The two of us search the house, doors slamming and a barrage of 'Trey!'s as we secure the perimeter. I check the garage. The metal door is bowing inward from the gusts outside and water has leaked in on the concrete. We pull on our shoes and Lenny checks the porch, his flashlight beam erratic on the woods beyond the screen.

"Trey!" we call.

Only the storm answers, wind screaming in under the aluminum and the limbs of trees making a rushing sound like a hundred needles dropped down a drainpipe. The rain turns to drizzle but the gusts come like punches, lesser twigs ripped from foliage and carried off. Several branches have violated our screen panels, sticking through torn holes. My own hair whips my face.

"I'm checking out front!" Lenny yells.

The flashlight beam vanishes behind the boards and lights up the house, dark again as Lenny exits through the front door. I can barely hear him shout Trey's name again. I hug myself and step out from the porch. The rain is like pin pricks on my face and bare legs.

"Hey, Trey!" I call.

Lenny's beam bounces up and down the sides of the house. A jolt of fear hits me when I see another beam, steady and fixed, just beyond the woods. There's a narrow trail that leads in, tread down by raccoons coming for our cat food and a couple of neighborhood kids that cross through to the community pool. The shaft of light pierces the woods and lights up the rain drops that soar almost sideways. I call out again but the light doesn't move. It's focused up at the trees. It has to be Trey.

I trek carefully over the smashed-down underbrush. The hurricane has littered the path with leaves and tree limbs. I get closer to the light. There's a small clearing we explored when we first moved in. The trees open up a little and a family of armadillos lives there. Here's Trey, his dark gawky body shivering in rain-soaked underwear. His hair is saturated and matted to the sides of his face. He squints up at where his beam is aimed. I follow it to find the broken end of the tree that met its demise earlier that night.

"Trey!" I say.

He hears me and looks over. The guy smiles this warm welcoming smile that replaces the weasel sneer I'm so accustomed to. Even in the garish shadows of the flashlight he looks as if I'm a favorite relative come to see him. On large bare feet he crunches over. I freeze as he gets close and puts his free hand on my shoulder. He hugs me, then. I shut my eyes like a child would when getting a shot. He's wet, cold and tall, and I can feel his flaccid penis under the briefs against my hip. I cringe and hold my breath but he's not letting go. I don't want to push him off because Lenny always warned me not to startle him if I catch him sleepwalking.

Finally I decide to return the hug, slowly curving my arms around his back and shoulders. I pat him twice. When he releases me, he kisses me on the cheek, a Trinidad thing my standoffish, unaffectionate upbringing had to adjust to long ago.

“I always knew you were the one!” he says. “You’re the only one good enough for my cousin! I’m going to miss you two. I’m going to miss the shit out of you.”

I feel heat rush to my face again. I’m soaked now, shivering with him in the dark. Immediately I picture him listening at our bedroom door, playing back our conversation. But, he couldn’t have heard. He must have already been outside a while before Lenny and I were even done with sex. I see Lenny’s flashlight. I know he sees Trey’s, still on and pointing at the ground, so I don’t shout out.

“Trey!” he says. The beam gets closer. “That you?”

Lenny approaches, pushes the underbrush aside and fixes his beam on us. Trey crosses to Lenny and gives him the same treatment, squeezing him tight but not saying anything to him.

“O.K. buddy,” Lenny says, patting him on the back. “Let’s get you back inside.”

Trey says nothing as we usher him across the lawn through the wind and rain. Once we get the door closed and locked I grab a towel and Lenny throws it over him.

“Thank you, guys,” Trey says. “Thank you.”

The house once again creaks and groans from the storm as Trey gets him to his room. I wait in the living room where the candles warm the walls with orange light. Ringo creeps out with a look back at Trey’s room. He’s annoyed, displaced, and jumps up on the couch. I’m still cold and shaking, listening to the scratching on the roof and the wailing wind growing louder. Lenny comes out with two more towels from the hall closet.

“You all right?” he asks, handing me one.

“Yeah,” I say.

We go back to our bedroom, dry off and climb in bed.

Morning leaks into the bedroom. Sometime during the night, Lenny opened our windows a crack for air. The sunlight comes in meager streaks across the room from gaps in the wood. I wake to footsteps in the lawn, an intermittent slush, slush. My alarm clock is dormant, a black panel where red numbers are usually displayed. I roll out of bed and peek through the gaps in the window. I can see half an arm and name brand tennis shoes I recognize. It’s Trey, probably combing the yard and checking damage. Lenny is asleep. My watch tells me it’s almost eleven. I gaze at my ring and kiss Lenny on the forehead.

The bathroom spigot yields nothing. I try the shower, it’s the same. Luckily, we filled the bathtub like the readiness guides say, so I use some of the water to brush my teeth with. Since there would be no flushing I leave my business in the toilet, using paper sparingly. The moist wipes we buy come in handy. I use four to wash my face and freshen up. I pull on a pair of old jeans and one of Lenny’s worn shirts and head outside.

“Water softener,” Trey says.

He points to the broken pipe in the ground where the large box had fallen over in the wind, severing our supply. He’s picking up shingles and piling them onto a plank. The yard is littered with them, soggy, sandpapery squares scattered as random as leaves. Somehow I fall into helping him, grabbing up loose branches and heaving them back into the woods. The neighbors

are out, and soon our cul-de-sac echoes with chain saws and hammering. People walk their own rooftops, the houses now checker-boarded from missing shingles and patched with blue tarps.

Wooden fences are blown over. The formidable oak in the yard across the street came up from the ground and tipped, grass around its roots like pulled up carpet. Someone has a blower and clears the sidewalks of debris. I brush off crusted grass from our front door and windows with a broom and Trey brings me a warm Gatorade.

“You know what?” he says. This is the beginning of most of his weird observations. He says it when he has some get-rich-quick scheme or invention. It’s usually followed by “What if they had...” and then whatever crazy stupid thing he’s come up with, like fruit-flavored cigarettes or beer-flavored candy.

“I was thinking,” Trey says. “I got a buddy lives in up in South Carolina. He says there’s a really good art school up there.”

I swallow the Gatorade. “Yeah?”

“He called to see if I was O.K., with the hurricane and all, and he was like, ‘Dude, you should come live up here.’ He says he can get me a job at a bank where they reimburse school tuition,” Trey says, swigging his drink.

“Oh, yeah?” I say.

“He says his roommate bailed on him and I could stay at his place, first month free.”

A neighbor loudly mourns deep scratches on his SUV, likely from flying branches, circling the car and shaking his head. Trey and I watch him in silence. I don’t know what to say so I take another drink. I know Trey woke up in his underwear and towel but he doesn’t speak of it. I wonder how much he remembers, if anything. It’s strange how transition happens, a harsh

violent thing that turns everything on its side and levels again on a different plane. The three of us had been one entity, crowded in this small world of ours for too long. It seems decades since the days of band practice in Trey's garage, lounging on the couch moving my head to their pseudo-rhythmic noise and admiring Lenny's fingers moving fluidly up and down the frets.

I had always wondered if I had invaded Trey's territory or if he'd invaded mine. I didn't want to be like Charley's girlfriend, the bimbo who came with him to hang out with us just to lean over and whisper to him twenty minutes later that she wanted to leave. Whenever he came to see us by himself she would call his cell phone and whine that he was spending too much time at our place. Eventually he folded as they all do when ass is on the line, and chose her over us. Women are biologically designed to systematically destroy a man's relationships so that she is the center of his universe. I wouldn't become the bitch that came between Lenny and Trey.

"Sounds like a pretty good deal," I say, surprised to hear the sadness in my own voice.

"I was just thinking," Trey says. He stares down into his almost empty bottle, damp black locks like ropes on his forehead. "If you guys would be cool with me going up there. I mean, with the rent and all."

I hesitate. "I think so."

"I mean I would give you notice and everything. I was thinking like, a couple months from now."

"That's cool," I say. I know I have to ask more about it so he'll feel like I'm giving him my blessing. "So, where in South Carolina?"

Trey and I work on the yard, hauling lawn bags with sticks poking through to the curb. Lenny appears, trudging outside in old clothes with a black cap and his bad tennis shoes. He

winces when he looks out at the neighborhood. He has a drink in one hand and the roll of Latin cookies in the other.

“Good morning, star shine,” I say. “This is some shit, huh?”

Lenny moves in slow motion, handing me the cookies and rubbing his eyes. He twists off the cap of his Gatorade. The cookies broke after all, a whole cylinder of sugary shards. He looks up at the garage door. It still moves up and down, but small instabilities cause it to make a horrific sound like a car being crushed slowly. Trey goes to help a neighbor lift her mailbox and set it erect again. I tell Lenny about his plan. Lenny just raises his eyebrows, like he does when someone tells him a bit of interesting trivia, and nods. There’s a solemn look in his eyes like a man looking back at a lost era, like when he stood in his empty bedroom after the last of his rock posters were rolled up and taken to our new apartment.

“You think he heard us?” I ask.

“No way,” Lenny answers frankly. “He couldn’t have.” He takes a cookie shard from the package and looks at it curiously. “Maybe this would have happened either way. You know what this means?”

“What?”

“No more free movie tickets,” he jokes.

The aftermath of Aida yields all sorts of advertisements. There’s nothing like a natural disaster to garnish the almighty dollar. Only a few days later, the television stations are bogged with lawyer commercials, roof repair, flood services and furniture close-out sales. The news station warns us of price-gougers -- tanned, tattooed stereotypes in beat-up trucks with rebel flag

decals who come around offering to remove tree limbs and such for a ‘small’ fee. Lenny, Trey and I watch the six o’ clock report.

“Jim looks refreshed,” I say.

The weather man we’ve come to revere seems to have rested, his eyes brighter and wider as he reports the last of Aida’s rain bands over Jacksonville. Jim Jenkins tells us she’s dissipated and downgraded, her remnants tiny green specks over Orange County. Trey digs out the last oatmeal pie.

“I think we need to go to the store again,” he says.

The roads are still overrun with trucks carrying debris, leaves like confetti blowing out and over cars behind. There are unofficial dump sites at the front of the neighborhoods where lawn bags, fence sections and cut up trees are piled. We are the county of tarps, the bright blue sheeting patching every other roof. People work at a steady pace to get their routines back. We are recovering, leveling again.

“Well, hello,” Trey says to the same store clerk from our previous visit.

She looks tired and annoyed. “Hi,” she says.

Lenny and I unload the cart. Covertly, I show Lenny a roll of packing tape. He shrugs. Neither of us tossed it in the basket. I chuck it up on the conveyor. Trey tries again to woo the clerk. She smacks gum and jerks a stray hair from her face.

“So, did you get your power back, yet?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“Got ours back yesterday. What a nightmare, right?”

“Yeah.”

The beep of the laser as she rings up our items cuts each response. Trey opens his wallet.

“It’s amazing you don’t even think about that shit until you don’t have it anymore, you know? I mean, I don’t remember the last time I was so happy running the dishwasher,” he says.

Trey gets a smile out of her. She straightens her posture. “Yeah,” she says with more enthusiasm. “I have a new appreciation for my blow-dryer.”

She tells us the total. Lenny moves up to pay but Trey waves him back.

“I got it, dread,” Trey says.

“You sure?”

“I owe you.”

I pluck a pack of gum from above the conveyor and set it in front of the clerk. “This, too, then,” I say.

“Hey, nice ring,” the clerk says, reaching out to touch my hand. I let her. “So pretty.”

“Thanks,” I say.

We still haven’t told Trey. He pulls cash from his wallet and hands it to the clerk.

“I like your accent,” the clerk says to Trey. I hadn’t even noticed. The register opens and closes. She gives Trey his change. “I’ve been wanting a tattoo but I don’t know what. I have some ideas and I was wondering if you could draw them up sometime.”

Lenny and I trade looks. Trey shifts his weight and stuffs the change back in his wallet.

“Sure,” he says. “But it will have to be soon. I’m moving to South Carolina to go to art school.”

“Oh, really? Well, here,” the clerk says, grabbing up a pen. She takes the receipt and writes on the back of it. “Call me when you’re available.”

The three of us head out to the parking lot in silence. The sky is clear, the wet Florida air tinged with the first brisk smell of Autumn. We pile the groceries into Lenny's Camaro, Trey sharing the back seat with the plastic bags. The engine cranks and Lenny revs it.

"Told you that chick wants me," Trey says.

THE RUINED GROVE

The first time I saw her do it I thought the pot was laced. It was my second trip to the retired grove behind my uncle's house with my cousin, Omar, and the two sisters that lived next door. Theresa was a year older than me at seventeen, a hulky brunette tomboy with loose torn jeans and faded Birkenstocks. She was the proprietor of our marijuana supply. Riley was a pale little rail of a girl just turned twelve, always in one of three pairs of colored corduroys. The girl picked up a fallen orange and held it in her palm.

"Watch this. Watch, watch," Omar said. He balanced on his knees, his wiry frame drowning in oversized black jeans and an obscene T-shirt. "This is some serious shit, right here."

The first time I was invited out it had taken some coaxing. I was already in trouble back home. Omar had pleaded with a barrage of C'mons and Theresa promised no one would find out. "James," Riley had said, only seconds after learning my name. "Don't be a pussy." After that I hadn't much choice.

Riley sat Indian-style on the wrinkled blue tarp we shared, beige hair in long stringy vines parted in the middle and hanging over her shoulders. She stared down at the orange, a bright sphere against the folds of her dark brown pants. It was a long two minutes before I heard the gentle tearing like the sound Velcro makes. The spotted skin separated from the center where the stem had left its dot, peeling slowly up, then downward in sections toward her hand in curled strips. I leaned forward, blinking rapidly through the curl of smoke from my joint. The fruit had peeled itself, the skin opening like a flower in speed motion on a nature show. Riley let out a heavy breath as if exhausted from a sprint and slumped.

“You O.K.?” Theresa asked her.

Riley shut her eyes and shook her head. She let the orange drop on the tarp where it rolled, skin still attached to the bottom, toward me. She sprung up and over to a nearby tree where she vomited, using a fistful of branches as leverage. I picked up the orange in disbelief, trying to decipher how high I really was. I tore off the skin and examined it. It was star-shaped like a lily, amber on one side and cream-colored on the other.

“How the fuck did she do that?” I said.

Theresa lit a cigarette and puffed out a ghostly cloud of smoke. “Don’t know,” she said. “She always gets sick right after.”

“The Juans call her ‘Pequena Bruja’,” Omar said, flopping backward to rest on his elbows like a sunbather.

“What’s Bruja?” I asked.

“Witch, Primo. Little witch.”

The Juans were three neighborhood kids, bullies who cut through my uncle’s yard after school to get to their neighborhood west of the old grove. Two were named Juan and one was named Alex. They terrorized the route in and out of the subdivision. Omar was sure to list their offenses: throwing their basketball at passing bicyclists, hollering lewd remarks at the groups of junior high girls and breaking bottles in the middle of the road. They played at Alex’s house because he had a driveway hoop, and gave a glare to every passing car as if it encroached on their territory.

They pissed me off right away my first weekend at Omar's. I was out on the porch with my MP3- player, leafing through one of his gaming magazines, when the Juans approached the yard. With my father's German complexion and his angular features, it was easy to assume I didn't speak a lick. They were tromping up the asphalt, nudging each other and smirking up at me. My Spanish was meager, but I could tell they were calling me a faggot. "Quien es este?" they said. "Pato."

"Entiendo lo que dices," I called out, flipping a page of the magazine as they passed. The Juans slowed their tracks and their smirks vanished. "Puedo romper tus piernas," I told them. *I can break your legs.*

A second or two they lingered. I saw them peripherally but never looked up. I heard their sneakers on the dried-out grass between the yards and the shuffle of bushes as they ducked behind the fence.

Omar was thrilled to hear the story, which served as more fodder for his habitually talkative sessions of co-op *Halo*. We hadn't altered the routine for seven years of my sporadic visits, excepting the replacement of old game systems with whatever coveted model my uncle could afford. We occupied the ancient couch, a ruddy sage green wool blend, its corners shucked by an elusive house cat. Uncle Louis put together model military planes at the dining room table while rice and beans cooled on the stove.

"What did they say? When you said that, what did they say?" Omar said, his narrow shoulders twitching left, up and down with the movements of the controller.

"Nothing. They walked away," I answered, tossing a grenade at random enemies.

“I wish I could have been there. You know those dicks used to throw rocks at me and shit. Then I got my X-box and they were like, ‘Hey, can we come over and hang out?’, you know? And I was like, I don’t think so.” Suddenly there was a flash of cobalt light on the screen and Omar’s character flew back against a wall. “Hey! What the hell? You have to tell me when you’re going to throw those, man,” he said.

“Sorry,” I said.

I had gotten used to playing alone.

Omar’s verbal momentum continued after bedtime. We brushed our teeth, but he could talk even through the lathered paste in half-words that I had to piece together. After that, Omar would study his face in the mirror for any signs of an emerging mustache, cursing all the while at my patches of stubble. He gave me the bed and he slept on the floor on an old inflatable. His questions were endless, unrelated: Are there a lot of Puerto Ricans in Tennessee? What is it like to play in snow? Why did your parents get divorced? How many girls have you fucked? Were you good at football, you know, before they kicked you off the team for fighting? Do you want to go to the theme parks while you’re here? Do you remember when you first saw love bugs and I told you they bite?

I answered in short with a great many I-don’t-knows until one night he drifted onto the subject of my father.

“Didn’t your dad work at a bank or something?” Omar said.

“Yeah, but he got fired.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know.”

“I liked your dad. He was cool,” Omar said.

“Why are you talking about him like he’s dead?” I said, offended.

I heard him shifting on the air mattress. “I’m not,” said Omar.

“You’re using past tense, like he doesn’t exist anymore.”

“You know what I mean. I mean, when was the last time you saw him?” asked Omar.

I hesitated, tucking my hands behind my head and finding the outlines of his movie posters in the shadows of the room. “My birthday, a year ago,” I answered. “He and my step-dad got into a fist fight. My mom told him not to come around for a while.”

“No shit?” came the voice from the floor. “Did your dad kick his ass?”

I grinned in the darkness, a flu-like hotness coming over me. I remembered my mother in the kitchen, pleading with Miguel not to press charges while she plucked the wax-drowned candles from the melted cake. It bore a football theme, the green icing field like a soggy glacier and the plastic players sunken to the kneepads. Miguel wanted me to play, told me I needed to represent my culture or some shit. He said that extracurricular activities would straighten me out. My dad took issue with the cake and pulled Miguel aside. I could tell the conversation didn’t go well. It started in whispers, then got louder.

“Go to sleep,” I told my cousin.

I was a child of divorce, half-white and half-Hispanic. My real father was the white one. My mother had given me her dark eyes and quick temper. Her second marriage was implied as a correction, redemption for an error and I was its product. I took it badly, getting into fights at school and eventually pummeling a line-backer who had a racial slur tucked away for when I

missed a pass. Summer arrived and Miguel wanted me gone. Pent-up and pissed-off I endured the ride to Florida, the hot, dick-shaped state where the air sweats. Omar's neighborhood, with its uneven hedgerows and one-car garages, would be my prison until August. I was fully expected to return reformed.

Toward the beginning of July I'd acclimated myself to a ritual. Omar, me and the girls met behind the splintered fence early in the afternoon. The path was a straight shot down one row to a cluster of ferns, then right past an overturned refrigerator to our spot. The tarp was secured at the corners by stakes and our snacks were stored in a plastic container hidden in a tower of used tires. Theresa orchestrated the pipe or the papers, always serving the first round. Riley was never permitted to participate, but she seemed to pass the time by thinking up ways to incite Omar into some type of argument.

Theresa lit her pipe and sucked on it. She held her breath, squinted and passed it over to me. I took the lighter and copied her, already feeling the humidity of the afternoon to a startling degree. That earthy, withered smell wafted up into my nostrils and I felt the heat surge into my lungs. I felt like I was covered in Vaseline.

"Where's the blood?" Omar said, contesting Riley's promotion of her favorite fantasy video game. "Nobody ever bleeds in that stupid game. And fairies? Like I want to play a game with fairies. It's the gayest fucking thing ever," said Omar, taking a drag from his joint.

Riley wore the blue corduroys that day. She maintained an eerie adult calm, her voice always hoarse but even-tempered. "Maybe you're gay and you just haven't admitted it, yet," she said. "Maybe that's why you're getting so mad."

Omar stood up from the tarp and loudly rattled off in Spanish. I caught only bits of it, slang and curse words Riley was better off not having translated, before he stopped suddenly. Omar looked up, alarmed. His black eyes flew open wide and he whirled around in the direction of the house. In an instant, we all heard it, a voice echoing. Uncle Louis was calling for Omar.

“Holy shit,” I whispered into my fist. “It’s your dad.”

“Be quiet, Primo!” Omar whispered back. We listened. We heard his name again in the familiar deep tone. There was the sound of disturbed foliage not far away, sticks cracking and shuffled leaves in cadence, footsteps. “Quick! Put this out, put it out now!” Omar ordered, handing his joint to Theresa and blowing out what was left of his drag.

He scrambled to hide our stash, tipping over the plywood that topped the tire tower and tripping on a corner of the tarp. I was dazed, languidly observing the scene as if it was all in slow motion. It began to dawn on me when Theresa, instead of putting out the joint, held it gently by its metal clip with an unconcerned grin. ‘Omar, donde estas?’ the voice called out again. Then, everything went silent. The rustling died. A cloud passed in front of the sun and a car rushed by in the distance. There was no sign of Uncle Louis.

Theresa was chuckling and shaking her head. I followed her line of sight where it met Riley. The girl’s fragile body was lurching forward in intervals, her hand over her mouth and her eyes watering. Omar finally caught on just as Riley moved off the tarp to puke.

“Oh!” he said. “That’s a funny joke, ha, ha!” Omar stomped over to where she was bent over her pile of wasted Snowcaps and Oreos. “I hope it was worth it, Brujita!” he said.

“I don’t get it,” I told Theresa. “How, how does she - ”

“Most of the time it’s more us than her,” Theresa said. “She picks something up from us, you know what I mean? Don’t try to understand the rules. Sometimes it’s real and sometimes it’s only half-real. She’s been working on that one for a while,” she said, waving a hand at Omar, who was still bickering with her.

“When did she start doing this?” I asked.

“When she was little, she started sneaking out here. She says the first time was when she scared away the Juans, made the oranges fly at them right off the branches. This is the only place she can do it.” said Theresa. “I’ve tried to get her to do stuff with my report card, make my mom see the right grades or whatever but she can’t. I think it all started after what happened to her.”

“After what happened to her?” I asked.

Theresa took a long drag from Omar’s joint. I noticed then that the clip was a hair barrette, purple metal with little jewels, probably one of Riley’s. Theresa squinted again as she re-adjusted the paisley bandana on her head.

“Dammit, there aren’t any more cookies,” she said, kicking at the empty package of Oreos.

Socorro Avenue was thermometer-shaped, Uncle Louis’ house at the top of a cul-de-sac. The neighborhood was more than fifty years old and backed up to the Meads’ orange grove. Somewhere in my memory it once thrived, trim and groomed with thick green leaves and tidy aisles matted with fresh soil. When my parents were still married and came down twice a year, Omar and I stole out at night to the far end of the trees where the Meads lived in a beautiful house with terra cotta yard ornaments. The challenge was to get the car alarm to go off by

tossing oranges up and over the property wall at just the right angle. I was usually the first to succeed. We tore through the aisles back home, the smell of citrus fresh in the balmy night. The alarm wailed in the distance in long howls followed by short honks. If we stopped to listen, we could hear Mr. Mead cursing.

A generous contract had been negotiated in recent years and the Meads eventually vacated for the sake of development. Newer, more luxuriant neighborhoods sprang up in the surrounding area and the grove had been targeted. Something in the process, however, had been delayed, fell through or otherwise mishandled and the grove fell into disrepair. The neat lines of trees became overgrown and neglected, the leaves suffering some disease. Mice, armadillos and raccoons made nests and burrows. Tractors moved in and churned up earth but stopped short. Oranges ripened, fell, and rotted into the ground.

The construction crews left bottles, cans and miscellaneous trash in and around the perimeter. Neighborhood residents discovered that the land was not being monitored and used it to stow broken appliances, dismembered furniture and household items mildewed from hurricane flooding too cumbersome for the curbside. Theresa and Riley had made a lounge from scavenged parts, and the tarp Uncle Louis had tossed after discovering a few holes made a sufficient floor mat. Most of the neighborhood kids stayed away for several reasons. The grove was dangerous, unclean and easy to get lost in. The Juans kept their distance for fear of Riley's unnatural abilities. Once in while they would pass, the primary red and blue of their shirts like a parade between the branches, but they never breached the tree line.

One week in July it rained for days, the peeling siding and sun-baked lawns suffering from the other extreme of Florida weather. The grove was a mire of mud but we braved it

anyway at the first sign of sunshine. After the first few snacks Theresa and Omar went on the hunt for another tarp she had seen near the construction. Riley and I stayed behind. I skimmed a magazine while Riley tossed an orange high in the air and practiced catching it. I found myself looking up at her between throws, some part of me worried that she would miss it and it would hit her in the face.

“I’m good at this, don’t worry,” she said, as if to answer my thoughts.

“If you’re not careful you’ll have orange juice,” I said, watching the little ball fly from her hands.

She used her entire body to throw it, bending down and jumping up, releasing it with a hoarse little grunt. She got the sucker pretty high, into the glare of the sun and then caught it carefully when it came back down. I looked back at the magazine. The rain made everything smell like soil.

“So how come you don’t ever talk?” said Riley.

“What?” I said, looking up at her again.

She was tossing the orange from hand to hand. “Omar says you used to talk a lot, but you’re all serious now. He says you always look like you want to hit something.” Riley threw the orange up again.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “I don’t really, I just have...”

“Omar says you got into a fight. Is that how you got the bruise?” she asked, taking two steps back to catch it. “He says you don’t talk about it.”

I’d forgotten about the bruise. After it happened, my eye swelled up and I stopped looking in the mirror, altogether. I stared at the bathroom countertop or out the window. I shaved

once in a while, looking up in flashes to make sure the sides were straight. Instinctively, I reached up to touch the high part of my jawbone just below my eye. I flinched. It was still tender, the flesh giving a little under my fingertips.

“What else is there?” I said to her, clearing my throat. “I got into a fight.”

Riley gave another toss. “My counselor used to say that bad feelings are like germs, if you keep them inside they make you sick,” she said, the last part accented by a cynical sing-song tone as if she’d recited it a thousand times.

“You see a counselor?”

“I did once, when I went to court,” Riley said.

I huffed. “You went to court? What did you do?”

Riley caught the orange. “I got molested.”

I felt a hot sting in my chest. “What?”

“I was molested,” Riley said again. “This lady and her husband ran a day care I went to. He did it to other kids but I was the only one who testified. My mom said none of the other parents would put their kids on the stand. She says that’s why we lost. You know what’s weird?” she said, turning the orange in her hand. “They tell you a million times it’s not your fault and I’m like, duh, I know that. It doesn’t make it less embarrassing. It doesn’t make people not think you’re gross or messed-up. Look, watch,” she said, and threw it high in the air again.

I looked up through the glare with one eye shut. The damn thing wasn’t coming back down. The orange was a dot against the gauzy clouds, hanging in the air above the tops of the trees.

“Watch it. Look,” said Riley, pointing up at it.

It started to flutter, like it weighed nothing. The orange caught some rare hot breeze and tumbled erratically in its current like a lost balloon. It looped and dipped higher and higher until it drifted away and out of sight. I lifted myself from the tarp to try to see the last of it. I glanced over at Riley, waiting for her inevitable upchuck. Her doll-like face turned sour from some unpleasant feeling and she put a hand on her stomach. All that came out was a long obnoxious burp.

“Hey,” she said after a deep breath. “I kept it down this time.”

Omar and Theresa could be heard coming down the aisle. I backed away from Riley when they came into view, like I was guilty of something. Theresa’s Birkenstocks made a suction sound with every step and were caked with mud. Omar followed, dragging a large green plastic sheet behind him.

“Score!” Theresa said, waving at it while Omar held it up like a proud fisherman with a photo-worthy catch. “James, help me get the other side loose so we can tack it on the end.”

I walked away from Riley and bent over the stakes in the ground. I wrapped my hand around one and pulled, thinking about the man who had touched her and what I wanted to do to him. I had his face in my mind already. I had my hands around his throat and squeezed. The stake gave and came up out of the saturated dirt. I staggered backwards, a dizziness coming over me. I felt drunk and nauseous.

“You all right?” Theresa asked, one eyebrow bent in concern.

I remember standing there with the stake in my hand, breathing in and out and the blood draining from my face. “Yeah,” I said. “I think I smoked too much.”

With that, I dropped the stake and turned. My body moved, my legs carried me. Somehow I stumbled down the rows and found our fence. I made it into the house and groped my way down the hallway to Omar's room. I fell onto his bed and stared up at the ceiling fan. The afternoon gave the walls a brassy glow. I tried to master the high, closing my eyes against the shifting room. After a few moments my heartbeat slowed. I heard Omar in the yard. I heard the creak of the front door and he was in the doorway, asking if I was O.K. I nodded.

“Estas enferma?” he asked me.

“A little,” I said.

Omar waited. I said nothing. He left. I heard the musical sounds of the X-box booting up in the living room. After a few moments I got up to go to the bathroom, slowly shuffling in and closing the door behind me. I turned on the water in the sink, filled up my hands and splashed my face. With a conscious effort I raised my eyes to the mirror. There was my long sharp nose, thick dark brows and prominent cheekbones, long curled feminine black lashes holding on to big drops of water. My upper lip and the hull of my chin housed the shadow of whiskers, like my dad called them. There was the bruise, its colors like a geode, blue with a ring of yellow.

Why the fuck would she tell me something like that? All I could picture was this greasy, ugly old man reaching down to pick her up and take her to some empty room in the house. I closed my eyes and dried my face, fantasizing about meeting him in a parking garage or standing outside a playground. I'd come up behind him and go, 'Hey asshole,' and beat him until my muscles gave up, like those runners whose legs fold underneath them from strain. Omar was right. I wanted to hit something long before that day.

Only a few weeks before I almost had it out with the Juans, clenching a fist as Omar and I passed Alex's house on the way back from the store up the road. There were two girls walking ahead of us and we were deliberating how we would talk to them when the Juans starting whistling and hooting from the driveway.

"Hay una problema?" one of them yelled at me.

I'd been glaring at them. Omar nudged me and kept his head down. "Solamente si haces un problema," I answered. *Only if you make a problem.*

The girls looked back at us, interested, but kept walking. One of the Juans bounced the basketball hard on the ground. They eyed us. I was ready. Uncle Louis' signature rumble echoed in the hot afternoon. I waved away a fly as I looked down the road to see his roughed-up maroon Crown Victoria barreling toward us. He eased to a stop and threw one arm out the window.

"Quiere un Paseo? Entra," he said, and nodded at the back seat.

Omar looked relieved, but I was disappointed. The Juans smirked and resumed their game.

I went back to the bed and listened to Omar play the game by himself. I recognized the sound of his gun, the action music playing behind the cries of fallen enemies. I heard them eventually overtake him, the sound of him dying. The shadows took over the room. My eyes closed and I half-dozed. Riley came with me to my realm of should-haves, a place where I replayed the moments I was powerless and humiliated, imagining all the things I should have said or done. There I was some self-taught martial artist, a master of languages, telling off my step-father in perfect Spanish and beating up child-molesters. But there is only a small window

between waking wishes and the monster of the subconscious, and I usually found myself slipping under the tyranny of my dreams.

There was Trevor Milligan, the asshole line-backer, green-eyed and beaded with sweat, taunting me again for missing the ball. I heard the words again, *stupid fucking Spic*. He had taken off his helmet. There was my determined shove in response, the upper cut and tackle that followed. I had already won, but the others were on me with a vengeance. I felt the fists in my ribs, saw the coach rushing up through gaps in dirt-smeared jerseys, arms and knee braces. In the dream there were twice as many of them, two whole teams worth of arrogant white kids.

A different memory invaded, and I was in the back room of a church, Miguel's hard voice resonating. We were alone together, dressed in crisp tuxedos face to face in metal folding chairs. Organ music was muffled on the other side of the wall and the pin of my corsage was sticking me in the collarbone. His entire threat was in Spanish to humiliate me. I picked out enough of it to understand - my father had ruined me for the rest of the family. Things will be different from now on. My mother would never hear about this conversation. I was quiet, helpless, stifled in the rented jacket. Riley suddenly appeared in the dream, opening the door to the room and stepping in behind Miguel. He didn't notice her.

"James," she said, hands on her hips. "Don't be a pussy."

I woke to the evening, the television a blue beacon from the hallway. I got up and trudged out to the living room where Omar was on the last level of the game. Uncle Louis was stirring dinner and whistling. I joined my cousin on the couch. Omar was having a difficult time with the Warthog, a tank-like vehicle that had to be driven through a rough course with a strict time limit.

From the looks of it, Omar had failed a number of times. I watched him for a moment. He didn't acknowledge me.

“Do you want me to drive while you shoot?” I offered.

Omar paused the game and finally looked over. “About time,” he said.

We beat the game before dinner was ready. It took a few tries but we learned the course better each time. Omar knew where the enemies would come from. I knew where to turn and how to maneuver around ledges and corners. We reached the end and escaped the doomed structure, reveling in the spectacle of its explosion and the automated voice-overs telling us our mission was successful. Uncle Louis called us to the table.

At bedtime, Omar swore he found dark hairs on his chin after brushing his teeth. He pointed to them and I told him I saw them even though I didn't. We lay in the dark, talking about the game and how much longer I had until summer was over. Omar said a couple of the neighborhood kids told him the Juans had nicknamed me ‘flan-face’.

“Is it true what happened to Riley?” I asked after a short silence.

“Huh?”

“When she was younger, the day care thing,” I said.

“Oh, yeah,” Omar said. I heard him lifting himself up from the air mattress. The silhouette of his shaved head was a black oval. “You know what Theresa said? Her dad went to the guy's house and waited in his car for him to come home. Their mom called the cops and told them where he was. They found a shovel in the passenger seat. He probably would have killed him,” Omar lay back down. “It's weird how Riley talks about it, right? Like she's telling you

about the time she went to the circus or something. She says they gave her those dolls to play with, the ones with penises and vaginas, and made her shown them what he did.”

There was longer, more ominous silence. I remembered that the Spanish word ‘molestar’ means ‘to bother’. Omar’s ceiling fan creaked in intervals. Insects sang outside the window.

“You know I kicked that kid’s ass,” I said. Omar didn’t answer. “I had him on the ground but three of his friends pulled me off and wailed on me. His parents called Miguel.”

“What a bitch,” Omar said.

“Yeah. They figured out I wasn’t like them when they saw my mom and Miguel at the games. He’s thinking of moving down here. There aren’t a lot of Puerto Ricans in Tennessee,” I said. “You know he wants me to change my last name.”

“Are you for real?”

“Yeah, to Ramirez,” I said. “My mom said I could compromise and hyphenate it. I’d be James Clingmeyer- Ramirez.”

Omar broke out in laughter. It took me a few seconds, but I joined him. I realized I hadn’t laughed like that for months. Riley was right about bad feelings.

“Man,” Omar said as he sighed out the last of it. “Fuck Miguel.”

As August came on, the color of the sky became a dull yellow. Streaks of dirt lined driveways from afternoon car washing, and Saturdays were oppressed by yard sales. Dusty, neglected wares were put on long folding tables. Housewives wearing curlers ventured out to peruse old dish sets and rusted bicycles. Weekdays were quiet and long. A family of raccoons

had taken up residence near our lounge in the grove. We caught them ransacking the tire tower going after the snacks. After that, we brought food in smaller rations.

“Is it true you’re going home soon?” Riley asked me.

She was popping Raisinettes two and three at a time. Omar and Theresa were busy with rolling papers and her freshest bag of weed. I was lying on the green part of the tarp looking up at a passing plane.

“Next weekend,” I told her.

“Going back to the Heartland,” Theresa joked. “That sucks.”

“We forgot soda,” Riley said, standing up. “I’ll get it.”

“Dude,” Theresa said to me. “Go with her? She may need help carrying stuff.”

I sat up. Riley wore blue corduroys that day. I noticed her shoes were untied as she marched away behind the trees. “Yeah,” I said and trudged after her.

A warm breeze soared through the leaves, the roar of the airplane fading off. I followed the path, flecks of Riley’s pale blue pants between the branches. But, she wasn’t going back to her house. I stopped, lost sight of her. I checked my bearings, Omar’s chimney to the east and the yellow perimeter flags visible where the construction had halted.

“Riley?” I called out.

I didn’t hear her. I jogged a little down the aisle where I could see the fence near her yard. She wasn’t there. Then, I heard them. There were voices, familiar, male, hostile. An alert system seized me, that hot fever rushing to my head. The voices came from the edge of the grove near the tree line. I sprang forward, recognizing the Juans’ mocking laughter. There were flashes of clothing, red and white. Another few steps and I found them in the clearing where the

piles of dirt were packed down by the rains. The three of them had Riley cornered against a tree. The tallest one was leaning in, speaking Spanish to her. My face felt suddenly sunburned. I heard him say “*Quieres Tocarlo?*” *Do you want to touch it?*

“Come on, witch,” he said, switching to English. “You’re not afraid, are you?”

I was on them in seconds. I attacked strategically, taking one out and then the next. I kicked the tallest one in the bend of his knee and he buckled. I grabbed him by the hair and knocked his head against a tree. The next I punched in the face. It was Juan, then Juan. Alex backed away, then lurched forward and swung at me. I dodged and punched him in the stomach. He doubled over but didn’t go down. I kicked the side of his head where a gold earring peeked out from his hair and he fell over, disrupting the yellow tape and making a shape in the dirt.

The adrenaline surged through me. The grove spun and the air came fresh into my lungs. Some sweet, violent, masculine release found me. I was sad, angry, elated and powerful all at once. I had protected her. Juan and Juan got up and escaped down the rows, cursing. Alex lay at my feet in surrender. I drew back my fist, wanting to deliver one more blow, but I didn’t. My face was heated and wet. I realized it was tears.

I stepped back and wiped them away, wiped my nose and sniffed. Alex held up his hand, palm facing me in a pleading gesture. His ear trickled blood and the hair at his temple was matted with it. The Raisinette box was a few feet from him, the candy spilling out.

“You all right?” I called out to Riley, still staring down at Alex.

It was all over for me. I had almost made it to August without getting into a fight. Now, more parents would call Miguel. My mother would know. She would tell my father. Miguel

would have some harsh restriction or list of chores for me to do. He had threatened me with military school, the end-all for troubled boys.

The sound of coughing and spitting made me turn. Riley was throwing up again, thick dark clumps that dropped slow from her mouth. She was bent over, bracing her hands on her knees. Her little body trembled, her eyes red and wet and her face drained of color.

“I’m sorry,” she breathed. “I didn’t mean to, honest. I don’t know what happened.”

I felt myself go rigid and turned back. Alex was gone. The tape was pulled straight again from stake to stake. There was no imprint in the dirt. The grove was quiet and empty. I looked down at my hands. My knuckles stung but they were unscathed and pale. My hand pulsated with some phantom impact that never occurred. I turned it over and again in awe. I hadn’t hurt anyone. Riley was spitting into the bushes. I crossed the path to her.

“You don’t know what happened?” I asked her. “Why did you do that? Why did you screw with me like that?”

Riley sank to her knees, closed her eyes and steadied her breathing. “I didn’t screw with you,” she said. “I know you wanted them here. You needed a reason.”

Her face, the color light as mine and marked by the beginnings of womanly beauty, was resolute and calm. Another breeze hurried over the grove and gave a low hollow whistle as it passed through the concrete piping. I looked out at the leveled ground past the overgrown rows. There were knolls of grey dirt, squares of flagged string and of piles of block like a dig site. There was a sign, clean and new, sticking out of the ground where the long dumpster sat. ‘Iris Landing, Coming Soon’, it read.

I kneeled down and took Riley gently by the arm. She leaned on me as we walked toward the house, both of us disappearing behind the curtain of orange-flecked green.