

BLACK SKIES AND GRAY MATTER

by

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ABSTRACT

Black Skies and Gray Matter is a collection of stories thematically centered on characters that are lonely or lost in the world. These stories explore the characters' personalities through their interactions with others (strangers, family, friends, and spouses) and the difficulties they face being misunderstood. Their journeys are ones of trying to find happiness and their place in society (or rejecting it). As they face alienation, they must endure the trials of everyday life (some more extreme than others) and, at the same time, search for kindred spirits, a sense of belonging. Some stay true to themselves while others conform to social norms with various degrees of success and contentment. One trait all characters share is selfishness, but they are not aware of it, nor are they aware of how their selfishness affects others. These stories also explore the characters' philosophies and growth (or stagnation) through how they deal with alienation, loneliness, social awkwardness, drug abuse, alcoholism, disease, death, failure, rejection, and loss.

This work is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Ruby Ann Pallarino. She supported me financially, and encouraged me through all my creative and academic endeavors. I only wish that she could be here to see the end result.

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MUSTACHE

As Shaneen's house burned, she wondered if a strip of facial hair was really such a big deal. The fire started while she was at her monthly book club meeting, the only night she allowed herself more than one glass of wine. The fireman who was first on the scene said it seemed the fire originated in the attic. By the time she arrived, it had made its way through the second floor and was burning down the first. She heard the wires of her baby grand snap and pop. With each sharp, reverberating *ping* she imagined the spring steel flailing around like the arms of a sea monster. Both of her boys were safe. They were with her mother, Agnes, while she was with her book club. The four of them were now gathered with the onlookers across the street. Thurston, her oldest at eight, stared with eyes wide as pancakes. Gordon, age five, had his face hidden in his grandmother's belly. Marcus, her husband and main suspect, was MIA.

"You just had to push him, didn't you?" her mother asked. "Couldn't just let it go, eh? Couldn't just let this little crisis pan out? If you had just let it go, things would have gone back to normal eventually."

"Shut up, Mother." Shaneen looked away from the house long enough to see Agnes's eyes shrink.

"I know this is a stressful moment, honey, but you will not speak to me that way."

"Just take the boys home with you, OK? I'll come get them later."

"Come get them? Won't you be staying with us?"

Shaneen faced the burning house again, just in time to see the fire burst through the front bay window. Gordon screamed. Through all of this, he was the one she felt for the most, her fragile little boy. There was only numbness for her lost possessions, her failed marriage, and

even Thurston. The pity she felt for Gordon was so deep, she didn't flinch as her pink hydrangeas dissolved into smoke and ash. Gordon had started kindergarten a few months ago and returned traumatized. He seemed to get worse every day. She waited with him at the bus stop the first day, but didn't realize until it was too late that he'd sat in an ant pile. She swiped at his shorts and, since he didn't itch, assumed he hadn't been bitten. As she ushered him to the bus, she had a good feeling he would be fine because he didn't fuss or cling. She took his photo beside the open door of the bus, his hair parted to the left, lunch box held in front of him. He came home that afternoon, face flooded with tears and snot. He begged her not to make him go back.

She tried the go-to remedy for any mother comforting a six-year-old—a sit-down in front of the TV with a bowl of ice cream.

“Sweetie, you have to go to school. Everyone has to go to school,” she told him and brushed the hair from his forehead.

“I can't go back. They called me Brownfinger. I told them to stop, but they wouldn't stop saying it. I hate them and I'm not going anymore.” He wiped his nose with the back of his arm and kicked at his chair.

“Who's Brownfinger? What does that mean?” She rubbed his back and he shrugged her off.

“I'm Brownfinger! Because the teacher made us get in a circle by ourself and tell everybody stuff like our name and different stuff like if we have a pet or what kind of food we like. It was so stupid.”

“Well, I know you're shy, but that doesn't sound so bad, and it will help you make new friends.”

He started to cry again. “No. I got in the circle and I got scared. I got sweaty and my butt started to itch because the ants bit me there. I scratched my butt in the circle and now they won’t stop calling me Brownfinger. I hate them.”

She tried to be gentle and encouraged him by putting extra treats in his lunch, but every day was a struggle that left her angry and exhausted. Here, illuminated by the fire and flashing lights, she looked at him with his face buried in the ripples of Agnes’s dress and knew she had to get him out of there before he broke down.

“No, Ma. We’ll get a hotel room once I find Marcus. The boys always have fun in hotels,” Shaneen said, and stroked Gordon’s hair.

“Marcus will be staying in the slammer,” Agnes said, low enough so the boys wouldn’t hear.

“First you yell at me for not letting his behavior go, and now you want him in jail?”

“I never said I wanted him there, but he did commit a crime. There’s no way around it.”

“The fireman only said where it probably started. He didn’t say it was arson.”

“If he isn’t guilty, then why isn’t he here?”

Shaneen resented her mother’s accusation, but couldn’t help thinking that maybe Marcus was responsible. His behavior had been so erratic, there was no telling what he would do if provoked. Whatever the case, she wasn’t going to allow her mother the satisfaction of letting her believe she considered it a possibility. The gray nimbus of smoke shifted with the breeze and rose higher into black night sky.

“He’s probably drunk, Ma. I don’t know where he is on any other night. Just because the house is on fire doesn’t make tonight any different.”

Agnes said, “If you could have just let all this blow over, maybe he wouldn’t have taken to the drink so bad. To keep a man happy—”

“Just take the boys and go, Mother, please!”

The neighbors gathered around them stopped talking. Even Thurston broke his gaze from the house to look at her.

“Boys, go with Grandma now and I’ll come for you soon.”

“No way,” Thurston said. “This is awesome.”

Shaneen grabbed him by the elbow and steered him to Agnes’s 1958 Edsel Villager Wagon, a car Agnes bought twenty years before Shaneen was born—a gas-thirsty blight on the American landscape. She knew her mother didn’t love the car more than her, but it didn’t stop her from hating the hunk of shit. When she was a kid, all of her mother’s extra cash went into that car, to keep it in mint condition. To this day, it still had all its original parts: rubber floor mats, ashtrays, cigarette lighter, floating speedometer, spring green and white frost paint job, chromed rear-view mirror, crank-operated rear windows, boomerang taillights, and a three-speed manual transmission. Shaneen hated that she’d memorized all the specs from hearing her mother say it all the time. “It’s what Donna Reed drove, ya know.” Did she really think people cared? Shaneen openly wished the car would meet a grisly end, yet was still hurt when Marcus told her Agnes left it to him in her will.

“Come on, babies,” Agnes said, pulling the boys along. “How about some ice cream? Mommy needs to talk to the firemen some more.”

Not until the Edsel chugged around the corner did Shaneen’s shoulders relax. She lit up a Camel, another once-a-month luxury. Was sending him off with her mother the best thing for Gordon? She scoffed at the thought of Agnes offering her precious boy a scoop of butter pecan

in an old-fashioned tasteless wafer cone. A neighbor walked up, she assumed to offer condolences, but she waved him away. The December wind roused her hair into a frenzy. The fire was under control and the black cloud of smoke and steam above the house shrank slowly. She pulled the scratchy gray blanket the fireman gave her tight and wondered how easily she could sneak away to look for Marcus. She dialed his cell phone for the fifth time. Still no answer.

He had a mustache when they met, but at sixteen it was cute—a wispy thing he would smooth down with his thumb and forefinger when he thought she wasn't looking. However, the novelty of it quickly wore off. She thought it made him look trashy and told him she wouldn't kiss him unless he shaved it off. He did. He even thanked her.

“You're right, babe. The mustache was ugly. I looked like Kix Brooks with that thing. Now, you gonna do the Boot Scootin' Boogie with me or what?”

Shaneen told him he didn't look anything like Kix Brooks. “And that song is about line dancing.”

“Not to me it isn't,” he said and pulled her to him by her belt loops.

His mouth tasted like nacho cheese and Crystal Pepsi. She didn't care. She sucked in the tastes like nourishment. It wasn't her first kiss. It was the first that mattered. The truth was she would have kissed him whether he'd shaved or not. Shaneen was a daddy's girl, and she saw her father in Marcus. He shared her father's conservative values. He had no special talents. He wasn't particularly good at any subject in school. He was uncomfortably average. So he depended on the ethics of hard work in order to gain favor with his teachers.

He broke from the kiss and told her he couldn't wait to take care of her—to work forty hours a week, wherever he ended up, just so she could have all the things she ever wanted, so she

could live better than both of their mothers. He pulled his finger down her spine and tucked a curl behind her ear.

“You’ll never have to worry about anything with me, babe. Just stay happy and beautiful.”

She lost her virginity in the back seat of the hated Edsel that night.

To his credit, Marcus lived up to his promise, though they struggled in the beginning. He started at the bottom of his company and, with dedication and a lot of overtime, moved his way up. A short time ago, the vice president of the company suffered a massive coronary and Marcus knew all his time and effort had finally paid off. All he had to do was wait for the old man to die and slip into that VP spot. That was until the bastard CEO announced to the whole staff that his deadbeat, stoner, mooch of a son was the new VP. He paraded the little fucker in, cleaned up, though he wasn’t fooling anyone, and announced that he should be welcomed and groomed to take over the company. All this Marcus told Shaneen after dinner that night. He huffed for an hour and drained almost the whole bottle of scotch he was saving for his promotion celebration.

“Seventeen years, Shan. Seventeen years and I get pushed aside by some scruffy little burnout?”

“Well, he is the boss’s son.”

“I don’t give a shit who he is. That job is mine. Gerry promised it to me two fucking years ago.” He swatted a stack of mail off the counter and kicked the garbage can.

“There’s no reason to take it out on me. And keep your voice down. Gordon’s in our bed.”

Marcus raised his head and shook it at the ceiling. “Christ, really? Again? That kid is a fucking sissy and your coddling is just making it worse. I’m putting him upstairs where he belongs.”

“Don’t. Just leave him alone. He’ll grow out of it.”

Marcus sat down and poured another glass. “What’s the point in doing the right thing?”

“What?”

“I married my high school sweetheart. I work hard to provide for you guys. You have all these nice things—jewelry, a big house, name-brand clothes. You drive a BMW and get your hair and nails done every other week. I’ve never cheated on you, and believe me, I’ve had a few chances. Drunken company Christmas parties, the ones you refuse to go to, and a couple business trips.”

“Marcus.”

“I started two college funds for the boys, even though Thurston is probably too dense to get in.”

“Marcus!”

“I donate a couple thousand dollars to charity every year. I vote Republican. I go to church. I’ve done everything right. I’ve become the exact man I was raised to be. And for what? To get shit on at work? To come home to a wife who won’t pay attention to me because she’s too busy smothering our crybaby son?”

Shaneen left the room. He was too drunk and could wallow alone. If he was going to insult her and the life they’d built together, he could tell it to the toaster.

Marcus began to openly court failure after that. His alcoholism increased, he rarely came home before ten p.m., and he stopped making an effort at work. He did so poorly that he was

demoted. He seemed so much happier after that. Before, when he got home from work, he would grump all the way to the fridge and didn't speak to anyone until he had a beer. After the demotion, he came home in a good mood and played video games with the boys before dinner, even though Shaneen suspected it was because he'd started drinking at work.

It had been over an hour since Shaneen got the frantic call from her mother, and the fire was out. Neighbors trickled back into their houses and Shaneen decided it was time to leave. She couldn't stand it any longer—the pitiful glances, the acrid smell of smoke, the flashing lights. The fire chief told her to stick around until they were finished, but she didn't listen. She walked to her car and left without notice. She slipped a CD into the player and tried to remember which bar Marcus told her was his favorite.

Before the boys were born, they went out every weekend. Marcus was still pretty low-ranking in his company, but the pay wasn't bad and he said he wanted to watch her bend over a pool table as much as possible. The times she knew he was the only one watching, she took her time aiming. Only when he finally said, "Come on, babe," would she hit the ball hard enough for maximum jiggle. The first few years of their marriage were a blur of sex, laughter, and whiskey. It was foolish to think that with kids and Marcus's hours that the fun would last. It was inevitable that the sex would dry up and the laughter would diminish. Only the whiskey remained.

Of course she was disappointed he didn't get the promotion. She enjoyed the luxury his salary provided more than anyone. She was groomed for a certain lifestyle. Her mother, a thirty-year secretary, told Shaneen to find a man who would support her—not to waste her life behind a desk getting shredded by paper cuts, fetching coffee, and being ogled by every Tom, Dick, and Harry at the office. So that's what she did. She found a man who promised to take care of her, snatched him up, and locked him down. Since the demotion, that security was in danger. She had

no skills outside of the home, and at thirty-eight probably couldn't even get a job in an office. She would have to resort to a hostess job at some chain restaurant or running a cash register—jobs with little glamor and even less respect. She tried to concentrate on the road while going through worst-case scenarios: going on welfare, moving back in with her parents, living in the Edsel. Now that the house was gone, Marcus had to get his shit together so they could afford to get back to normal. She wondered if her mother was right. Should she have stood by him despite his downward spiral? Would he have eventually snapped out of it? Did she push him further?

After the demotion, he embraced his new coworkers who he once called his underlings. He came home with stories about how Manny, practicing his golf swing, knocked a hole in the break room wall, how Phil brought his wife's Chihuahua in and let it piss outside the new VP's office, how he caught Mackie and Cliff making out in the supply closet. She listened to them all with feigned amusement until the day he came home and announced that he'd started a mustache growing contest. He thought she would be happy because the winner would get two-hundred dollars.

About a month ago, as they were getting ready for bed, he said, "Look at it, Shanny, so thick and lustrous. I never thought in high school that I was capable of growing such a beacon of masculinity." He did his best lion roar and practiced some muscle man poses in the mirror.

"I hate it," Shaneen said, as she put lotion on her legs. "Would you just shave it, please? I won't kiss you again until that thing is gone."

"Not a chance, babe," he said and pointed a finger at her. "That shit might have worked when we were kids, but this kick-ass-stache ain't going nowhere." He turned back to the mirror. The mustache was thick and dark with a streak of gray at the corner. "I draw all my manly powers from this bad boy. It reeks of swagger and virility. It's so magnificent Burt Reynolds

would weep like a toddler at the sight of it.” He banged on his chest and yelled like Tarzan. Shaneen couldn’t repress a laugh. He was, again, the boy she fell in love with, but she convinced herself that wasn’t who she wanted anymore.

“OK, Marc, I get it. You’re a god among men, but don’t you think you’re being a little selfish?”

He mimicked choking himself.

She was glad. Maybe if she made him angry enough, he would be forced to realize how silly he was.

“You look like a washed-up country singer,” she told him, “and the boys—”

“Are you kidding? The boys love it. And Gordon could use a more manly influence. Between you and your damn mother? It’s time that kid grew some fucking balls.”

“That’s enough. I’m sick of the way you talk about him. Just because he’s a little sensitive doesn’t mean anything’s wrong with him.”

“He keeps crying about the kids at school calling him a butt picker, Shan. He needs to smack the shit out of the next punk who says that to him, not run home and cry to his mommy.”

“Just get the hell out of here. You’re sleeping in the guest room until you shave that thing.”

He snatched his pillow from the bed and had slept in the guest room ever since. Even after winning the contest, he refused to shave. Every morning at breakfast, she zeroed in on each little coarse hair. The mustache swayed with each breath. She swore it made a rustling sound whenever he spoke. He let it grow so long that it curled under his upper lip. He kept a little black comb in his back pocket and groomed the damn thing obsessively. One morning it nearly made

her throw up. He got milk on it and sucked it off with his bottom lip. That was the last she could handle. She began to plot the mustache's demise.

Denying him sex didn't work. The alcoholism had already muted his libido. Berating him only made him angry and caused him to lash out. She tried to change the boys' minds about it by calling it nerdy, but that didn't work either, not even with Gordon. He said it was cool and wanted to grow a whole beard when he got big. She bought disposable razors and left them around the house and in Marcus's car. She stopped wearing makeup and shaving her legs and underarms, but since they weren't having sex, he didn't care. She threatened divorce once only to be rudely reminded that she and the boys depended on him. She knew the mustache was there to stay, but she couldn't resign herself to living with it. She realized that if the mustache was going to die, it was up to her to kill it.

Marcus's habit on Thursday nights, his poker night, was to come home drunk, chug a few more drinks, pass out on the couch, wake up late for work, and leave in the same clothes from the day before. Shaneen told her mother she was having trouble sleeping because of the stress and begged a few Xanax from her.

The night before the fire, she sat down with Marcus to watch TV with him with the ground-up pills in a vial in her pocket. Neither of them spoke. They watched late-night talk shows and every time he got up to pee, she poured a tiny bit of powder into his drink. By the fourth drink, he leaned over and put his arm around her. She resisted shoving him off and, instead, put her face into his. They made out like sixteen-year-olds. She didn't realize until then how much she missed his touch. He had always been a good kisser. Even with the mustache tickling her face, she trembled. He used the perfect amount of tongue and the way he squeezed the small of her back made her moan involuntarily.

“I knew you’d come around,” he whispered in her ear and passed out on top of her before he even got his pants off.

She rolled him onto his back and lightly slapped his face a couple times, just to make sure. He didn’t respond. He only snored and farted. She ran to the bathroom and grabbed a razor and a cup of water. She didn’t bother with shaving cream. That would have taken too long. She swirled the razor around in the water and went to work on the mustache, taking care not to cut him. He didn’t move once, and in a couple minutes, the mustache was gone. She looked at what she’d done and couldn’t believe she’d pulled it off with how bad she shook. She barely contained her laughter as she brushed the stray hairs onto the floor where they disappeared into the rug. She took one last look at Marcus’s naked face before she went upstairs and locked herself in her room. She didn’t come out until he left for work.

After driving around downtown for about an hour, she saw his car in the parking lot of The Wet Spot. She didn’t remember it being his favorite and it was the seediest place in town that she knew of. Maybe he didn’t want to be found, she thought. The place was nearly dead. A couple college-age guys were playing foosball, trendy pop music played, and Marcus sat alone at the bar, a bottle of cheap beer in front of him. Shaneen sat to his left and set her purse on the sticky bar. She pulled down her skirt to cover her knees.

“Well, now, what brings the princess down to these parts?” Marcus asked. He wobbled a bit as he looked over and patted her knee.

“Why’d you do it, Marc?” It wasn’t her intention to interrogate him, but it just came out.

“You’re going to have to be more specific than that, babe.” He emptied his bottle and signaled for two more.

“Do you hate me that much?” Shaneen asked.

He looked at her, steady this time. He fingered the bare spot above his lip and bit the inside of his cheek. “I’m capable of a lot of things, but hating you isn’t one of them.”

She relaxed. Without the mustache, he looked like the boy in high school who promised her she would never want for anything. That was strange because he didn’t look like that a month before. She thought she was being hasty believing Agnes’s paranoid assumption. The house was over one-hundred years old. There could have been an electrical shortage exacerbated by the fiberglass insulation. Wouldn’t Marcus smell like smoke if he’d set a fire? He was surely smart enough to drive a little farther than a few blocks from home if he’d just committed a felony.

“Marc, the house just burned down.”

He laughed and handed her one of the beers. “What?”

“I thought maybe you did it as revenge for me shaving off your mustache.”

“Wait, you’re serious? Holy shit, babe, what are we doing here then? We have to go.”

“It’s too late. The fire is already out and the house is a total loss.”

“The boys!”

“They’re at my mother’s. No one was home when it happened.” She took a gulp of the beer and winced. “I called you five times.”

“I think my phone’s in the car. The house is really gone?”

“Yes.” She forced down another swig and took Marcus’s hand. “Settle up here and we’ll go get the boys and find a hotel.”

“But how did this happen?”

She wondered if he was being honest. She never could tell when he was lying. From the beginning of their relationship she was convinced he never lied because she had never caught

him. For all his shortcomings, she clung to the notion that he was an honest man in dishonest times and she was lucky to have someone so pure. She wondered if this was another ploy to drive her nuts. The mustache was one thing, but could he set the fire, wait for her to come after him, and feign innocence? With such a spike in the stakes, she doubted it, but couldn't let her guard down.

"I don't know," she said. "They'll tell us the cause when they figure it out. It's an old house, Marc. I'm not sure why I assumed you did it. Just because you've been so spiteful, I guess."

"Bored," he said and finished his beer. "Ask your mom to keep the kids tonight. Let's get that hotel room alone. Now that the 'stache is gone, I say we make our own little fire."

She couldn't believe it, but she giggled at the suggestion and even considered it. Until the fire, she couldn't stop thinking about their time on the couch last night and wished he hadn't passed out so soon. But the conversation wasn't over. There were too many things that needed to be said. Things she never had said and wasn't even sure what they were anymore.

"Aren't you concerned? We're homeless, Marc."

"We have the best insurance any almost-VP can buy."

"The boys can stay with Agnes, but I've had enough fire for one night."

He dropped two twenties on the bar and stood. "OK, but just one thing first. How'd you do it?"

"Do it?"

"How'd you shave the mustache without waking me up? The way footsteps echo in that house and the unholy squeak of that bathroom door, I should have been awake before you got

within two feet of me, even as drunk as I was. You know I went to work and didn't even notice the damn thing was gone until almost lunchtime?"

She pinched his cheek and said, "I micked you."

He laughed. "You what? How?"

"I crushed up some pills and poured them into your drinks when you went to the bathroom. Today you're, no, I'm mustache free."

He gave her the keys and put his arm around her. He waved to the bartender and they both left.

"You know what, babe? I think we're going to be OK."

So that was it? They were fixed? She wondered if he would feel the same when he woke up sober. After the mustache, and now the fire, she wondered if he felt so nonchalant on the inside. They might be able to rebuild their house, but their relationship? They could buy another, albeit cheaper and smaller house, but if the marriage was going to survive, they would have to work a lot harder. Start over or give up. There was no rebuilding that could fix over a decade of tension and denial. Her mother might not forgive her if she got divorced. Gordon might not be able to handle it either. She felt stuck.

If Marcus was truly OK and willing to work things out, they might have a chance at being happy again, but how long until tensions flared back up and they were back to mustaches and sleeping in separate beds again? It was true that Marcus had changed since the demotion. He stopped caring about the end-game and began enjoying himself. He now took life as it came and brushed off all the bullshit he once thought was the key to happiness. It was only then that he truly seemed happy—talking about the guys at work, playing games with the boys, even that damn mustache made him smile. Money didn't do it, the house, or climbing the corporate ladder.

He only worked for those things because that's what he was told he was supposed to do. Maybe that's why he wasn't more upset about the house. Assets and stature no longer mattered to him. She wondered if she could adopt the same outlook.

She got into the car and looked at him. He patted her knee again and smiled.

"I mean it, babe. We're going to be OK."

She didn't hate herself for believing him. She wanted to believe him. She hated herself for not believing him, but going along with him anyway.

A DIVE INTO THE MAELSTROM

As he waited out the head rush, David held his temples with his fingers. Eyes closed, he listened to the last of the parishioners as they shuffled out the door. They mumbled to each other about the service and where to go for lunch. When he was sure he was alone, he took a small plastic flask from his jacket and snuck a quick swig. The dizziness was replaced with something else—something warm. Dust swirled in beams of sunlight from a small square window above. He watched the dust particles as they moved upward and imagined them as tiny angels dancing towards heaven. A throat cleared in the back of the room, and he shoved the flask back in his jacket pocket.

He turned around and thought he saw his mother standing in the doorway, but it was Helen Small, the church's organist. She had come to play a few songs the old Wurlitzer. David listened to her rendition of Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue in D minor*. He thought again of his mother. Ever since she had passed a year earlier, he had expected to see her everywhere—catch glimpses out of the corner of his eyes, like in the movies. He would constantly look over his shoulder while he washed the dishes, did homework, or cleaned the cat box. He had slept in her bed the night before. But nothing ever evoked her apparition. He couldn't pick up her scent even though he hadn't washed anything of hers. He didn't distress. Most of the time he could close his eyes and see her face, and if that failed, he could always recall the sting of her paddle. He didn't deny himself the love he felt for her and the loneliness he would endure without her, but the pull of freedom seemed to overpower all his senses. He finally had his chance to live the life he'd always wanted so she needed to stay in the past.

Once Helen had finished the song, David applauded her and left to run errands and get

ready for a date with the new woman in his life. Siobhan, with her sweet smoky scent of cupcakes, incense, and coffee, was a promise of a fresh understanding of the world. He had known her since kindergarten, but had only recently gathered up the courage to speak to her. They'd become close friends quickly and had been dating for almost a month. He picked her up that evening and drove to I Tuoi Amici, an Italian café made of stucco and covered in dark green ivy, which looked black in the moonlight. The restaurant was close to campus and Siobhan's favorite. She said that even though the place was tiny and dark, the food was the best you could get this side of the Atlantic, and the foam on their cappuccinos was taller and fluffier than a cumulonimbus.

They arrived a little before eight, and a short, round woman with sleepy eyes greeted them and showed them to a table next to a large square window, which rose up from the floor and nearly swallowed the entire dining room in its reflection. Siobhan ordered a glass of sauvignon blanc. David sat with his back to the window and chose strong French-Canadian ale. He chose it because of the name, *La Fin Du Monde*. The end of the world. Siobhan teased him a little bit about having to drive him home if he drank more than one.

"I ended up getting fired from a job the day after drinking four of those in an hour," she said.

"I'll try and restrain myself," David said, and he raised his glass for a toast.

"*Sláinte*," Siobhan said, and they drank for a moment in silence while David studied the menu. Siobhan's wine glass caught her reflection from the black window. He only had a moment to ponder the possibly infinitesimal Siobhans contained in that reflection of a reflection before the server came back for their order. He decided on spaghetti and sausage with extra garlic. Siobhan chose bucatini puttanesca.

“Extra garlic, eh?” Siobhan said. “Forget driving you home, I think I might take a cab.” She smiled, snapped a breadstick in half.

“I wouldn’t want you to think I had any crazy ideas,” he said and imagined what kind of person she would have been if she were born in another time and place. In the bohemian streets of Ginsberg’s New York, an angel-headed hipster laying waste to convention with sex, drugs, and art. In Ancient Ireland, a Celtic warrior with an arsenal of daggers strapped to her body, slaying those who crossed her. In Salem, she would have fled the witch trials in the night, barefoot despite the cold and arriving in Boston with black feet and a voracious thirst for lager. The Siobhan he knew was a bombshell with a hair color she called Toyota blond because it matched the interior of her Corolla. Her personality had an irresistible gravity. She was a black hole. If you strayed too close, she would spaghettify you.

“Why did you tell Andy to break up with Tarra?” David asked her. He looked down and twirled his pasta into a mound.

“He asked me for advice, I gave it to him. That girl is nuts. She stole my dog in fifth grade, I swear it.”

“What did you do?”

“I couldn’t prove it. I think she kept it at her dad’s house. I didn’t know where he lived. No one did, but she never had any animal hairs on her clothes until after Van Gogh went missing.”

“So, you told him to break up with her because she stole your dog ten years ago?”

She drained her glass of wine and set the empty glass at the end of the table. “I told him to break up with her because he wanted a reason to.”

“How do you know that? Is that what he said?”

“No, I knew that’s what he wanted me to say. I didn’t even mention the dog, although I’m sure he remembered it. I was irate for the rest of the school year.”

“How can you be so confident in what he was thinking?”

“What’s a matter, David? Don’t you have faith in my powers?”

He laughed and shook a fist-sized knot of pasta off of his fork. “It’s that you have so many close friends who confide in you.”

“And?” She put her elbows up on the table and cradled her face in her hands.

“I mean, I’ve noticed you seem to have these intensely... philosophical, transcendental conversations with such a wide variety of people, and you become close friends with them almost immediately. It’s like you have some sort of compatible-friend radar.”

She continued to watch him and said nothing.

The tea light candle in the center of the table flickered and went out, sending up a thin, black trail of smoke into the fan. “It’s not a bad thing. Don’t look at me like that,” David said.”

“Well, I don’t get the point you’re trying to make.”

“It’s that you’re a very open and accepting person.”

“What’s that have to do with Andy and Tarra?”

“I don’t know. Nothing, I guess.”

That’s Amore played for the second time since they’d arrived and a loud crash of glass echoed from the kitchen. The staff offered up a round of applause. Their waiter, a tall middle-aged man with a heavy accent and a bad comb-over, stood at the bar and chatted with a petite waitress with large breasts. The smell of garlic and tomatoes reminded David of his mother’s chili. If she was still alive, he would have probably been at home, at that exact moment, eating her chili or something like it, at her immaculately set table, conscious of little more than trying

not to stain the white table cloth.

“I guess I’m jealous, you know?” David said. “I wish I could connect with people that deeply.”

“Don’t we connect, David?”

“Yeah, but that has nothing to do with me. It’s all you. You opened me up. I would have never done that on my own. I don’t know if I have it in me to take a chance on anyone.” He looked up at the ceiling and noticed the exposed wiring. “To take a chance on anything.”

Siobhan sat back and relaxed. “Well, I’m not as accepting as you think I am. Most people I can’t stand, and I judge them right away based on their appearance. Sometimes I change my mind about them, but those people who are close to me, as many as there are, they’re the only ones who’ve passed my initial judgment.”

David laughed. “Really? That’s kind of cruel, actually.”

She tilted her head up at the ceiling and grinned. “I know. Underneath this charming smile lies a misanthrope of impressive ability.”

This made David think. He hadn’t realized it before, but for someone who was, he thought, as accepting as she was of human nature, there were a few pet peeves he knew about, such as men who wore flip flops or had a mustache, white people with dreadlocks, anyone who wore Ed Hardy, or girls who said, “hey girl, hey!” He was curious and excited at the prospect of learning others.

“OK, look at that girl over there with the Mohawk,” she said. She handed him a small mirror. “Look at her reflection. Don’t turn around.”

A girl in a red shirt sat alone at the bar, drinking a light amber-colored cocktail and reading a paperback. Based on his view of her reflection, he guessed she was a little older than

they were, maybe twenty five, and that her hairstyle could barely qualify as a Mohawk.

“I wouldn’t call that a Mohawk,” he said.

“Exactly!”

He smiled. “What’s the problem?”

“It’s a half-ass-hawk. Why bother? Mohawks make a statement, David. And do you want to know what that fauxhawk says to me?”

“Indulge me.”

“It says to me she listens to Avril Lavigne.”

“So she has bad taste in music,” David said, a little annoyed that she would judge someone so harshly based on the music she only thought the woman listened to. Chances are Siobhan was completely wrong, and even if she was right, what’s to gain by being so subjective?

“Worse, she wants so badly to be different, but she’s afraid she won’t fit in anywhere, so she dances around the edge of danger without getting too close.”

“Yeah, but who has the courage to do that? I don’t. Do you?”

“I do and I have, but I went all the way. I had to drive down the street like Ace Ventura because I couldn’t fit my liberty spikes in the car, but I don’t need all that anymore because I know who I am. And so do you. You just need to make that leap into the unknown. You need to discover those things you know are out there waiting for you. Why go through life with a wannabe Mohawk? Look at it, with those stringy bangs. Without that cheap hairspray she’s using, she still has the option to look normal. What a lame-o.”

David couldn’t accept Siobhan’s animosity toward this poor woman. Why feel bad about being normal? Isn’t being normal just being yourself if that’s what you are? Isn’t sporting a Mohawk or liberty spikes, a leather jacket and ripped jeans just another way to label yourself?

The punk rock uniform was, after all, just another system of conformity. It was the orthodoxy of refusing to conform. By removing all labels of society, you were then wearing a new set of labels.

“What if she had to look presentable for work?” he asked.

“That’s a good point, but why can’t someone who works in an office or a school have pink liberty spikes? If she wanted to shave those sides closer and let that hawk grow taller, she shouldn’t have to be afraid to. Why not dive into the maelstrom? You might not know what’s at the bottom, but it sure is a fun ride.”

David knew she didn’t give a shit about the girl at the bar—that she was trying to make a point. He thought of the organ music from earlier that day. His mother had encouraged him to join the children’s choir when he was eight years old. He was enthusiastic about learning music. The Southern Baptist Church didn’t turn down any child, no matter how badly they carried a tune. He asked Brother Dan if he could join, and he was in. Just like that.

His mother had encouraged David to join the choir just to keep him involved in the church on some level, but she did not want him to invest any of his extracurricular activities to learning an instrument. She sensed his interest in the church slipping and found a way to keep him involved. She was the type of woman who wanted to give people the impression of excellence. Even if it wasn’t so, she presented herself as a model of perfection. She never left the house without each strand of her black hair meticulously groomed, her nails polished a neutral color and cut to a moderate length, her clothes stain and wrinkle-free. In the house, there were hand-made doilies on the couch arms and a gleaming, polished china cabinet. David was expected to keep the lawn freshly mowed and was forbidden to feed the ducks that lived near the lake.

David was expected to become a pillar of the community, not a musician, and the church choir was only something to add to his résumé as one of the reasons to show the world he was a pure soul, deserving of reverence in all the future pursuits she had picked out for him. Law school was her first choice. He was to become a lawyer, and from there, a judge, then onto politics. She truly believed her son would become president of the United States. They were noble expectations, he believed, but falsely executed.

When he was fifteen, David borrowed a copy of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* from the school library. He looked forward to reading the book because he had heard from his classmates that it was a great story, and wanted to fit in and discuss it with them. When his mother found the book in his backpack, she grounded him for a week and demanded that he take it back to the library, but he didn't. He hid it from her and read it in secret. In doing so, he felt a new sense of freedom. He felt foolish because he had always been so obedient to his mother and blindly believed anything she said. He began to question her guidance after reading the book because he found that it actually was good, and the story which she proclaimed to be evil was anything but. Besides, it was just a story. There was no harm in reading fantasy, he thought. All books can't be the Bible. It was his first introduction to the thought that someone whom he admired could be wrong, and it's that memory which led him to question Siobhan's guidance. He began to skip out on his debate team meetings after school and went to the public library instead. He read authors like Camus, Melville, Thoreau, Barth, Sagan, and Dawkins. He also began to question his life and his feelings regarding the things his mother had taught him about God and the Bible. He didn't take everything he read in books to heart, but he gained the ability to think for himself and make his own decisions.

He felt a disorienting pull between his mother and Siobhan. He wanted to dive into the maelstrom like she said, but he knew he wasn't ready. There had to be a happy medium. Besides, he was still so young, not even a college graduate. There was so much more time to learn, so much more time to study the world and his place in it. Siobhan, he knew was only trying to help him take the final step into the unknown, a place he was curious to discover. He was too slow for her, it seemed, at gaining the courage to change his life, to start taking chances and dictate where he was headed, but he needed that time of his own, he decided. He pondered, there at dinner, whether he should put some distance between him and another powerfully opinionated woman before he was ready to embrace having a mind of his own.

"Have you given any more thought to changing your major?" she asked him. The waiter had brought them fresh drinks and taken away their dirty plates.

"Yes, but what if I'm not any good? I only started playing guitar a year ago, and I can't sing. I don't know if I can abandon pre-law and just go for broke."

"Then pick up a music minor. You're good, David, you're so good. Trust me. Only Thurston Moore can write better songs than you."

He looked at her sideways. "Don't exaggerate."

"OK, I'm flattering you, but I am serious about how good you are. Please don't be afraid. I wouldn't encourage you to do it if I didn't believe you could."

Later that night, in bed, David thought about what Siobhan had said. He thought about how badly he wanted to believe her and pursue music. The fear his mother had instilled in him since childhood still left him cold, and he shivered at the thought of what she would do if she were still alive. He got up and grabbed her old wooden paddle that she had used ever since he could remember. It was twelve inches long, four inches wide, and an inch thick. It had holes

drilled into it for minimum air resistance. When he was ten, after she caught him stealing bubble gum from the grocery store, she had it lacquered. David took it into the back yard and flung it into the lake. He knew he would follow Siobhan into the abyss, but he would do it at his own pace.

JOYRIDE

June 30, 1995 was the first time I ever got drunk—not the first time I had a drink or the first time I caught a buzz. I guess I could say it was the precursor of a long line of mistakes. A lesson not learned. It was a Friday. I remember the date so well because it was my sixteenth birthday. There was no celebration. No presents. No sweet sixteen hoopla, but there was never a shortage of booze to indulge in after my mom passed out for the night, which was usually pretty early, even on the weekdays. My dad worked at Winn-Dixie, managing the night-stock crew, so I had until about eight in the morning to cause as much under-the-radar mischief as I could manage—to celebrate in my own way.

Tilly, my best friend and next door neighbor, spent the night, as she normally did. We decided to start the night with a few rum and Cokes and some TV. We lived in a semirural town in Western Tennessee called Indian Springs. It was a combination of green hills, meth labs, beech trees, Mennonites, and rubes. The Indians had long since been relocated to reservations halfway across the country, and the only springs to speak of could be found exclusively in our mattresses. The name of the place made no sense and neither did anyone wanting to live there, we thought. Tilly and I planned on moving to Orlando as soon as we turned eighteen. Tilly's older brother had just moved there to go to college and had a full time job wearing a character costume in ninety-five degree weather, posing with suburban brats from all over the world. His words. We were sure he was exaggerating because everyone hates their job and he probably didn't want his little sister swooping in and cramping his style. But we were certain better lives awaited us, and Florida was just as good a place as any and the only place where we knew anyone.

“I’m bored, Shawna,” Tilly said after about an hour or so of watching *Northern Exposure* reruns. Tilly had a crush on Chris, the philosophical shaggy-haired DJ. I was more into Ed, the founding movie buff. She pushed Nightbeast, my cat, off her lap and swiveled her head in my direction. Nightbeast landed with a dull thud on the carpet, shook it off, and set to raptly chewing on his left foot. Tilly’s eyes were red-rimmed and droopy. Her kinky blond hair, always parted in the middle, was squished into an M-shape on the top of her head. “We have to do something fun or I’m going to pass out.”

“I rented the new *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. We could watch that. You won’t sleep till Sunday.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’d rather eat a bowl of your dad’s Texas chili.”

“You’ll have diarrhea till Sunday.”

“Seriously, can’t you think of anything that doesn’t involve fake blood and screaming women?”

I tapped my fingernails on my teeth for a few seconds and, giving her my best devious eyebrow dance, said, “Let’s take my mom’s car for a drive.”

“You’re a genius. You should drive, though. I don’t think I can stand straight. Where we going?”

“Anywhere. We’ll figure it out in the car. Let’s just get out of here. Come on.”

I threw back the last of my latest drink and struggled a bit to get up, but managed to with minimal wobbling. Tilly wasn’t so lucky. She was sitting in my dad’s favorite recliner, a white La-Z-Boy with foot and arm rests worn gray. She was sitting with her stubby legs draped over one of the arm rests and her head on the other. She put her hands on the seat and pushed herself up. As she stood and started to walk, her feet tangled up with each other and she fell and crashed

into the coffee table. I should have helped her up but stood there laughing until I realized how noisy we were.

“Be quiet. You’re going to wake up my mom,” I said.

I went into the hallway at the far end of the house and saw that my mom’s bedroom door was slightly open. The light from the TV flickered and lit up a vertical strip on the opposite wall. I could hear an audience laughing at David Letterman reciting that night’s top ten list, but what I couldn’t hear was my mother’s legendary snoring. My dad called her The Lumberjack because of her expertise at sawing logs. *Shit, we did wake her up.*

I peeked through the crack in the door and saw her face down on the bed. Her head was down where her feet should have been, and all but two of her seven pillows were on the floor. I assumed I could jump on the bed singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” and still not wake her. I sucked in a deep breath and walked in to grab the car keys from her purse. I took three Valiums while I was in there.

“Living in the heart of Nowheresville, a person needs a little trip to La-La-Land every once in a while,” is what my mom said when I asked her why she took drugs. I was twelve and had been nipping them from her ever since. I thought it was impossible that she didn’t notice, yet she never confronted me. Perhaps it was guilt for taking them herself. Maybe she just didn’t care.

When I returned to the living room, Tilly was back in the recliner, this time sitting up straight and rubbing her raw-red elbow. I asked her if she was OK. She stood up and gave me a double-thumbs-up in response.

We left through the front door and out into the balmy summer night. I hadn’t gotten my driver’s license yet but had been driving since I was thirteen.

“Oh hell yeah,” Tilly said and skipped towards the car, her hair now smoothed down to its normal frizz. She looked back at me and said, “This going to rock, sistah.” Just as she said it, she tripped again, catching herself, but not before she slapped the hood of the car, setting off the alarm.

I gasped and tried to hit the button on the remote to shut it off. I forgot which one to push and just stood there mashing buttons. The trunk flew open and I dropped the keys on the pavement. The neighbor’s dog, a large chow and black lab mix that I called Cerberus, was barking and the porch light flicked on from the house across the street.

I picked up the keys and pressed the right button. Once the loud chirps stopped, I paused to gather myself. I waved to Gladys across the street who was peeping at us through her blinds. She snapped them shut and her porch light went out. I looked over at Tilly who was crouched down biting her nails. Even in the dim street light, her eyes twinkled and I couldn’t seem to get mad at her. With my mud-brown eyes and ashy brown hair, I had always been jealous of her looks. She claimed to also be jealous of me because I was tall. When you’re a young girl, you envy others’ looks; your best friend, the girls you don’t even like, women on television, pretty much anyone who isn’t like you. If you’re short, you want to be tall. If your hair is straight, you’re jealous of any girl with curly hair. If you have brown eyes, you want them to be blue or green, but not the other way around. No one wants brown eyes. I imagined that if a boy ever looked into my eyes, he would only admire his own reflection in the opaque darkness. If he looked into Tilly’s, he would see into them and easily find all the good that was inside her.

When my mom failed to come running out the door, I assumed she was dumping the contents of the luggage she called her purse onto the bed in search of her keys, or that she was

still in a whiskey/pill coma. I thought about ducking behind the car in case she came out but figured Tilly would muck that up too. So I just stood there, waiting to get caught.

Mom didn't come out.

"Go around back and peek in her window. See if she's still crashed," I told Tilly who didn't hesitate. "And for shit's sake, stay on your feet."

I closed the trunk and Tilly came back a minute later. She gave me double-thumbs-up again. I smoothed my eyebrows and got into the driver's seat. Tilly fumbled with the door handle a little and slid into the passenger's seat.

"I can't believe she didn't wake up," she said.

I reached into my pocket and showed her the pills. "Maybe because she took a couple of these babies."

"Score!" She took one and swallowed it dry.

"We should have split that," I said. "Who knows how it will affect you, lightweight?"

I took another one and washed it down with a warm, flat diet pop that was left in the cup holder. I remembered leaving it there the day before, but it wasn't nearly as disgusting to me as what Tilly had done.

I started the car and we put our seatbelts on. I backed out of the driveway and didn't turn the headlights on until we were halfway down the street. Since my mom's bedroom was in the back of the house and we'd already made so much noise, I can't say exactly why I thought the stealth was necessary.

"Where should we go?" I asked Tilly.

"Let's see if Louis is still up."

"No, he went to New Jersey to visit his grandparents."

“That’s right. How about Brian’s then? I bet he’s just sitting around playing Super Nintendo anyway.”

“Brian lives twenty minutes away.”

“So? Come on, Shawns, your mom obviously isn’t going to wake up for anything and your dad won’t be home till the sun comes up. We’ve got plenty of time and nothing better to do. This was your idea. Let’s party, dude.”

That was enough for me. I drove to Brian’s house. It didn’t take too long for the pills to kick in, though I don’t think I noticed when they did. I drove back and forth—right to left over the yellow line of Indian Spring’s main highway—playing my favorite driving game, England-America, America-England. I drove through the orange light of the street lamps, blasting Nirvana and smoking from a pack of Virginia Slims that my mother always kept in a pocket on the sun visor. The speed limit on that stretch of road was fifty-five, and the car started shaking a little around sixty, so I made sure to keep it just under seventy. I missed a small creature that looked to us to be a cross between a platypus and a gerbil.

We joked about our narrow escape from the Gerbtypus and pulled into Brian’s driveway at about half-past midnight. There were no lights on in the house and no cars in the driveway. I thought I saw a human-shaped shadow in the living room window, but it didn’t move, so I wrote it off as imagination.

“Great,” I said. “We drove all the way here and no one’s home.”

By that time Tilly had succumbed to the effects of the pill. She was snoozing with her head tilted to the left, mouth open. I realized how heavy I was feeling then since I wasn’t driving, but I had a higher tolerance than her.

“Tilly,” I said. She didn’t respond.

“Till,” I said louder, poking her in the ticklish spot above her knee. She only closed her mouth and pulled her legs up on the seat.

“Matilda!” I shouted in her ear. She snorted and opened her eyes.

“Don’t fucking call me that.” She swung a weak slap that missed me completely and hit the headrest. “I hate that goddamn name.”

“Brian’s not home.”

“Oh well. I’d probably just crash out on the couch anyway. Let’s go back to your place.”

“I drove forever and it was your idea to come here. Now you want to turn around and go back?”

She didn’t answer. She was snoring again. Looking at her made me sleepy, so I turned the car off and put the seat all the way back.

I woke up in my bed to my mother screaming at me about a bloody mess all over her car. I had a gauzy feeling in my head and a vague memory of running something over. The sun hadn’t come up yet, and I didn’t know where Tilly was. I didn’t think I could have been asleep for more than an hour or two. I noticed my shoes were still on when I slid my legs off the bed and tried to sit up. My tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth and my head was a cannonball on my shoulders. I couldn’t keep my eyes open. It felt like my top and bottom lashes were stuck together. It took my mother yanking me by the arm to get me on my feet and out of the room.

Downstairs in the kitchen, Tilly was asleep at the breakfast table. My mother sighed and went to the fridge. “I need a damn drink,” she said, flipping the light on. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with the two of you.”

The light didn’t wake Tilly, but my mom’s voice did. She had a shiny red mark on her cheek. I didn’t know if it was from sleeping on the table or from maybe hitting the dashboard. I

tried to remember what happened but was interrupted by my mother yelling at me with her head inside the refrigerator.

“Damn, Shawna, you drank my last Guinness. I was saving that. Do you have any idea how expensive those are?” She swung her pointer finger between Tilly and me. “And don’t think I didn’t notice that half my rum and some Valiums are missing.” The finger rested on me. “When your father gets home, you’re in deep dark shit. I hope you know that.” She looked around the room and adjusted her nightgown which was bunched up in the back. “If you’re going to be a drunk, at least get a job and support your own damn habit.” She pushed her fingers through her hair and groaned up at the ceiling. “Are you going to tell me what happened to my car or what?” she asked and walked into the dining room.

I sat down at the table with Tilly and asked her if she remembered what happened.

“What do you mean?”

“Mom says there’s a bloody mess all over her car, but I know we didn’t hit that weird rodent thing, whatever it was.”

Mom came back with a bottle of red wine. She uncorked it and drank from the bottle.

“Go look at the damn thing if you don’t believe me.”

“Come on, Till,” I said. She shook her head and stayed where she was. She didn’t look at me or my mother. She was bouncing her knee and biting her nails. I went to the front window alone.

I was still bleary-eyed and the window was dirty, but I could see black or maybe brown spots on the bumper and hood. Leaves and twigs were caught in the grill. The black-brown splotches were also on the windshield, smeared into wide arches by the wiper blades.

I felt wobbly and turned away. When I got back to the kitchen, my heart was beating between my eyes and I had to sit down. My mother looked at me with a smug grin on her face.

“So what the hell happened? Did you hurt someone? What the hell were you thinking? Are you hurt? Do you have any idea what kind of trouble you could be in? I’m pretty sure that’s blood, Shawna. You know there are squatters in that vacant lot.”

I looked at her open-mouthed.

“Yeah, you think I don’t know you use that as a shortcut? I know more than you think, young lady.”

I put my head in my hands and tried to piece together what had happened from the time I got to Brian’s to when I woke up in my bed. I remembered Tilly screaming as I drove through the vacant lot. “Holy shit,” I said, jumping up.

Tilly said, “What? Oh my god, what?” The kitchen light and a cold sweat made her skin look gray and scaly.

“I did drive through that vacant lot.”

“I told you not to.”

“I thought you didn’t remember what happened.”

“It sounds like something I would do.”

I rolled my eyes. “I probably just wanted to get home quicker. I remember being there, driving through the dirt path, and you were shouting like we were going to die. I think you actually said we were going to die. Don’t you remember?”

“You’re making that up. Why do you always have to exaggerate?” She wasn’t looking at me but at her own reflection in the sliding glass door. There were only a couple porch lights on in the distance, and the clouds blocked out the stars. Tilly dug some white goop out of the corner

of her mouth and pulled her knees under her chin. She seemed to emit some sort of reverse gravity that forced me to look away from her.

The grass and weeds in the vacant lot grew about three or four feet tall. I told them I remembered I had swerved off the path and ran over rocks and who knows what else while Tilly yelled for me to stop the car.

I didn't stop the car. I'd done plenty of smoking and drinking out there with Tilly, Brian, Louis, and other kids from school or the neighborhood. I was convinced I knew which direction I was heading and as long as I kept going the same way, we would come out on the other side and onto the street next to mine. I also knew bums sometimes made little clearings in the weeds to drink and sleep, but I didn't think of it until my mother mentioned it.

The weeds opened up for a second. I heard a loud thump and some crunching noises. The car jerked and bounced. We might have even been airborne for a second. A gush of dark liquid sprayed across the windshield. Then we were both screaming. I didn't stop, but came out of the lot, right where I knew I would. At that point, all I wanted was to get home.

"Shut up, Shawna," Tilly said. "It didn't happen that way."

"Then what happened?"

"I remember driving through the empty lot, but we didn't run over any people and certainly never left the ground. And blood wouldn't gush on the windshield like that even if we did hit someone. You've been watching too many of those stupid movies."

"No, that's what happened," I insisted.

I told them I remembered Tilly kept repeating that she wanted to go home, so I drove home as fast as I could and parked the car in the garage. I closed the garage door, but neither of

us got out of the car. Tilly kept saying, “Oh my god oh my god oh my god.” I cried into my hands.

Finally, I took a deep breath and said, “I just killed a bum, didn’t I? What should I do? I think I just killed someone.”

“We should tell your mom. She’ll know what to do.”

“Shut up! I never said that,” Tilly interrupted. She stood up and sat back down after glancing at my mom, who was leaning on the counter with a blank expression.

“Let me finish,” I said.

Back in the car, the fluorescent lights in the garage had gone off, leaving a faint silver glow on the walls. “Yeah right,” I said. “Let’s go in and tell her. ‘Hi, Mom. We drank all your rum, stole your pills and your car. Now it’s in the garage covered in hobo guts. G’night!’”

“Shawna, that didn’t happen. We never said any of that.” Tilly’s cheeks were red. “The car isn’t even in the garage. You just looked at it in the driveway.” She stood up again with her fists clenched.

“My mom must have taken it out when she noticed it wasn’t where she left it.” I looked over at her for confirmation. She was shaking her head with an amused look on her face.

“You were sleeping pretty heavily, dreaming your little dreams. I could have done any number of things,” she said.

“I’m going home and I’m never coming back,” Tilly said.

“No, it’s late,” Mom said. She took a big gulp of wine. “Here’s what we’re going to do. Just go to bed for now. I’ll put the car in the garage. I really don’t want to look at that shit right now anyway. Your dad never goes in there, so he won’t see it. When he goes to bed in the morning, you two will wash the car, and, to the rest of the world, this never happened. The cops

aren't going to look too deeply into the death of a homeless man, if it's even reported. No one is going to miss a random bum."

"Wow. That's really harsh, don't you think?" Tilly said.

"I'm sorry, Little Miss Sensitive, but it's true," Mom said. She put her hands on her hips and bit her lip. "Go. Now."

I nodded my head. I didn't feel good about it, but I didn't want to go to jail either. It nagged me that something was off about the whole situation, but my mother's confidence was enough for me, so I trusted her and did as I was told. "She's right, Tilly. It might even be days before someone finds him out there."

"I'm going home, and I'm never coming back," she said, again.

"No, you're not," Mom said. "Go on up to Shawna's room and don't come out for any reason until I get you." She swirled the wine in the bottle as Tilly and I shuffled out of the room. "But don't think for a second you're getting away with any of this shit," she called out when we were halfway up the stairs.

In my room, I went straight to my bed, still not taking off my shoes. Tilly flopped down on my bean bag. I pulled the covers over my head and lay there trying not to close my eyes. I think the stress of remembering what happened had sobered me up. I thought I would have to force myself to stay awake, but I was wrong. I kept seeing blood splatter across the windshield. I wished there was something I could do to occupy my mind, but my mom had taken away my television the week before for watching movies too loud at night. Tilly spoke to me only to say, "You and you mother are lunatics. One day you'll be just as miserable as her." She rolled over and faced the wall.

I wondered if my mother was wrong. What if the police did investigate? I hadn't gotten a good look at the car so I couldn't be sure of the damage done to it. It might have been dented. It was surely scratched up. I thought I saw gore stuck to the fender—or worse, body parts. Maybe Tilly was right and I should cut back on the horror movies.

I also thought about what would happen if my mother sobered up and decided it was a good idea to report what happened. What if Tilly snitched? *No, she wouldn't do that. Would she?*

My throat was dry and felt glued shut. I tried to swallow and my mouth quickly filled with saliva and I puked into my garbage can.

I'm not sure how much time passed before Tilly groaned and rolled over. She looked at me with wet, swollen eyes. "I bet he was a war vet," she said. "Like Vietnam or something. He probably wasn't even a drunk, just a guy whose luck ran out. I bet he was just sleeping there while waiting for his next government check to come in."

"I feel bad enough, Till. Stop making up stories about him. Next you'll say he was blind and curled up with his seeing eye dog, and..."

We both froze when we heard the garage door open. I jumped up and looked out the window. The sun was pink on the horizon, and my dad's truck was in the driveway.

"I thought your mom said he never goes in there," Tilly said.

I didn't answer. I knew my mom had told me not to leave my room, but I didn't obey. I snuck down the stairs just as my dad started quizzing my mother about what she had done that night. She had fallen back to sleep on the couch and was rubbing her eyes. She looked confused.

"What the hell did you do, Jeanie?"

He took off his shirt and flung it over the back of the La-Z-Boy. Mom quickly glanced in my direction. Tilly was behind me. Her hand was on my shoulder and I could feel her shaking. Tears blurred my eyes and I couldn't move.

"Well, do you even remember?" he asked my mom. "How much did you have to drink? Where'd you go?"

"Hang on, Gary. Let me think."

"Let me save you the brain power. I can tell you exactly what happened. You got shitfaced, drove your car through that damn vacant lot a couple blocks over and straight through a blackberry bush."

Tilly gripped my shoulder then slid to the floor.

"Wait, what?" I said, running over to them.

"Your mother's car is covered with twigs and smeared with berries, Shawna. How could you let her drive in that condition?"

He didn't wait for me to answer and turned back to my mom. "You think I wouldn't notice it if you put it in the garage? Come on, Jean. Don't be a jackass."

I opened my mouth to ask my mom if she knew all along, but only squeaked and sat down.

"So, what's the story, Mrs. Earnhardt?" Dad said to mom. "Were you taking a shortcut to the liquor store?"

"I was home all night, Gary. And I was sleeping great until Brian's mother called squawking about how your genius daughter and her trusty sidekick just ran over her azaleas."

He got close enough to my face that I could smell his snus. "You did that, you little shithead?"

Tilly ran past us. “I have to go home now.”

No one responded.

“She’s learned her lesson,” Mom said. “I scared them both real good. I let her squirm all night after putting the idea in her head that she ran over a bum.”

“What?”

“You know how she is. I knew what happened to the car by looking at it, the same way you did. I put the idea in her head that she had run someone over and she just ran with it.”

He looked back and forth from me to her and squinted his eyes when his gaze finally rested on me. “You’re an idiot,” he said and went into the kitchen.

So that was it. I hadn’t killed anyone and my mother knew it the whole time. I bet she felt like some sort of genius mastermind. She thought she was teaching us some kind of lesson. She lay back down on the couch and chuckled to herself. At that moment, I wished I had run over someone. Her lame attempt at scheming, while successful, only made me think less of her. It showed me how petty and insensitive she could be.

I like to think that’s why Tilly stopped talking to me after that, because my family was so screwed up and she didn’t want to get sucked into our redneck drama. If it had been the other way around, I would have stuck by her, even tried to get her out, not just bail and leave her stranded and alone. People like me are the ones who need friends most of all. When you can’t count on your family, you create your own family out of kindred spirits. And that’s what I thought I had in Tilly. Maybe I had deluded myself because she was close by. But what do you do when you can’t depend on your family or friendship? I needed her to save me from them, to save me from myself.

My dad came back into the room with a beer. “You’re not getting your TV back for another two months, Shawna. And I’m throwing all your comic books and movies in the trash.”

“No way!”

“Don’t argue with me. Or do you want me to whoop your ass, too?”

“Come on, Daddy. Please? Just take them away for a while. Don’t throw them out.”

“You liking that gory stuff when you were younger was creepy enough. It’s time to grow up now.”

I dug my toes into the carpet and started crying again.

“About the car,” my mom said, “I’m not driving it around with all those dings and scratches all over it.”

“Dipshit here is going to work the cash register at the store for the rest of the summer in order to pay for the repairs,” he said.

“And for the shit she stole.”

I guess she had noticed that I was stealing pills all along. But what could she say about it until I caused a problem? That’s probably why she’d never mentioned it before, she would have to do some actual parenting. I figured that soon after I started paying her back, she would go on a binge and forget all about it. I would take that job cashiering and use my own money to pay for booze, like she suggested. I’d fall into the same cycle as her, and never leave Tennessee, like Tilly and I planned.

I went back to my room and played the same Nirvana tape I was listening to in the car the night before. Kurt Cobain sang about lithium, but all his songs were really about heroin. I remembered how angry I was when he shot himself. I thought suicide was an easy escape from a bad situation—that it was the ultimate act of selfishness. Lying there in my bed, I felt the world

was full of nothing but selfish people. There was no difference to me between suicide and my mother's retreat into drugs and alcohol. Selfishness is what caused Tilly to run out on me when things got hairy. I was the bad situation they were trying to escape. I felt I wasn't worth it to them to work through all the shit—to persevere—to show life that escape isn't an option. I was determined to make it through life, though, no matter how hard, or if I had to do it alone.

I could hear my dad slam things around in the garage. The new morning sun pried into my eyes, so I put a pillow over my head. Listening to the muffled drum beats from the stereo, I pushed the pillow down hard until sparks popped behind my eyes and my leg kicked out against the wall.

When I removed the pillow, the air in my room was fresher than it had been a minute before. Despite the dirty laundry and crusty dishes, I swore I could smell daffodils. I took the last Valium from my pocket and chewed on it until it melted down my throat. I relished the chalky-sour taste. I let the taste seep into my bloodstream and draw out all the toxic feelings of self-pity and replaced them with numbness.

A MARK UPON A STAIN

I'm the lady who went into the public restroom, saw all the toilets were in use, and went into the handicapped stall while you waited in your wheelchair as I took my sweet time. I'm the girl in kindergarten who ran with scissors, tripped, and sliced your knee. I'm the neighbor who ran over your cat. I'm your high school girlfriend who held your hand in the hallway after sneezing into mine.

A few weeks ago, I woke up to notice I had sprouted an excessive amount of nose hair. Back when I hit thirty, a couple years ago, I noticed it was coming in a bit thick, but thought nothing of it. Now I have a straggler that has grown to hook from my left nostril, over my septum and into the right. I plucked it when I noticed it was there, but like all hair, it grows back. Somehow this one always seems to grow back without me noticing until after I've had a long conversation with someone. This was distressing not only because it's unsightly but also because I had recently decided it was time for me to get married and have a baby. I've never wanted to do either. I'm still not sure I want to, but the way I saw it, it was either get a man and some rugrats or no one will notice I'm dead until the neighbors smell something funny and my skeleton is found after being picked clean by my twenty hungry cats. I can't think of many worse ways to go, so my life as a single woman needed to end.

Also, I was bored. I'd made a mess out of my life with boredom and laziness. I didn't know if I was past redemption, if I was worthy of it, or if I even cared about it all that much, but I had to do something different before I became the dead cat lady. I partied away my twenties and had been waiting tables so long it was killing my legs and back. Most people who wait tables are only there for a few years while they're in college or they use the job as a stepping stone into

management. Then there are those of us they call lifers—the ones who begin waiting tables in their early twenties and get stuck in that rut until retirement—tired bitter alcoholics with no legacy and little to show for a life of servitude. I had begun to see myself as one of them. I worked at a tiny place called Amelio's which claimed to have the best calzone in the city. I wouldn't go as far to agree with their hyperbole, but the extra inch or two around my waistline could attest to the quality of their pizza.

My first thought in the search for a husband was to reconnect with my last boyfriend, Charlie. He was shorter than me and his hair was longer than mine, but he was funny and always smelled good. The only reason we broke up was because he started to get serious and I didn't want that at the time. I tightened my bra straps until my breasts were in danger of spilling out of my top, found my shortest skirt, and headed to "our" bar, The Wet Spot. It was just as classy a place as you would expect from its name. When we were a couple, we went there to play pool but stayed for the cheap booze. The floor was once black and white checkered, but years of foot traffic and spurious cleanings had turned it gray and blacker black. When I showed up, a homeless man in a cowboy hat played, without rhythm, on the windowsill outside with chipped drumsticks.

"Hey, mama, you got a cigarette?" he asked me as I approached.

"Here ya go." I didn't mind. Once I got pregnant I'd be quitting anyway.

"Thanks, a lot. Can I get one more?"

I should have known that was coming. "Here, now leave me alone."

I hurried in and scoured the place for any sign of Charlie or his buddies. A pop song was playing. I wasn't familiar with the tune, but it sounded similar to a number of others I'd been hearing for the past few years. It was a heavily synthesized melody, a thumping bass line, and

auto-tuned voices singing like an anthem, “You make me feel so la la la la la.” Seriously, people were paid thousands of dollars to write these lyrics. The place was nearly empty. A biker couple in their fifties played on the only pool table and three college-age guys stared at their phones at a table in the back of the room. I didn’t see Charlie anywhere, but spotted his best friend, Doug, behind the bar. He had a wide face covered with hair and no neck. I took a seat in a stool in front of him.

“Doug, you work here now?”

“Jaycee! Holy shit. I haven’t seen you in, like, a year.”

“Yeah, it’s been a while. What are you doing here? Did your mom retire or something?”

“Nah, that bitch fired me. What are you drinkin’?”

“Seriously? She fired you? It’s about time.”

“I know, I’m a dick.”

I could tell that comment pissed him off. He turned his back to me and started to mess with his phone, too. Perhaps since I wasn’t dating Charlie anymore, it wasn’t the best idea to goad him.

“Give me a glass of the thickest, blackest beer you got.”

“I should have remembered.”

He came back with a cold mug of something, which tasted like a blessed mixture of chocolate, coffee, and roasted malt.

“Let me guess. You’re here looking for Charlie.”

“How’d you know?”

“The cleavage is a dead giveaway.”

“Ah, yes, the ever-sharp observation skills of a seasoned bartender.”

“Nah, I know the language of titties.”

I didn't laugh.

“Anyway,” he said, “he's not here or at my mom's place. Hasn't been to either in a while. He hooked up with the chick my mom hired to replace me. Sherry or Cheryl or Carol or some shit. A real dog if you ask me. They moved to Buffalo last month.”

Shit.

“So your mom's new bartender hooked up with a customer and moved away? Did he knock her up or what?” I asked.

“Not that I know of. I haven't talked to him either. But I wouldn't be surprised. He was pretty messed up when you dumped him. Said as soon as he brought up having a kid, you split.”

“Well, you have to admit he was a little clingy.” Doug was ten years younger than us, so I thought he would agree with me.

“I don't know. I thought what you did was pretty cold. Besides, why wouldn't you want to have a kid? Time's running out. What are you, like, forty?”

That's when Doug's older sister, Kate walked in and stumbled up to the bar. Nothing she's ever said to me made any sense. I had never seen her sober. She smelled of Jägermeister and it reminded me of my early days of serving, hanging out at the bar with my coworkers after work.

“Danger Zone” was playing on the stereo. She clapped me on the shoulder and said, “Kenny Loggins sold his soul to the devil. He left Loggins and Messina for four or five years of fame. And where is he now? Burning in hell! The Danger Zone's what done him in.”

OK, forget Charlie. It was time to get out of there.

I went home that night with take-out chicken and waffles from the soul food place next to the bar and drank half a bottle of rum before I passed out on the couch. The next morning while nursing a greasy hangover, I came up with another plan of action. Instead of going backwards from the latest boyfriend, why not start from the beginning and try to reconnect with my first boyfriend?

My uncle told me when I was nine that my mother got knocked up with me at a toga party. I don't know why he told me that or at least didn't wait until I was older. She denies that night ever happened and swore the conception was immaculate. My mother isn't necessarily adhered to reality. To further her delusion, she named me Jaycee. Perhaps this was a defense mechanism she cooked up, so she would never have to explain to me why she didn't know who my father was. Sure, there were boyfriends who came and went. None of them were great or memorable. None of them were abusive or perverted. None of them could really stand her for very long. Denny Keiser stayed the longest, about three years when I was a teenager. He was a bum, but I liked him the best. He never had a job the whole time I knew him. He lived off of disability checks from a work injury he refused to tell me about. I assumed he did something careless and stupid.

The greatest perk to him living with us was that he was a video game junkie. I was twelve years old when the first 8-bit Nintendo was released and was immediately entranced by Super Mario Bros., but my mother could never afford to buy any game systems. I had to babysit to make enough money to buy my own. I hated dealing with diapers, snot, and crying but it was worth it once I got that controller in my hand. When I was sixteen, I bought myself a Super Nintendo and dropped out of high school. My mother allowed it as long as I promised to read

one book a week. That was her logic. As long as I was reading enough, I wouldn't rot my brain on video games. Not like it mattered. At age sixteen it was legal to drop out without parental permission. I kept the promise, anyhow. I loved to read and still do, and I thought I'd appease her in this, so she wouldn't get the idea to make me get a real job or move out. Shortly after, Denny showed up and we spent our days smoking weed, watching movies on stolen cable channels, and playing Super Nintendo all day while my mother worked as a cleaning lady at a dingy hotel a few blocks away. Due to the lack of discipline from her and my tendency toward slacking off, you could pretty much guess where my life went from there if I hadn't told you already.

I kept telling myself it was the boredom that was killing me, but the truth was that I was lonely. For as long as I can remember my fantasies while falling asleep at night had been mostly about being an actress or a singer. As a movie star I would make up elaborate and poignant acceptance speeches, which verified both my intellectual and philanthropist personae I would have created for myself. Then my current costar fell in love with me and we became the new Hollywood power couple. As a singer I would imagine having a room full of Grammys and singing duets with the latest hit-makers and bringing them home for steamy romps at my mansion in Beverly Hills. Those fantasies recently changed to ones of me simply spooning with them. That might have been another thing that spawned me out of my lethargy, the realization that my sexual peak was on a down curve.

I'd known my first boyfriend since we were in kindergarten, but we didn't start dating until I was seventeen. His name was Alex Labelle, but in elementary school everyone called him Buggy because his eyes were so big. He was easy-going, even as a kid, and wasn't bothered by the name. I think he even liked it. His head grew to accept his eyes, but the name stuck. He hung

out with all the nerdy kids and wore polo shirts every day. But he was so damn hot, I didn't care that he was a nerd. None of the other girls did either. With his perfect nose and square jaw, his quickness with a joke, it didn't matter to anyone that he was studying differential equations by tenth grade and was a member of both the debate team and chess club. After watching him win a debate against our rival high school by quoting Mark Twain, I decided I was in love with him. He had dirty blond hair and dark brown eyes that contrasted my black hair and blue eyes. He had a voice like soft sand tossed into the wind. When he spoke into my ear, the knots on my back dissolved into a warm tingle. He trailed off almost every time he spoke. The air disappeared from his sentences so all I could hear was his mouth move. Or I was so enamored it seemed that way. The only reason we broke up was because he went up north for college while I stayed on the couch.

I found him the same way anyone does these days. Facebook. Since the Charlie debacle, I was afraid that Buggy didn't live in the area. I'd run into his sister a few years ago, and she said he moved back home a few years after college, but that didn't mean he didn't meet a woman like Charlie did and move away again. The odds were good that he was married. We were, like, forty, after all. Almost, but that didn't matter. With the divorce rates in this country, he could have been single again.

I found him easily. He was even listed as Buggy, not Alex. He still looked good. Even better actually. From his profile picture I could see he hadn't gained weight, and he still had the same crooked, somewhat sinister grin. I sent him a friend request, and he accepted no less than a minute later. Why did he accept so fast? I freaked and deleted all the photos that I posted or was tagged in that I found in any way unflattering, even ones with funny comments that I liked reliving once in a while. I hid all posts I thought made me look stupid or lonely and removed all

traces that I ever played Farmville or Candy Crush. I left Words with Friends there. Hopefully he didn't see any of those things before it was too late. After doing all that, I snooped through his profile.

He had almost one thousand friends. I remembered reading somewhere that the more Facebook friends a person has, the fewer friends they have in real life. I believed it, too. I had almost three-hundred friends but really only talked to ten or twelve of them. Maybe that's why he'd accepted my request so quickly. He wasn't picky. I scrolled down his news feed to see the kinds of things he was interested in these days. I didn't get very far until I came across a photo of a little girl. Of course he'd be a dad already. I hoped he wanted another one. I was fooling myself to think he'd be as unattached as I was. But I wasn't deterred. His profile said he was single, so chances were I didn't have to worry about the mother, and even better, maybe the girl lived with her.

The girl was definitely his. She had the same big brown eyes and small nose. Only her hair was bright red. So red it didn't seem real. She was standing in a kitchen smiling and holding up a certificate with type so small I couldn't read it. The caption said, "My little genius made the honor roll again."

I hovered the pointer over the "like" button until my chat box popped up and Buggy insisted we get together right away. He lived about twenty minutes away and was willing to meet in town.

I made a list of things to do before meeting up with Buggy.

- 1) Get eyebrows and mustache waxed.
- 2) Paint fingernails. (Fire engine red.)
- 3) Buy and use nose hair trimmer.

- 4) Buy new outfit. Sexy but not too sexy.
- 5) Search entire body and remove any unwanted hair I wasn't yet aware of. (I'd found several thick black strands under my navel.)
- 6) Clean entire house. (If all goes well, he would be coming home with me.)

The list wasn't long, but each item was crucial. We were set to meet at eight o'clock at Doug's mom's bar. The bar was only a few blocks from my house, but I left at seven-thirty. I was so anxious, I started to get ready a little after five. I put on the new outfit, a dark purple dress that reached a few inches above my knees, black suede boots that made me two inches taller, and a silver necklace with an inverted triangle charm. I picked the charm so that it would point to my cleavage, but I left more to the imagination than when I had gone to find Charlie.

As I sat in the car of the parking lot before going in to meet Buggy, I got the sweats, and even though I showed up half an hour early, I didn't get out of the car until a quarter till ten. I watched a few people pull up and walk in and when I recognized Buggy, I slipped down in my seat. I couldn't believe how well he had aged. He was taller than I remembered and had let his blond hair grow a little shaggy. He had a close-cropped beard and still wore Polo. He looked even better than I had hoped, and I could smell his confidence through my closed windows.

I almost chickened out. I even started the car to drive away. I planned to delete my Facebook account, never go to that bar again, and remain bored and alone forever. I watched Buggy sit at the bar as I put the car in reverse. He said something to the bartender, Meghan, and she pointed to me through the window, sitting in my car. I swore if she told him how long I'd been sitting there, I wouldn't tip her. I couldn't even check myself out in the mirror because they were both watching me. I waved and got out of the car.

I entered the pub and he stood up. I felt a pull under my ribs and forced myself to walk slowly to him. He hugged me and lifted me off the ground.

“Jaycee, you look fantastic.”

He smelled like freshly washed laundry and lemons. I wanted to curl up where his neck met his shoulder and stay there, but I pulled away first.

“You look exactly the same,” I said. “Except for that little scar there under your eye. What happened?”

“Lab accident. What are you drinking?”

“Whatever you’re having. Lab accident?”

He signaled Meg for two beers and said, “Yeah, I teach high school chemistry now.”

“Chemistry? I should have known. Though, I would have guessed cosmology. What else have you been up to?”

I hated myself for my banal attempt at small talk. I thought about how we used to talk when we were kids. We thought we were so smart discussing Camus and Sartre. Well, mainly I listened and agreed with him while he talked about them. He talked about becoming an astronaut and me, a famous writer. At least he hadn’t abandoned his dreams.

“Look, let’s cut through the bullshit,” he said. He drained his first beer as Meg handed us two new ones. She winked at me and walked away, being careful to stay within eavesdropping range, and pretended to clean glasses.

“We both know why we’re here, high school lovers, now single and fast approaching middle age. We can waste all the time in the world catching up if you like, but how about we be honest and you come home with me? Right now,” Buggy said.

Meg coughed and said the beers were on the house and to have a great night. She picked up her phone and began to type frantically. Buggy tipped his beer to her and took a giant gulp. I was silent, my beer untouched. That was what I wanted, right? If things had gone any smoother, I would have slid right off my stool.

I didn't let myself think about it too long. I had thought enough in the car and it almost caused me to run away. I stood up, slapped a ten on the bar. "A tip," I said and we left.

In the parking lot he said, "We have to pick up Kayla. If we're diving in, you might as well meet her, right? Don't worry, I'll put her to bed as soon as we get home."

Oh shit. I had forgotten about the kid. I was too nervous to worry about being a future step-mother. Buggy didn't give me time to think or change my mind.

"Do you want to follow me in your car, or ride with me?" he asked, pointing to a small green car.

I opted to follow him in case I needed a quick escape.

He drove cautiously the whole way, and I kept seeing him peek in his rearview to make sure I was still behind him. I wondered if I were to suddenly veer off onto a side road and gun it for home if he would try to follow me.

We pulled up to his old house in a suburb north of downtown. His parents must have still lived there and were babysitting. I parked in the street across from the house as he ran inside. He came out in less than a minute, the girl walking behind him. She was incredibly tall, almost as tall as him. Probably taller than me, though she wouldn't be the first child to look down at me. Buggy pointed at my car and the girl gave a half-hearted wave, in contrast to him wildly swinging his arm in the air.

When we got to his house, we all stood in the driveway for a minute. The house was enormous and looked to be about one hundred years old. I introduced myself to Kayla and noted that we were the same height. She lightly shook my hand and didn't look me in the eye.

"Come on," Buggy said. "Let's go inside. You can show Jaycee your room."

She could show me her room? Hers was not the one I wanted to see.

The front porch was dark brick and one of the two porch lights was flickering. Buggy pulled out a keychain which must have weighed ten pounds and searched for the right one for a bit before getting into the house. An orange cat darted out the front door as soon as it opened. Buggy flicked on the light in the foyer and I saw that the place was in shambles. I was surprised that I was surprised. He was a single dad, after all, and the place was almost a mansion, though I wondered why he didn't bother cleaning up a little if he planned to bring me there. Was inviting me over a spur of the moment decision? There were dirty clothes in a heap next to a door to the right which I assumed led to the laundry room. The air smelled of pepperoni and feet. The staircase to the left and the foyer was made of hardwood which looked scuffed by decades of traffic. At the end of the hallway, I could see a yellowing floor that must have been the kitchen. The floor where we stood was covered in a light sprinkling of dirt and cat hair.

"Go show Jaycee your room then get ready for bed," Buggy said to Kayla. "I'm going to make us some drinks," he said to me.

The whole room was all shades of yellow and it was the source of the lemon smell. I wondered how she did it. Lemon oil? Furniture polish? The room was the only clean one I'd seen, so far. There was a tall white bookshelf on the far wall next to an antique desk holding an old Apple computer. It was also yellow. She stood in the doorway, arms crossed, and I sat on the

edge of her bed. There was a large stuffed frog propped up against her pillow. I picked it up and tossed it in the air a couple times.

“Nice frog,” I said. “You sleep with this thing?”

That must have offended her because she swiped it from me and said, “His name is Ribbert.”

Clever girl. “You make that up or is it from a cartoon?”

“I made it up, and I hate your shoes.”

I generally don't like children. They tend to smell bad, carry germs, and believe in all the unbelievable things adults tell them. Things like Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, and God. But this kid was different, this was Buggy's kid and after seeing his house, all my misgivings about reconnecting had reignited. It was a sty, but with a little TLC, it could be a palace, so I resolved to make her like me. I felt that now wasn't the time though, and let the insult go. After she pointed them out, I decided they were ugly shoes, after all.

“Well, it was nice to meet you, Kayla. I'm going to go back downstairs now.”

“Later.”

I heard a loud grinding noise coming from the kitchen and found Buggy making margaritas. “I hope you like tequila,” he said, holding up two red solo cups and handing one to me. There were dishes piled up on every surface, but the sink was empty. He pulled out two stools at the breakfast bar and patted one.

“I know the place is a nightmare, but between work and Kayla, there's nothing I can do. I kind of gave up a while ago. I can't afford a cleaning lady, but mom comes over once in a while and Kayla pitches in, too.”

“How can you afford the house?”

“I inherited it. I barely get by with the property taxes and taking care of Kayla. But she’s low-maintenance.”

“Ah.” I took a sip of my drink. It was strong, and the tequila was cheap. I looked into his brown eyes, but couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Look, here’s the deal,” he said. “What you see is what you get. I’m not looking for another wife, but if that’s what you want, it’s cool. I can live with that. If you decide you want to move in here, you have to accept Kayla. She’s pretty precocious. You don’t have to work, if you don’t want to either. I want a warm body next to me, and I would love if it was you. I never stopped thinking about you and I nearly shouted when I saw your face on my monitor.” He put his hand on my cheek. “I don’t expect you to be Donna Reed or anything like that. Be yourself. You haven’t changed much. I can see that. I’m still pretty immature myself.”

Did he determine this just from looking at me? I should have been insulted, but he was right. My life was a mess, but somehow this seemed so much worse, dreary even. I pictured myself living there, cleaning the place up, helping Kayla with her homework, sleeping in a bed with the same person for the rest of my life, watching bad movies and detective shows every night. The thought made me want to go adopt some cats and keep slinging pizzas until arthritis ate away at my joints and I had to retire. But there is no retirement plan for servers. I would have to resort to being a receptionist in some lackluster office, or worse, telemarketing. I thought of going back to my list of exes and trying my luck with one of them. I thought of Bobby who listened to death metal and let his bull mastiff sleep in the bed with us. Perry, who always voted Republican and was addicted to reality TV. Scott, who refused to ever go down on me. And Tyler, with his eczema. Then I looked at Buggy. He had salt on his lip and that crooked grin on his face.

“You, uh, just kind of laid a lot down for me. I thought we were going to have some drinks and maybe fool around a bit.”

He leaned back and put his hands behind his head. “That’s cool, too. I just got this vibe from you that felt like you were looking for something more, and fast.”

That was a good guess, but I didn’t believe he really thought that. I believed he was looking for a live-in maid and babysitter, and he thought I was susceptible enough to fall for his charm, as I always had when he wanted me to do something I didn’t. He’d gotten me to have sex with him on my parents’ bed. He leaned back in his chair with his arms on his head like that, I could only assume, to give me a nice view of his biceps and flat stomach. When he looked at me, he didn’t see his high school girlfriend for whom he still had feelings, he saw an aging, desperate woman who was willing to do whatever it took to pin down a man.

Whether it was correct in my assumption or not, I couldn’t stand the thought that it was possible he saw me that way. My head got hot, my mouth went dry, and I could no longer look him in the eye. I asked where the bathroom was and went out the front door instead. I don’t know if he realized it at first because I didn’t bother looking back. I got in my little car and backed out of his long, winding driveway. When I was only two houses down from his, I heard a strange noise coming from outside my car and looked out my rearview mirror. Apparently, I had run over Buggy’s trash when I pulled out of the end of the driveway because it was trailing down the block from the back of my car. I debated leaving it there, but I couldn’t ditch him and leave garbage strewn all over his neighborhood, too.

I pulled over and picked up the bits from the street, keeping an eye on his front door. He didn’t come out, but Kayla watched me the whole time from her bedroom window. It only took me a couple minutes to pick everything up. For such a dirty house, I was surprised by how little

he threw out. It was mostly empty Doritos bags, two liter bottles of soda, and frozen pizza boxes. I was relieved Buggy didn't come out of the house to see what was going on. If he had realized I left, he must have known exactly why. I felt bad, but was still going to leave. I went back to my car only to discover that I'd locked my keys in it, engine still running.

I couldn't call anyone because my phone was in the car. It would have taken me too long to walk to the nearest gas station. I picked up a rock and smashed it into the passenger side window. The window didn't break, but for a second I thought my hand had. The sound was much louder than I'd expected, almost like a firecracker. I threw the rock down and tried kicking the window instead. That only landed me on my back in the street. A neighbor's porch light switched on. My only option was to hang my head and go back to Buggy's for help.

Kayla answered the door with my drink in her hand and her stuffed frog nestled under her arm. "He doesn't know you left," she said. She looked down the street at my car. The taillights glowed red in the darkness like the evil eyes of a lurking monster. "I guess breaking windows isn't as easy as they make it look on TV." She handed me my drink and stepped back to let me in. I followed her into the house, and she made her way back upstairs.

"Wait," I said. "Can I use your phone?"

She laughed and kept walking.

Buggy was still in the kitchen. When I walked in, he was shredding a block of cheese.

"I got the munchies," he said. "Nowadays, I always want nachos with my margaritas." He pointed to the top of the fridge. "Grab the chips."

I regretted not coming up with an explanation on my walk back to the house. I was at a loss for an excuse as to why I had left. I couldn't pretend I never left. My car would surely be

towed away before morning if I didn't go back for it. I ignored his request for the chips and chugged tequila straight from the bottle.

"Whoa!" Buggy said. "What the hell are you doing?" He pulled the bottle from my mouth and some of the liquid dribbled down my chin. I wiped it off with my sleeve.

"I kind of panicked and did something... regrettable," I said.

"Did you clog my toilet?" he asked, chuckling.

"I ran away."

"From what?"

"From here. From you."

He said nothing, still smiling.

I tried to take the bottle again, but he put it behind his back and told me I'd had enough.

"Can you help me with my car? I'll explain after." I thought that would buy me some time, but he insisted I tell him first.

"Like I said, I panicked. You said all that stuff about Donna Reed and moving in here, and I got scared."

"OK," he said, pushing his hair out of his eyes. "Where's your car? What's wrong with it?"

I told him what happened and he laughed for two whole minutes. "Damn, Jaycee, why didn't you say something? You think because we grew apart, you can't talk to me anymore?"

"Well, yeah, I mean, you said some pretty weird shit. Do you really think I'm that desperate?" I asked, hoping he was convinced of my outrage.

"OK, so I misread you. I'm sorry." He put the bottle on the counter. "Wait here. I'll get your car."

I got up to finish making the nachos. He'd shredded a heap of sharp cheddar cheese. When we were younger, we used to eat nachos the same way. We'd shred sharp cheddar, sprinkle it over tortilla chips, and put it all in the microwave. He'd always liked his gooey enough that he could stretch the cheese and wrap it several times around his chip. I preferred my cheese slightly burnt. I set to making us each our own plate. I looked in the cabinets and dishwasher, but didn't find any clean plates.

"There are paper plates in the pantry." Kayla stood in the doorway, watching me.

"Thanks," I said.

She looked toward where her dad was, as if she could see him through the wall. "He's pretty smart, but says really dumb things."

I laughed. "I think we're all a little guilty of that."

"Maybe. Just don't take him too seriously. He says one thing, and means something else. It's pretty annoying, actually." She threw her frog in the air a couple times. "I like you."

"Yeah?"

"Yep. You might be more messed up than he is."

I had to admit, I liked her, too. Talking to her made me feel better. I don't know if she had a calming presence or if it was because she'd distracted me from embarrassment. She didn't seem to care that I'd just made an ass of myself in front of her, and probably the neighbors. She was wise beyond her age, yet she was attached to a stuffed frog.

"What do you think about all this?" I asked.

"I think this is going to be fun."

FLYING OVER DRIVING

The plan was to leave for the airport at 4:30 a.m. I'd spent the night on my dad's couch to save myself from having to wake up before 4:00. But, even then, it would be too early so I tried to stay up all night by working on an English paper and taking breaks from it to watch old horror movies on cable. It was two days before Halloween and they were playing my favorite kind—the corny ones.

My dad was flying up to Kentucky to visit family, and I was driving him to the airport so I could use his truck while he was gone. I didn't know it, but that trip to the airport would be the last time I saw him. I wonder now, if I had even suspected he would be dead a few days later, if I would have acted differently. But no one thinks of those things.

I awoke to my dad saying, "Come on, kiddo. Let's go." He pulled the pillows out from under my head and clicked on the lamp. My eyes stung from the light. I hoped he was playing his old trick from when he used to wake me up for school as a child. He would go into my room and turn on the light, shouting one of his silly nicknames for me: knucklehead, lizard lips, or my personal favorite, dingleberry. He would change the time on my alarm clock and tell me that I had half an hour to get ready and out the door. I would hit the snooze button for twenty more minutes and fling myself out of bed only to find I had an extra thirty minutes to actually eat something before the bus arrived. My groggy brain never thought to check my watch and see what time it really was. As a child, my trust in him was absolute in all things, even if I had been fooled before.

"What time is it?" I asked now, my voice, weak and gravelly.

“It’s 4:30. We have to go, now.” He was holding his coffee thermos in one hand and suitcase in the other. “Get your ass up. The plane isn’t going to wait because you’re too tired to get off the couch.”

With my eyes closed against the lamp light, I slapped at the coffee table until my hand hit my cell phone. The digital display read 3:30. “Did you remember to set your clock ahead last night?”

“Shit,” said my dad. Every time he cussed, a little bit of his Kentucky accent slipped out. “I forgot. Go back to sleep. You got yourself one more hour.” He turned the light off.

I wrapped myself up in the sheet until I felt like a burrito and relished the thought of that extra hour, even though I was sure he would wake me again in thirty minutes. My dad’s couch was the most comfortable I’d ever slept on. Overstuffed cushions wrapped in denim kept cool against my skin. It was roomier than a panel truck, but I sunk into those cushions and closed off from the world around me. I had a brand new bed with satin sheets and a fluffy comforter at home, but always ended up falling asleep on the couch under a thin sheet with a book. I preferred couches, in general, not just my dad’s. I liked the confined space afforded by the back of a couch. I was a claustrophiliac and the couch was a womb.

Despite the comfy couch and my lack of sleep, I had some trouble drifting back off. *The Phantom of the Opera* (1962) played on the television, which was still on, and I couldn’t help but notice the contrast between it and the 1994 version. The flickering light from the TV in the darkness and the low background noise provided distraction from my busy mind and allowed me to drift off slightly until daylight savings time finally caught up to me. I peeled myself from the couch, tied my hair into a sloppy knot, and put on my jacket and flip-flops. We were out the door five minutes later.

The air was surprisingly sharp and chilly for a Florida morning in October. It was hardly cold even when the rest of the country was neck-deep in winter snows, so it felt odd for it to be in the mid-60's in early autumn. It hadn't been so cold in October since Halloween ten years before when, at the last minute, I changed costumes from sexy witch to lumberjack, so I could bundle up in a flannel shirt, though my dad wouldn't let me borrow his ax to complete the ensemble. I might be wrong about how cold it was or felt it more because I wore a peasant skirt and flip flops and moments before had been curled up on the couch.

"You're driving, right?" I asked.

"Yep. Let me get my bags in the back, and we'll be off."

I sat in the passenger seat, reclined all the way back, flipped off my shoes, and put my legs up under my skirt. I felt like dozing off again but knew I would get carsick when the truck started moving.

My dad got in and set his coffee mug in the cup holder and gave his thermos to me to warm my hands. He would always offer me coffee, even though I declined every time. I was the last person to drive his truck, so it took him a while to adjust the seat, mirrors, and steering wheel.

"Why the hell are you so damn short?" he asked me.

"Hey, you made me."

"No, your mother gave you the short genes. I gave you the genius genes."

"You don't have those. I grew them all on my own."

He turned the ignition and adjusted his fanny pack. He reached for the radio tuner and I begged him not to put it on a country station or talk radio. He obliged, and we agreed on soft rock.

It was the edge of dawn, and the sky was black and cloudless. The traffic was sparse. Even so, my dad was impatient and quick-tempered behind the wheel and groaned at every red light or car in front of him. We had plenty of time to get to the airport and the little traffic we encountered didn't hamper us much, yet it drove him "ape shit" not to have the roads all to himself so early in the morning. I tried to start a conversation to keep his mind off of it.

"Your coffee smells good."

"I thought you didn't like coffee."

"That doesn't mean I don't like the way it smells. I'm surprised you didn't offer me any."

The windows were foggy and he had to keep the wipers on to see through the windshield. I wrote, "eM pleH" on the inside of my window. No one pulled up beside us to read it.

"You want some?" he asked.

"No, thanks."

He took the thermos from me and refilled his mug. "It's Barney's coffee," he said. I didn't know who Barney was and didn't bother to ask.

"That's where Uncle Earl lives," I said, pointing to a subdivision to our right.

"Wipe that shit off," he said. "What if someone were to take that seriously?"

I laughed and did as I was told.

"Anyway," he said, "is that where Earl lives?" His high-pitched inflection indicated a feigned interest. "Is that houses or apartments?"

"They used to be apartments. Now they're condos."

"Aren't they all? I haven't seen Earl in twenty years."

Earl was my uncle on my mother's side. My mom and dad had divorced when I was in elementary school. I lived with my mother until I was twelve when I moved in with him and my

step-mother. Though they never spoke ill of each other, my parents never spoke directly. My dad said once that he was friends with both of my uncles but since the divorce, they no longer kept in touch. I don't know why my parents got divorced. Any time I asked my mother why, she only said she didn't love him anymore. I never asked my dad why.

"How's Earl doing?" he asked. "I'd like to see him. I didn't even know he lived down here. I thought he was up in Tennessee with the rest of them. Why'd he move?"

"He was probably bored out of his mind. The question is why did he stay so long?"

My dad laughed and switched lanes to pass a car that wasn't going far enough over the speed limit for him. The small talk was boring me but at least it kept my dad from honking the horn and yelling, "Out of the way, Dopey!"

My legs tucked up under my skirt started to bother me. The circulation to my feet was cut off and my knees ached. "Can you blow the heater on the floor so I can put my feet down?"

"Sure can." He flipped the switch, raised the temperature, switched lanes again, and sped past an old man in a long Cadillac.

"That fucker must have been a hundred years old," he said. "I didn't know they gave licenses to mummies. I bet he's on his way to Denny's for the early bird special." He chuckled and poked me in the ribs.

I agreed with what he said but didn't think his jokes were funny. "They should start revoking people's licenses once they reach a certain age."

"Sixty-five seems fair," he said.

"That only gives you fifteen more years, Pops."

"Shit, I'll be retired and living in Catalina by then. What would I need to drive for?"

We passed the hotels, restaurants, and car rental places that meant we were near the airport. I watched an airplane's lights in the not-too-distant sky blink slowly and make a wide left turn. It rose higher until I could no longer see its lights. The thought of being up there, with my life in a stranger's hands and crammed in a confined space between several other people made me nauseated. I may have been a claustrophiliac, but it was the solitude I favored, not the feeling of being sealed in a tuna can.

"I don't think you could pay me enough to get on a plane again," I said.

"I'd rather be on a plane than with all the crazy turds on the highway."

"You mean guys like you?"

"Zip it."

I had only flown once, as a child, shortly after my mom had remarried. We went to New York to visit my new grandparents. I was eight. I had seen *Twilight Zone: The Movie* a few weeks before. John Lithgow's character was horrified by a creature on the wing of his plane. As I grew older, I realized it was foolish to think a malevolent goblin could sabotage an airplane from outside, while in flight, the same as the older me knew a shark couldn't eat me in the deep end of the pool. But I still wouldn't swim in the ocean, and real-life anxieties when it came to flying, such as engine failure, terrorism, severe weather, and operator error had replaced the fictional goblin on the wing.

I wanted to take a road trip instead of that flight as a child but was surprisingly calm and even fell asleep right before takeoff. A few years later I learned my mom had crushed up half a Benadryl and put it in my Pepsi. I should have known something was up. My mom never let me drink soda except for on weekends. I was so excited to have one on a Tuesday that I never suspected a thing.

It was 5:15 when we arrived at the passenger drop off. We passed several terminals, keeping a lookout for U.S. Airways. It was the last one. It hadn't occurred to either of us that they were in alphabetical order. I don't know if it was the morning grogginess or lack of common sense in us both that caused that mishap. My dad parked along the curb and we both got out. He went to the back to unload his luggage, and I went with him to say goodbye.

"Here's the keys," he said. "Give me a hug."

I put my arms around his neck and kissed his cheek. "I love you. Tell everyone I say hi."

"OK. I love you, too."

I got into the driver's seat and watched him as he walked through the automatic doors and threw his hands up because he was caught behind an elderly woman struggling with a large suitcase. The last time I saw him, he moved around the old lady and grabbed her luggage to show her how the wheels on the bottom worked. He died two days later on a narrow, winding back-country road from a combination of a drunk driver and his own impatience.

I was a little apprehensive about him flying but voicing my concern would have been futile, like sweeping leaves off a sidewalk. A chill shook me, and I thought of the couch and sleeping the rest of the morning. I took a sip of his coffee for warmth and was surprised that I liked it. At the time I thought it was because of how people's tastes tend to change as they get older. I had never liked broccoli or spinach, but now loved both. I still hated cauliflower. My dad agreed with me on that one. Vile curd, he called it.

I drove home and reveled in the idea of sharing my new taste for coffee with my dad when he got home—talking about our favorite brands, sipping it together after our weekly dinners, and laughing about how I'd changed. I experimented with flavorings for the next couple

of days. I tried several flavors of creamer and varied amounts of sugar but found I liked it best black.

I conjured up different scenarios of what could have happened if I was able to change his mind about flying up there. It was a car crash that killed him, but if he'd driven up there instead of flying, maybe a different chain of events would have occurred and he'd still be alive. It was, of course, useless to dwell on what could have been. I knew it was enough that I had made the best of my time with him. We gave each other a lot of shit, but it was the normalcy of the sarcasm and nit-picking of our everyday lives with each other that defined our relationship and was how we expressed our love. It's how we communicated and it was fun. We were kindred smartasses, and I'm proud of that. There's no point in recreating the past and wallowing in what could have been done differently. The only thing I can do is remember the good times we had, and better appreciate the people who are still here.

LETTUCE

Buggy lit a menthol and tapped his fingers on his thigh as he waited for the train to pass. It wasn't one of the fast trains like an Amtrak or the Sunrail but a CSX, a freight train known for running especially slow, a train that a week before, back when he'd had a car, stopped at a crossing and backed up for two whole minutes before it resumed its forward, grinding pace. He timed the gaps between cars and tried to measure whether he could get a running start and sling his gangly frame through an opening with all limbs intact. He decided against an attempt right as the caboose came into view. He was sure he was going to be late. His renewed outlook on life meant he shouldn't care all that much, but he couldn't contain his anxiety. Normally the rhythmic sounds of a train soothed him. It was a nostalgic sound from his youth, which he had spent not far from where he currently stood. But he was on his way to a new job, bussing tables at a mom and pop Greek restaurant called Kalamata. He didn't care much about the job. He wanted mindless work where, if he kept busy, and his head low, no one would bother him. He had had enough pressure at a career he'd left far behind. He had discarded the desire to be the best, to control his fate, to make the most money, to drive the sleekest car. His real name was Alex, but that was also in the past. He had reclaimed his high school nickname and moved back to his hometown.

He wanted to get through the days with as little effort and drama as possible. Success only brought disquiet to him, and his new job as a busboy, and as Buggy, was the first step in his new life as an under-the-radar nobody. Then there was the petite waitress, Johnna, the girl from his teenage years that he never had the guts to speak to, though he suspected she had a thing for him, too.

When he'd gone in to fill out the application, he recognized her behind the register, but pretended he didn't. Coming back for his first day, he saw her out from behind the counter and noticed that she had a bit of a pudgy belly and her breasts hung lower. He wondered if it was because she'd had children. He could handle her being a bit overweight, but kids could be a deal breaker. He thought twice about that. This was a woman he'd been infatuated with since high school, one who even after all these years had kept a place in his thoughts and fantasies. So she looked a little different now and might have kids? It was silly to think that someone was in her late twenties and didn't have children. There were at least two girls who had babies before they graduated. But kids meant stress, and he didn't want stress.

Business at Kalamata was steady. Most of the time it was slow, but once in a while it got moderately busy. After two months on the job, working two lunch shifts, three dinners, and one double per week, Buggy settled into his duties without incident. There were minimal broken dishes, no drinks spilled, and no customer or coworker complaints. He only spoke when necessary, and even when business was slow, he kept himself occupied with cleaning or restocking, but he made sure to stay within his own duties. He didn't want any unwanted attention, even if it was positive. He had no desire to be promoted or to be given additional responsibility.

A few times he caught glances from Johnna, and once she even smiled. He enjoyed his new low-key lifestyle, but he didn't have to be lonely. He put his unease about her weight gain aside and decided to talk to her one day while she was out back on a smoke break. She smiled again as he walked up to her. The Florida summer sun was bright and hot. It was easily ninety-five degrees. Tiny sweat bubbles sprinkled her forehead, and her pale blue eyes squinted at him even though the sun was behind her. He wondered if she remembered him from high school. He

wasn't very popular back then and was kind of a nerd, but in his mind he had gained confidence and charisma in and after college. He tried to use it to talk to her.

"I know I know you from somewhere, but I can't figure it out," he lied.

She took a drag off her cigarette and blew the smoke straight up. "I know you, too," she said. "You sat behind me in tenth grade biology." She pointed the two fingers that held her cigarette at him and said, "You're the guy who really likes frogs."

She offered him a non-menthol cigarette. He declined and took out one of his own. "I don't really like frogs. A lot of people don't like dissecting animals."

"You turned green and ran out of the classroom."

Things weren't quite going the way Buggy had desired. He gave up before he even really began on Johnna and decided to move on to someone a little easier. He wasn't looking for a romantic challenge, nor was he looking for an easy lay. He wanted someone who promised low-maintenance companionship. He could handle good-natured fun, but couldn't help but sense an edge of ridicule in her voice. He didn't want to be the nerd she knew from high school. He didn't give himself a chance to use any of his lines on her.

"Well, I should get back to work," he said.

"But you haven't finished your cigarette."

"No biggie. See ya."

Later that night, on the drive home, Buggy chided himself for giving up so easily. Why was he being so sensitive about some stupid incident that happened in high school? Was it because that's the first thing she talked about? Was that the only thing she remembered about him? The thought gave Buggy a dark feeling of inadequacy, which he quickly shook off. He wasn't going to worry about what people thought about him anymore. He wasn't there to impress

Johnna. Sure, he still had feelings for her, even though they never really knew each other. The extra weight she had put on slightly bothered him. He had thought he could use it as an excuse to write her off in case things went badly, but now that they had, it made him feel worse that he could be rejected by a woman who was clearly not good enough for him. He'd dated models and dancers. Chances are they were into him for his money, but that didn't mean he needed some pudgy waitress who'd never left her hometown. He knew they were called servers now, but it made him feel better to debase her in his thoughts. He decided not to talk to her anymore, and if she spoke to him, he would be aloof and cold.

He didn't see her at work again until almost a week later. They both worked the lunch shift that day. It was a Wednesday, and an unexpected rush came hard and fast. There were three people outside the restaurant, waiting to get in before the doors opened at 11 a.m., a rare occurrence at Kalamata. One server had called out, and the manager on duty had a chest cold, so the day would have been hard enough even if it hadn't been so busy. By noon the place was full, and every time Buggy had one table cleaned, two more were dirty in its place. He quickly learned that tensions got high when a restaurant was too busy, and the staff wasn't prepared or used to the volume.

The servers didn't bother to clean up after themselves. When one took too long at the computer to ring in an order, the server behind her yelled at her to hurry up because he had orders to put in as well. Mistakes in the orders were not tolerated by the kitchen staff. No one on the line had time to grill a chicken breast on the fly because a server forgot to ring it in with the rest of the order. The servers claimed not to have time to throw away their trash or wipe up their spills. They said they were too weeded to take that extra five seconds to walk to the dish pit, so instead they left dirty plates and glasses in the salad station or didn't even bother to pre-bus their

tables at all. Receipt papers littered the counters near the cash register and bar. If a napkin or fork fell on the floor, it would stay there unless Buggy picked it up. He tried to be Zen about it, but the utter lack of respect from his coworkers almost ate through his resolve to remain under-the-radar. It took all his self-control not to yell at people the way the server at the computer had.

As he hurriedly bussed table after table and swept up the messes the busy servers left in their wake, he practiced telling them off in his head. He decided instead of making a big deal out of it, he would go straight to a bar when his shift was finally over. He would lay out what he'd gone through to the bartender who he hoped would just nod and sympathize.

When the rush had finally abated, before he finished his side work, Johnna tapped him on the shoulder and asked if he wanted to go have a smoke with her. He paused and nearly said no, but of all the people who had gotten under his skin that day, she wasn't one of them. He had noticed her a couple times during the lunch rush. She had a deer-in-headlights look on her face every time, but she didn't seem to ever miss a beat. He was never flagged down and asked to get something for one of her customers that she'd forgotten or taken too long to get. She was never part of any argument between servers or with the kitchen staff. The manager didn't have to admonish her for any mistakes. All the annoying habits his other coworkers exhibited when they were busy, Buggy suddenly realized Johnna didn't. Even though the look on her face betrayed that she was under a lot of pressure, her performance amidst the chaos showed she controlled the Zen to which he could barely hang on.

“Nah, not today,” he said. “Let's go grab a drink instead.”

“Actually, I'm pretty hungry. Let's go somewhere with booze and food.”

They left Kalamata in separate cars, Buggy first. He'd saved up a bit of cash and bought a ten-year-old Mazda Protégé. The paint job was faded, there were several cigarette burns in the

interior, and the headliner sagged, but he preferred it that way. He assumed that's what someone in his position would drive. He could fix the headliner himself, at least. Johnna said she would follow shortly after. They were going to meet at a Bennigan's, which wasn't far from Kalamata or Buggy's apartment. He waited in the parking lot and smoked three cigarettes before she pulled up in a bright red Firebird. He wondered how a server at a tiny restaurant could afford a car like that, plus what it must cost for gas and insurance. She'd changed her clothes and fixed her makeup. Her hair was loose now and cascaded halfway down her back. She was a natural blond, so the texture was shiny and silken, unlike the chemically processed blonds he'd dated. She smiled a smile at him that she did not seem to possess at work. He hadn't seen that smile since high school, not even when she greeted her tables when it paid to be saccharine. Seeing her like that, lit by the white afternoon sun, rekindled his desire for her.

"Sorry it took me so long," she said. "Tori spilled Coke on me, and I was all sticky. I had to stop home real quick and change. Why didn't you go inside?"

"Because I thought you were right behind me."

"Sorry, I should have told you."

"It's cool."

"No, it's hot as hell. Let's go in before I melt."

They were greeted by a waft of cold air and a bubbly hostess. As she walked toward them, her ponytail swung wide behind her with each bouncy step. Buggy wondered if the corporation that owned the chain required being so cheery. There were certainly no girls like that at Kalamata.

"Hey, folks, welcome to Bennigan's. Will it be two of you dining with us today?"

Johnna held up two fingers, and Buggy nodded.

“OK, great,” the hostess chirped. “Follow me this way.”

She turned on her heels and led them toward the back of the restaurant. Watching her walk, he noticed she had a slight limp that made it seem like one of her legs were longer than the other, yet it didn't slow her down. Her ponytail continued to swing in a wide arc that at one point brushed against an old license plate that adorned the wall. She brought them to a small booth in the back corner of the place. Since it was only four in the afternoon, there were few other customers, but happy hour started there at three, and Johnna's hunger was why Buggy chose to go there.

“Here you go,” said the hostess. “April will be right with you. You folks enjoy your meal.”

“Thanks,” Buggy said.

Johnna said nothing and didn't glance in the hostess's direction. She tossed her purse into the booth, plopped down, and opened her menu. “I love this place,” she told Buggy. “I could eat a gallon of their baked potato soup.”

He looked around for whoever April might be. He didn't see any servers on the floor, but all the customers looked content. If it were Kalamata, the server would have to greet the table within thirty seconds or get an earful from the owners. They sat for more than two minutes, in silence, looking over their menus before Johnna got up.

“I have to pee. Order me a cheeseburger with fries and a rum and Coke if anybody comes before I get back, OK?”

April, a forty-ish woman with a large brass-colored bun on top of her head came to the table as soon as Johnna was out of sight.

“Hi, I’m April, I’ll take care of you guys today,” she said in the thickest southern accent Buggy had ever heard. She pulled a black vinyl book and a pen out of her apron and asked if he knew what his friend wanted to drink.

“Actually, I know our whole order.”

By the time Johnna came back, Buggy had finished his first beer and condensation had gathered on her glass. He didn’t ask what took her so long. He didn’t want to know. The first reason that came to mind was that she was making room for a gallon of potato soup. He audibly sighed in relief when he remembered that she’d ordered a burger.

“Tough day, right?” Johnna said and took the lime off the rim of her glass and dropped it in the ashtray.

“Yeah, I didn’t think that place ever got that busy.”

“It doesn’t. I’ve been there for five years, and it’s never been like that. I wonder what brought it on.”

Buggy shrugged. “Just one of those things, I guess.”

“I guess. Just glad it’s over.” She bent the straw over the rim and drank straight from the glass, letting a few ice cubes fall into her mouth. She chewed them with her mouth open and started twirling her hair. “I noticed they don’t have any frog legs on the menu. That’s got to be a relief.” She laughed and apologized.

He guessed she thought she was being funny, but he wasn’t a fan of the frog jokes. He humored her anyway. “Are you going to let that go or am I going to have to quit my job and move back to New York?”

“When did you live there?”

“I went to college out there and stayed out there because I got a really good job.”

“Oh, yeah? Then why are you back here bussing tables? Girl trouble?”

“I wish. No. Just got tired of the rat race.”

“I can dig it.” She downed the rest of her drink. “Is that our waitress?” she asked, pointing to the hostess who had shown them to their table.

“No, she’s over there,” Buggy said and waved April over.

He was relieved Johnna didn’t press the question further. He didn’t want to tell her why he moved back to Florida. He didn’t want to speak it out loud. He didn’t even want to think about it. He wasn’t ready to admit how the stress of his job was too much for him. He didn’t think he would ever be prepared to admit it. Back in New York, he kept in touch and played it cool for his family. He told them stories of bravado and success, which were true, but it took him an increasing amount of whiskey to get to sleep every night. He was good at what he did, but he didn’t realize he hated it until he had so much responsibility that he thought he couldn’t easily get out. One night, a drunken stupor had caused him to lose the firm he worked for almost ten million dollars. He was alone on his couch with his laptop and a bottle of Jameson, doing some personal trading. He awoke the next morning, the night before a black mess in his memory, and he’d traded \$520 million in shares in crude oil, driving the cost up to a high that would last eight months. The stocks were not authorized, but since the trades were done in the middle of the night, the firm didn’t unwind the positions until the next morning when it was too late. Almost \$10 million in losses had already accumulated. He was, of course, immediately fired, but with that termination came immense relief. He moved back home where he was free to be idle, anonymous, and unremarkable.

Buggy and Johnna ordered another round of drinks. Their food arrived shortly after.

“Oh man, I haven’t eaten all day,” Johnna said. “I thought I would grab a bite at work, but I never got a chance.” She pulled the onions, pickles, tomato, and lettuce off the burger, poured some ketchup on it, and replaced the bun. The lettuce slid off her plate and onto the table. She placed her napkin on top of it and took a bite of her vegetable-free burger.

“Sorry, I would have gotten it without all that stuff if I’d known,” Buggy said.

She looked up and smiled. A glob of ketchup clung to the corner of her mouth. “I forgot to tell you.” She wiped the ketchup off her mouth with a fry and ate it. “I’ve never tried lettuce before, and I don’t like that other stuff. I mean, tomatoes are good in other foods, like when they’re cooked, but not on burgers or sandwiches, you know?”

“Wait, you’ve never tried lettuce?” He took a sip of his beer. “How does one reach their late twenties without at least trying lettuce?”

She shrugged and ate four more fries in one bite.

“You mean to tell me that you’ve never eaten a salad?”

“It looks gross and weird.”

“But it doesn’t taste like anything. Not iceberg lettuce. It’s like, I don’t know, crunchy water. It’s empty calories, only there for texture. How can you have never tried lettuce?”

She sighed and took a long gulp from her drink. “I’m not interested, OK? Can we talk about something else?” She rolled her eyes and finished her fries.

Buggy was a laid-back guy now. He couldn’t let something like this bother him or make a big deal about it. No stress. So she’s never tried lettuce? Big deal. He forced a laugh and moved past it. “So, what have you been doing since high school?”

“Not much,” she said. “I was married for a while, but that didn’t work out.”

Buggy sat up straight and arched his eyebrows. “Oh? Any kids?”

“Yeah, one, but he died.”

He bit his tongue, mid-chew, and masked his grunt of pain by saying how good his sandwich was.

“What is it? Can I try it?”

“It’s turkey on a pretzel roll with Swiss cheese and honey mustard, and you can only try it if you try that piece of lettuce you’re trying to ignore under your napkin.”

“This is payback for the frog jokes isn’t it?”

Buggy laughed and didn’t mention the lettuce for the rest of the meal.

“I’m sorry about your son,” he said.

“Thanks, but it’s OK. It happened a long time ago.”

When they left, they were both pretty drunk and decided to continue the night at Buggy’s. She was to follow him home. He got in the Mazda and rolled down the windows. The sun had gone down, but it was still balmy and his A/C didn’t work. When Johnna started up her car, the sound of the engine told him that it was a V6. It made a little more sense how she could afford it.

They spent the night at his place that night. Buggy awoke the next morning to find her in the kitchen wearing nothing but one of his T-shirts and panties, making chocolate chip pancakes.

“I hope you don’t mind that I raided your kitchen,” she said.

“How can I get mad when the end result is pancakes,” he said. He kissed her on top of the head and made coffee.

She set the table and pushed two chairs together so they could play footsie while eating.

“So, how can you afford a Firebird?” Buggy asked after a few mouthfuls of pancakes.

They were the most savory, sweet, and fluffy pancakes he’d ever tasted. He would have asked

the question earlier, but he was overcome by voraciousness from the flavor, and had to get up to get a glass of milk to wash it all down.

She told him that it was a gift from her ex-husband. She was so excited to get a Trans Am that she couldn't bear to let it go in the divorce. He laughed at her mistakenly thinking it was a Trans Am when it was only a V6, but was too distracted by the food to correct her.

They got along well and saw each other more and more. He loved her sense of humor. She never brought up the frog incident again, but as the months passed and he spent more time with her, ate more meals with her, her active avoidance of lettuce began to wear on his nerves. He wasn't sure why it bothered him so much. She called lettuce "pointless food fluff" and soon became quick to anger when he pressured her to try it.

Their relationship rapidly deteriorated because of Buggy's volatility. Lettuce was the impetus for many pet peeves to follow, annoyances that would have only turned up in a couple with many years together. He wanted to ignore her quirks. He'd never had a long-term relationship. He thought with his new laid-back outlook he could get past the silly things which he knew really didn't matter. Johnna was a fantastic girlfriend and exactly the easygoing type of woman he had hoped for. They never moved in together, but she spent the night at his apartment at least three or four nights a week. She didn't mind when he stayed out late drinking, and when they went out together, she always kept up, matching him drink for drink. She was uninhibited in the bedroom. She always smelled good. She slept in just as late into the day as he did. She cooked almost as good as his mother. Her huevos rancheros, in particular, sent him into a gluttonous frenzy that left him drunk on the spicy fumes, which still hung in the air. Her secret was that she added sharp cheddar cheese, a lot of sharp cheddar cheese. She had a sweet,

whispery voice and sang quietly to herself when she cooked, Norwegian folk songs she said her grandmother sang to her as a child.

All the positive qualities, to a normal person, would outweigh the bad, Buggy thought. She didn't live there, but was over enough that he thought she should clean up a little, not after him, but at least after herself. The main reason he'd initially looked past her remark about him and the frog in biology class was because she was so fastidious at work. Being a busser, Buggy was constantly cleaning up after the lazy servers who couldn't be bothered to keep the restaurant presentable. But that wasn't something he had to worry about with Johnna. Unfortunately, the cleanliness and order she displayed at work didn't extend to her home life. Buggy was well aware that he was guilty of the same exact flaw, but it was his apartment and he was allowed to be a slob in his own home. He never once went to her house, so he had no idea how she lived. He asked once why they never spent time at her place and she said he wouldn't like it there, so he never brought it up again, yet it festered in his mind. What a strange thing to say. What was wrong with her place and how did she know he wouldn't like it?

She also snored. She had cold feet that she never failed to press against his legs at night. After they'd dated for a month, she stopped wearing makeup and shaving her legs and underarms. She never trimmed her pubic hair. But it was her aversion to lettuce that accumulated the most frustration in Buggy. He devised plans to trick her into eating it. He shredded it fine and put it in a burrito, but she'd opened it before eating it, got angry, and ordered pizza, not sharing any of it with him. He tried introducing her to different types of lettuce: spring mix, romaine, and arugula. Each was met with more derision than the last. His desire to get her to try lettuce became an obsession, and he reverted to his high-anxiety ways that he had tried so hard to leave far behind.

They shared the duty of cooking. Some nights she would bring groceries and cook, others he would make dinner. One night, one after they'd both spent their day off of work together, snoozing, drinking, and binge watching old kung fu movies on DVD, Buggy put more effort than he would have normally into making a hearty salad. He went to the grocery store while Johnna was napping and bought romaine lettuce, baby spinach, a green pepper, grape tomatoes, shredded carrots, a cucumber, and fancy bleu cheese dressing in a mason jar. He made chicken parmesan for the entrée. He anticipated that she wouldn't try the salad so he put too much salt in the marinara sauce in the hopes that she wouldn't like it and give the salad a shot. It was far-fetched, but that didn't stop him.

Buggy's apartment was small. The dining room was a nook off to the side of the kitchen, but he tried his best to make it nice. He had picked up some carnations at the store and used them as a center piece. He opened the curtains so they'd have a view of the sunset. He lit a candle and opened a bottle of pinot noir, Johnna's favorite. He'd done everything he thought was necessary for a romantic dinner and hoped that would keep her in a good enough mood not to get mad about the salad. It was his ultimate hope that she would be so appreciative of the effort he put into to everything that she would give in and try the lettuce. He shook her gently from her slumber on the couch and told her dinner was ready.

She stretched, yawned, and smiled. "Smells good, baby. I'll be right there."

She entered the kitchen and narrowed her eyes. She didn't seem to notice anything but the salad. "I'm not eating any of that," she said, pointing a shaky finger at it. Buggy had put it in a cobalt blue glass bowl in the hopes that the presentation might help entice her a little. She sat down heavily and poured half the bottle of wine into her glass.

“Just once, so you can say you’ve tried it,” Buggy said. “That way you’ll know for sure you don’t like it, and if you do, even better. Here, I’ll put some dressing on it so the first time it will even have some flavor. You can get a feel for the texture.”

“No, Buggy. I. Don’t. Want. To.” She snatched the lettuce from his hand and flung it at the garbage can, but the lid was closed. It landed with a soft, wet smack.

“I mean, you actively avoid eating it every time we go out. I had a friend in high school who refused to eat anything green, but then, you know, he grew up.”

“Are you saying I’m not a grownup?”

“I’m saying it’s not something a grown person would do.”

“You’re a busboy, pushing thirty. What would you know about what a grown person would do?”

That was a fair question. He had once been a grown person but couldn’t handle the pressure. He realized when she said it that he wasn’t looking for a new laid-back lifestyle because it’s who he really was on the inside; he was, simply, inadequate. All the nit-picky issues he had with Johnna and her behavior, all the pet peeves, they were just ways to avoid taking a deeper look at himself and his failures. He didn’t like the sting of that realization and lashed out.

“Well, I think a grownup would know her husband is lying to her when he says her car is a better car than it actually is. The damn thing is a V6, Johnna. Trans Am and Formula models only come in V8.”

“Pete said it’s a Trans Am, and I believe him.”

“If he gave you a grenade and told you it was an apple, would you eat it?”

“That doesn’t even make sense, Bug. What do you even care? It’s not like you drive it.”

He ate the lettuce out of the bowl with his fingers.

“How many people have you told it’s a Trans Am? I care because it makes you look like an idiot, and me an idiot by association.”

“You’re an asshole.” She threw her napkin in the salad bowl, spilling half of it on the table.

He couldn’t stand it anymore. He told her not to be there when he got back and left the apartment. He was too drunk to drive, but sober enough to know better. He walked aimlessly and ended up at the railroad crossing from his walk to work. He sat against a light post with a fifth of cheap vodka that he’d bought a couple blocks back. He drank, waited for a train, and imagined himself a hobo. It was an idea that quickly passed. Just the thought of not knowing when his next shower would be made his head itch. He was going to finish his bottle, hopefully see a train pass, and go back home. If Johnna wasn’t there when he got home, he would let her go. If she decided to stick it out there, he would forgive her flaws and make the relationship work, on his end.

By the time he finished his bottle, it was nearly midnight and a train had finally come. It was another slow CSX, covered in graffiti. He looked at the tags and unfocused his eyes. He told himself that he didn’t need focus or order. The train became a dark gray-green blur, a rush of motion. The graffiti was a motley jumble. His brain buzzed softly, and the tension receded from his shoulders and back. He absorbed this feeling of tranquility into his core, but left it close enough to the surface that it could be easily summoned when needed. He felt hopeful that it would work. He’d tried with Johnna, but he didn’t try hard enough at not trying. He let Alex’s thoughts control too many of Buggy’s actions. He didn’t want to be Alex anymore. Buggy was supposed to be the kind of guy to take things as he found them. That was the plan when he’d left New York, but he wasn’t far enough removed. The train brought him what he was missing,

though he wasn't quite sure what it was. He could only feel it. Though he had no name for it, it was an acceptance of uncertainty, a not knowing what came next and not needing to.

A DIRTY WOMAN

It might not be a good idea to tell a woman she's pretty when she wants to be. The woman I met last night could have been struggling with some self-esteem issues. She was definitely on drugs. She could have also been nuts. But the way she ran her nails up and down my arms, her sultry gaze, even her thin smile stoked my loneliness. I decided, perhaps too quickly, she was what I was looking for—a dirty girl. Someone to bleed my sorrow, teach me a few things, or just get me out of my head long enough to wake me up.

Shadowy blue light filtered through the thin white curtain of my motel room. The table lamp was in pieces on the industrial-grade carpet. I thought to try consoling her but wasn't sure what else I could say. "I'm sorry" didn't work. "I didn't mean it like that" only seemed to make her angrier. "Liar!" she shouted and ripped the sheets off the mattress. She flung them over her head which revealed stains on the bed and sweat stains under her arms. She had already yanked all the drawers from the dresser and smashed the glass in a small painting of a fat dairy cow that hung above the bedside table. Her eyes fell upon the television. I thought it was best to hide out in the bathroom until she calmed down or, even better, got bored and left.

My wife and high school sweetheart died a little over a year ago. I moved in with my brother, Gianni and his wife, Carla after my wife passed because I didn't know how to be alone. It was Gianni's suggestion. He thought I would only be there for a month or so. I guess a month was his estimate for how long it would take to grieve. He said being around his rowdy family would make for a smoother transition, that if I spent enough time with four young, obnoxious boys, I would look forward to having a place all to myself. But I got too comfortable and ended

up staying there for over a year. I decided it was time to go after Gianni's two oldest boys got into a fight over who didn't want to sit next to me at Easter dinner.

I thought since I had been sedentary for so long—spending my days watching television, my evenings playing online poker—getting out of the house on a road trip seemed like a good idea. I thought maybe a one night stand could be a new experience to break me from my stupor, but I couldn't do it near my home, not where people knew me. Besides, I had barely seen any of the country. The only place I've been outside of Florida was Puerto Rico, for my honeymoon. It wasn't a well-thought out plan, but it was all I had. Thinking about spending one more night at Gianni's gave me a tight feeling at the base of my neck.

I met her at a biker bar called The Booby Trap in a small town called Indian Springs, somewhere in western Tennessee. *This is what you wanted*, I told myself as I faltered at the front door. Cigarette butts floated in near-empty beer mugs on the wooden railing. I thought of what I might be doing at that moment if I was still at home. It was 9:30 p.m., so chances were I would have been on the couch with a microwaved pizza in my lap and a crime drama on television. *They'll probably ignore me and tell jokes under their breath*. I hoped to leave with, at least, a phone number, though I didn't know if I'd have the guts to ask for one, let alone call to find out if it was fake or not. I decided to go in and settle for a cold beer before finding a hotel room for the night.

The bar smelled like smoke and leather. The sounds of laughter, Southern Rock, and clanging bottles filled the room. Two men in black vests played pool. Garlands of cigar smoke floated under the lights above the green-felted table. Behind them, two women in short skirts, shook and gyrated on a small linoleum dance floor. A woman in a red bikini swung on a giant swing, and another who only wore pink panties and electrical tape X's over her nipples danced in

a cage. The bar was against the back wall and I had to walk through the whole place to get to it. I regretted my clothes immediately and briefly flashed back to the bullying I'd suffered in school. I almost lost my resolve again until I saw a tall blond woman at the bar wearing a light blue, lacey blouse and faded jeans. She was smoking a long white-filtered cigarette and swinging her hips to the beat of the music, which had just switched to an old Johnny Cash song, I didn't know the name. I checked my breath in my hand and walked to the bar where she stood alone.

I was initially drawn to this woman because she had the same hair color as my wife. It was dirty blond with darker layers swirling through it. I had lost my wife to breast cancer. At the moment I saw the woman at the bar, I believed Maggie was being given back to me. She was diagnosed one day, gone two months later. We were only married for two years but had been together since freshman year of high school. She was the only woman I'd ever slept with. When I saw that sandy blond ponytail, my heart jolted as if snagged on a fishing hook.

I didn't realize I was just standing there, in the middle of the room until a man with long oily hair spilled beer on my foot. He apologized with a grunt and I awkwardly nodded at his back as he walked away. I looked back at the bar to see that the blond woman was gone. I asked the bartender if he knew where she went.

A man, who must have been almost seven feet tall, stood next to me. He only wore jeans and a denim vest, no shirt. A round belly, covered in blond-orange hung over his belt. He told me her name was Petunia, but everyone called her Petty because she collected a record number of poles. I had no idea what he meant, but laughed along with him when he slapped me on the shoulder. I shifted my feet to keep my balance. My shoes peeled from the sticky floor like masking tape. Big Red poked me in the ribs and wished me luck. "As if you'll need it." He grabbed his pitcher of beer and two mugs in one hand and went back to his table.

She must have gone to the ladies' room because she came back shortly after. I offered to buy her a drink and she accepted. I got a light beer. She opted for a bourbon and diet soda. We sat without speaking for a minute. She grinned at me like a school bully that was about to rough me up for my lunch money and shove me into a locker. I thought maybe a relaxed pose might boost my confidence and show her that I was good to go. I slouched a bit, like my nephew did when he played video games. Our drinks came, interrupting the silence. The bartender handed them to me with a smug grin.

Petty perched on an empty barstool and lit up another long cigarette. "You from around here?" Her hair, up close, was a halo of frizz, her roots dark and laced with gray. She put a hand on her hip, gave my khaki pants, and button-up shirt a long look, and blew smoke over my head.

"It's Tony, and I'm from Tampa." I started to reach out and shake her hand, but played it cool and scratched my nose instead.

She was very thin, and her crossed legs bounced in sync with the beat of the music.

"Tony, that short for Anthony?"

"Antonio."

She raised her eyebrows and took a sip of her drink. Her bright pink lipstick left a goopy mark on the glass. "You know, Antonio, I got a thing for Italian men." She leaned in close and touched my knee. I took a gulp of my beer and smiled. She rested her elbow on the bar and smiled back. Her full lips hugged her teeth, and her nose was button-small. With her high cheekbones and slim neck, I guessed, in another life, she could have been a model.

Being attracted to a woman who looked like Maggie seemed wrong to me just then. It was like, in some way, I was betraying her. I wasn't trying to replace her. I was trying to fill a void. When Petty looked at me and winked, I felt a flash of guilt and drained my beer in one

swig. I wasn't supposed to have feelings for this woman. I was supposed to find an easy woman, not to make me forget about Maggie, but to heal me a little. I had left the house that morning determined to never go back, to leave all reminders of Maggie behind. I broke eye contact with Petty and looked down at myself. I was dressed completely in clothes that Maggie had bought for me. I knew I didn't have the ability to erase her completely.

I had also been trying to shoo away thoughts of Gianni and Carla, who had taken me in after Maggie died. It didn't work out so well because the guilty thoughts kept coming back, like mosquitoes on a balmy night.

I'd gone down to part time at the factory to take care of Maggie when she got sick, but she didn't last long. After she died, I lapsed into depression and stopped going to work. I never even got my last paycheck. They sent it by mail. No one ever called to find out why I quit or ask if I was all right.

How does one go from having ever-present love to being alone? Sure, we had our differences and I can't say we never fought, but that doesn't mean the love wasn't there. I wasn't ready to lose her. She only lasted seven weeks, three days, and nineteen hours after being diagnosed. I spent that time fighting to keep her, not preparing to lose her. It feels selfish to think of it that way. She was the one fighting for her life, but I never saw her as actually dying. She was so positive the whole time. Looking back on it now, I know that she was holding me together through it all, not the other way around.

If she was afraid, she didn't show it. She didn't even cry at the initial diagnosis. Breast cancer did not run in her family, so she was sure it wasn't strong enough to take her. I didn't understand her logic, but it made me feel better. When the chemotherapy side effects made her

vomit, she would look up and smile at my worry. “I’m just practicing for when we have a baby,” she said.

The only time she showed weakness was when her hair began to fall out. She wasn’t vain. She was afraid for me, of how I would react to having a bald wife. I showed her how little I cared by brushing it for her after every shower and braiding what was left, even as the tufts fell out in my fingers. It was one of the ways we supported each other through her ordeal, how we showed each other that we weren’t going to let cancer defeat us. She let me embrace her sickness as she fell apart, and I showed her that I was happy to do it. After that she spent all her free time knitting hats to cover her baldness. She embellished them with flowers, hearts, and shamrocks, donating the extras to other patients, especially the children.

When my grief became semi-tolerable, I noticed that Maggie’s disease had not only taken her life, but our entire savings, which really wasn’t that much. But by that time, it really didn’t matter to me because I couldn’t stand to be alone in our house anymore. I had spent a week or so in a haze. When I came out of it, I couldn’t be alone with my thoughts. Memories of her flooded my mind every time I had a silent moment. I could still smell her even after I’d given all her clothes to Goodwill and her sister came for her jewelry, trinkets, and mementos I couldn’t stand to look at. The only thing I kept was her wedding ring, which I still keep in my pocket.

Since I had no money, I had to get a job, but I didn’t have any experience outside the factory, and only a high school education. The only job I could get was stocking shelves at a local grocery store. I had bad knees, and with all the bending and lifting that job required, I could only work three or four hours a day. It was at Gianni’s insistence, when my house went into foreclosure, that I move in with him and his family.

I looked at Petty again and wondered what her family life was like. I didn't have time to think too much about it before the girl with the X's on her breasts walked by. I knocked over my beer. Petty laughed and put her hand on my knee again. "Relax, cutie, we're all here to have fun. Have another drink. Loosen up." She plucked a piece of ice from her glass and popped it into her mouth. She made loud sucking noises as it melted. I looked around the bar. She was the only person who paid attention to me. I thought I saw Big Red snicker, or maybe it was a sneeze. I felt more comfortable and confident about halfway through my second beer. Before I got too drunk, I thought it would be best to try a change of scenery, but I didn't want to leave Petty. Her hair had drawn me to her. The thought of spending another night alone kept me there.

Since most of her lipstick was now stuck to her glass, I could see more of the woman underneath the makeup. I could tell by the wrinkles around her eyes that she was probably a bit older than me, but that didn't bother me. I was thirty and she was probably a little over forty, but when she smiled, I saw someone other than a barfly. I was well aware that there was probably no way she was interested in me for my looks or personality. I could tell it was a practiced smile—one she'd used to get countless free drinks, but that bothered me less and less every time she touched my knee. Since tension had risen from my presence in my brother's house, smiles were a rarity. I lifted my chin and smiled back to show Petty I was playing along.

She slid her foot up and down my calf. "I went to community college down in Jackson for a while, you know. Back then, all the bookworms like you would line up for a date with me."

I believed her. She had a natural beauty, though it was beat down by time and, I assumed, fast living. I imagined her as a child, running barefoot through her rural yard, with a younger sister, their hair flying wild in the summer winds, destination unimportant. At around fifteen, she discovered boys, though they'd discovered her many years before. Her father was too drunk to

care. Her mother had accepted it as inevitable. The girl turned into a woman overnight and never looked back. She enjoyed the power she had over men—how one gentle touch and a smile could get her whatever she wanted. Her string of lovers trailed behind her in a cloud of lust and cheap perfume. Her clothes smelled of booze, smoke, and sex. Her parents didn't miss their little girl. They saw her absence as one less mouth to feed. But what did I know? I'd lived a sheltered life in a beach town, and only saw people like her in the movies.

Could I handle a woman like Petty? I ordered another round of drinks. Big red tipped his mug to me while he waited to take his shot at the pool table. He must have thought it was hilarious. I assumed he was waiting for me to bungle it up—spill my drink on her, or say something stupid—and see her get angry or go find someone less dorky. But who knew, maybe he really rooted for me, the skinny nerd in a place everyone knew he didn't belong. If that was the case, he probably only wanted to josh Petty about it once I was gone.

“So, Petunia, I find it hard to believe you don't have a boyfriend,” I said.

She rubbed her nose and set her glass down on the bar, hard. “Oh, you know, I've had my fair share, but I haven't found anyone nearly as cute as you. And what's your excuse, anyway? No way some lucky lady hasn't tied you down.”

I watched the bubbles rise to the top of my beer and said, “I was married, but we don't need to talk about that.”

“What, she divorced you?”

“No!” I reached into my pocket for some cash to pay my tab and leave, but instead gave her a twenty. “Tell you what, why don't you take this and go play all your favorite songs on the jukebox.”

She snatched the bill from my hand and swayed over to the glowing machine against the far wall. I watched her hips swing as she walked away. I couldn't fathom how she could be attracted to me. I was nothing like any of the guys in there—guys I assumed she was there to meet. Maybe she thought I had money. I felt it wouldn't hurt to let her believe that for a while. She was probably used to being treated a certain way by men because of her looks. She wasn't as attractive as I thought at first, but there was confidence in her which aided her desirability. She slowed before she reached the jukebox and peered over her shoulder to see if I was still looking. I was. She waved the bill at me and smiled again. I wondered what color her eyes were. I thought should find out when she sat back down and compliment her on them. Thinking about what to say when she came back caused my self-doubt to creep back in and I got angry at myself for being so flaky. Again, I considered paying my tab and taking off before she returned, but as I watched her tap those bright red fingernails on the screen, I decided to at least stick around to see what songs she played.

She came back, picked up her drink, and sipped it through the straw. Her eyes were hazel. "What brings you to Tennessee, Antonio?" Petty asked.

"I'm on my way to Portland."

She ran her finger up and down my arm as I spoke. I was a little self-conscious about my soft skin and wimpy muscles. I drained my third beer and signaled for another.

"Why Portland?" she asked. "You got family there?"

"No. I saw on television once, this place in Portland that sells all kinds of donuts. I've been on the lookout for interesting places to visit, and this place stood out to me. Plus, people in Portland seem cool. I thought I'd pop up there and check it out."

She stared at me and said nothing, so I took that as my cue to tell her all about it.

“In Portland, there’s this place called Voodoo Donut that has all kinds of crazy donuts, like one with cereal all over it, and one covered in maple-flavored icing with two strips of bacon on top of it. Can you believe it? Doesn’t that sound like something you’d have to try?”

She laughed. Lipstick colored her two front teeth. “You’re driving to the opposite end of the country for a donut? That’s crazy talk. You think they don’t have those in Florida?” I hadn’t noticed any hint of a Southern accent until she said “crazy talk.”

“That’s not the only reason I’m going. But, come on, maple bacon donut!” I rubbed my belly and licked my lips, which made her laugh even harder. I couldn’t tell if she thought I was charming or an idiot, but her hand was on my knee again so I didn’t really care. She then suggested we get a room at the motel next door. The grungy red-haired guy said she was fast and that’s what I was counting on, but I needed a fourth beer to build up the nerve.

We left the bar together, grabbed some more beer from a little shop, and rented the last vacant room in the motel. She tossed her purse onto the dresser and kicked off her heels. I stood in the doorway with my hands in my pockets. The room smelled like mold and bleach.

“Relax,” Petty said. I’m not going to hurt you. Here, have another beer, baby. Let me freshen up.”

I sat on a small grass-colored couch against the wall and tried not to think about the things that had happened on it and the bed. I picked up the remote and thought about turning on the television. She came out of the bathroom and stretched her arms above her head. Her blouse came untucked from her jeans, which revealed her pierced belly button. She must have removed some of her makeup because her eyes seemed much bigger.

In the time it took me to put down my beer, she had jumped on my lap and straddled me, nuzzling her breasts against my chest. I was aroused but also frightened. I had wavered several

times that night, but that was the first time I had to physically resist the urge to leave, throw her off, run out the door, and drive straight back to Florida. But that meant going back to being alone. I was determined to no longer be alone, even if it was for that one night. The pressure of her thighs on my lap and her rocking motion made me warm inside. I wasn't sure what to do. I hadn't been intimate with a woman since Maggie got sick. I reached up and pulled Petty's hair free. It fell in a curtain around my face. She nibbled on my ear and whispered "Say something in Italian, Antonio."

I haven't spoken Italian since Maggie either. I cupped Petty's thighs. They were warm and taut as rope under her jeans. She clenched tightly, and my breath quickened.

"Puzzi come un fiore."

She yanked off her shirt and knocked the lamp off the end table. The bulb shattered and left the room a hazy blue. "I don't know what you said, but I love it." She grabbed my ears and put her tongue in my mouth. She pulled away and shouted, "Antonio!" She bounced up and down and shook her head back and forth, whipping my face with her hair.

"It's just Tony, really. Take it easy before you break something else."

I grabbed her shoulders to still her and she kissed me again, violently this time. When she put her mouth onto mine, our teeth collided. I remembered the way Maggie signaled she was in the mood by nibbling on my lower lip and rubbing behind my ears. It struck me as odd that being with another woman would make me miss Maggie even more. But, then again, this wasn't Maggie. No woman could ever be Maggie, I knew that. She was so smart and strong-willed. She was the type of woman who could make even the most alpha male eat his own tie. Her hair didn't smell like vanilla or roses or any of that stuff. It simply smelled clean. The woman on top

of me may have smelled like flowers, but she could never live up to Maggie, and all of a sudden, that really mattered to me. I couldn't take it anymore. I pulled back and smoothed her hair.

“You know, you're really pretty when you want to be,” I said.

I know now that was a mistake. I wanted to get her off of me. I didn't want her anymore. I wasn't prepared for what happened next. I knew that any expectations I had were not very well-thought out, even if I did know better. I should have known that a woman who hung out in a shady bar with disreputable people and ran off to a motel room with a stranger only an hour after meeting him might not be rational. Loneliness does funny things to people. Perhaps I should have simply asked her to stop.

She looked at me sideways and jumped up. “You don't think I'm pretty all the time?” She punched me with her middle knuckle extended, right in the shoulder and shouted, “How about now? Am I pretty now?” She ripped the phone from the wall and threw it high over her head. It crashed into the ceiling. “What about now?” I sat there, paralyzed with fear and indecision.

She went on a rampage for about five minutes and seemingly ran out of steam. I had retreated to the bathroom until her sobbing stopped and there was a sharp knock at the door. I guessed it was the police. Looking out the window, the moon seemed so large and close that I could've reached out and smoothed all the craters. I got up from my seat on the rim of the bathtub and shut off the light in the hopes that if I was quiet enough, she would forget I was in there. She seemed crazy enough, why not stupid, too? The knocking continued, and I wondered if she was going to open door. I couldn't muster up enough courage to leave the safety of the bathroom. I had no idea what to say to the police, who I could only assume were called on the assumption of domestic violence. Why wasn't she answering the door?

The knocks grew louder and a voice demanded from outside, “Police, open this door or we will kick it down.” I jumped up and ran out into the main room. Petty sat on the floor with her purse open, licking the inside of a small plastic bag. She frantically waved her hand at me. I assumed she was signaling for me to stall them. I wasn’t sure what to do, but I decided to open it anyway, lest they kick it down

She screeched and jumped on my back. I fell to the ground under her weight as she pulled my hair and bit my shoulder. The cops banged on the door and shouted louder. This was not what I was looking for when I’d set out. Instead of my brain rotting away on television, the plan was to see new things and meet new people. This was certainly new, but far from ideal. I had left my home so I could find maybe some sort of kindred spirit out in Portland or wherever I ended up. It was a mistake to pick a biker bar instead of getting a coffee or getting a nice quiet hotel room. It never occurred to me that Petty was too easy, that I shouldn’t have jumped at the chance to be with the first woman I met. I resolved to be more careful in the future. Maybe I wouldn’t have found what I was looking for anywhere. I thought being lonely in a house full of family was bad, but being lonely and alone was decidedly worse. Anyone who ever said that sticks and stones will break his bones but words will never hurt him has certainly never been called a crybaby nerd by his nephew. Whoever said it’s better to have loved and lost than to have never loved at all was full of shit and was obviously never left behind by a beloved wife who died young. People say things, but most people are wrong.

I may have gotten myself into trouble on my first night out, but I didn’t want to give up and go home. I could have waited until the cops busted the door down, but that wouldn’t help my situation. It would only make me look suspicious. An escape out the window wasn’t an option because my car was parked right outside the room. I hoped that if I answered the door and the

police saw her, they would take her away to sober up and cool off. They would joke about it with their fellow officer, and I would find a clean, quiet hotel where I could spend the night. I was betting that the cops would find my situation so sad and comical that they wouldn't harass me. As far as I knew Petty wasn't a prostitute. I hadn't paid for her services even if she was. Somehow that made the situation less funny, but the cops finding the scene they were walking into comical was the best outcome I could hope for. I struggled to my feet and staggered with Petty still on my back. With her dangling from my neck, I reached for the door knob.

On the other side of the door wasn't a cop. It was Big Red. He pushed past me and Petty dropped to the floor. "Hey, babe," she said, wiping her hair from her eyes. She looked rougher than the last time I saw her. Her cheeks were red and her makeup was a raccoon mask around her eyes.

"What the fuck happened here," he asked her. "Did you go through all that fucking coke already?"

"Well, you didn't give me much."

"Forget that shit. What are you still doing in here?"

"I was gonna do it, but he got rough with me."

He shut the door behind him and pulled out a knife. "You beatin' on my woman, pipsqueak?"

"No! She's lying! I've been in the bathroom for the last five minutes!"

"My lady ain't no liar," he said and put the knife under my chin.

"Look, take whatever you want. I didn't where my car keys or my wallet are, but you can have them. Just take them and go, OK?"

“Oh, we’re takin’ your shit. That was the plan from the beginning if this bimbo coulda kept her shit together.”

Petty slapped him on the shoulder. “He can’t call me a liar, but you can call me a bimbo?”

“Shut the fuck up,” he said and pushed her onto the bed. “And why didn’t you answer the door?”

Petty shrugged and looked out the window.

“You dumbass. You actually thought I was the cops, didn’t you?”

She shrugged again. “I got paranoid. Remember what happened last time?”

I noticed my car keys on the floor, next to the dresser. I hoped they were distracted by their own bickering and lunged for them. Big Red grabbed the back of my shirt and pulled me clear off the floor. He threw me on the bed with Petty who rolled her eyes and scooted away.

Big Red picked my keys off of the floor. “What kind of car you drive, Bud?”

“It’s that green Ford out front.”

He snorted and threw them at my feet. “Keep it. I can find five cars outside the bar that’ll bring me more than that POS. Where’s your wallet?”

“It’s around here somewhere,” I said.

“I got it in my purse,” Petty said.

“Well,” said Big Red, “at least you got something right. Let’s go. Dave’s waiting.”

And they left. Just like that. I was alive and unscathed. I was happy to be unhurt, but my thoughts quickly turned dark at being alone again. It was time to make a choice, to go back to my boring, lonely life or continue on and risk another harrowing ordeal.

That night I slept next to a phantom lover. She wasn't Maggie. She wasn't Petty. She wasn't either, yet she was both. She was familiar and new. She didn't have a name, face, or hair color. She was she. I could feel her smile and it told me she was glad to be next to me. I sensed her eyes on my face. Fully aware that I was alone, I was comforted by her imagined weight on the mattress and took care to stay on the right side of the bed. Her features were a blur, but I could smell her. Her scents mingled with my own—baby powder, cologne from a dark green glass bottle, menthol smoke, and peppermint. I breathed deep and let sink in that they all had one thing in common. They smelled boring—normal, unremarkable, and forgettable.

As the first glint of sun showed, I closed my eyes and so did she. I let my cheeks dampen the pillow and tried to think about nothing. I awoke after noon and had a strong cup of black coffee and called to cancel my credit cards. I got in my car and didn't know if I was on my way to Portland or home. I didn't look at any street signs, had no idea in which direction I was headed. I just drove.

ODDS ARE

Thunder is good, thunder is impressive; but it is lightning that does the work.

~Mark Twain

Telepathy isn't as cool as you may think. I hated it mostly because I couldn't control it or turn it off. My mind was the one thing that was mine, completely. One thing I never had to share unless I wanted to. It was the only place I could have absolute privacy. Then, all of a sudden, it was as crowded as a rock concert in there. Sure, there are benefits from knowing what others are thinking, like knowing to cover myself when some dirty old man is staring at my cleavage. I'm sure it'd come in handy in a job interview, but most of the time all I heard were snippets of sentences and private thoughts that are best kept private. They say the average man thinks about sex every seven seconds. I've always thought statistics were unreliable and adhered to generalities which couldn't account for all possible variables, but when it comes to men and their dirty thoughts, I can vouch for that one. A fact I could have lived my whole life without knowing. And I could hear everyone. No one was safe: my professors, classmates, sister, brothers, boss, cashiers, baristas, people stuck with me at red lights, my customers, or my boyfriend. That's how I knew he was cheating on me.

More people in the United States are killed or injured by lightning than hurricanes and tornadoes put together. You're also one hundred times more likely to win the lottery. So if you're ever struck by lightning, you should go out immediately and play Powerball—that is if you survive, of course, and there is an 80 percent chance you will. Those are good odds. I was struck by lightning. I survived, but I didn't win the lottery. Like I said, I was never a big fan of statistics

anyway. Yet they were almost all I thought about since I'd become one. I used them to distract myself, though distractions those days were hard to come by.

There is no place outdoors that's safe from a lightning strike, and during a thunderstorm the worst place to be is in a wide open space. That's where I was when I was struck. I was jogging on the beach of Hillsborough Bay. The sun was going down on a blazing July evening, and the cumulonimbus clouds were gathering into colossal, billowy anvils over the bay. I was not then aware of the danger. The lightning hitting the water miles off reminded me of the glass balls that were meant to teach us about static electricity at our elementary school trip to the science center. The thunder cheered from an imaginary celestial crowd to motivate me into adding another ten minutes to my routine. Even though I had my iPod at maximum volume, I could hear it and counted the seconds from each strike to know how far away they were. The doctors said that I'm lucky not to remember the actual strike, though memory loss is common.

Lightning can strike anywhere, anyone, and anything, even when the center of the storm is ten miles away. Many people have been known to have been struck under blue sky. Shortly after being released from the hospital, I started having nightmares. I was back on the beach and the clouds had fangs. The thunder echoed off the waves and changed to a thousand voices laughing. I could feel sparks snap and flare in my synapses in preparation for a surge from the white-hot plasma. Each time the dream came, I woke before the strike, as my hair began to stand up. My burns, even as they healed and faded, would sear as if I had been doused with boiling water. Even though the nightmare was always overwhelming, I would take another pill and hope to fall back to sleep, where the voices could not be heard.

Lightning strikes the earth 100 times per second. That adds up to over 8.6 million times a day. Out of those strikes, over 1,000 people are hit each year. 20 percent of them die instantly

from cardiac arrest. I suffered from many side effects of a lightning strike, some common and some not so much, most of them deeply unpleasant: third degree burns, insomnia, chronic pain, telepathy, headaches, nerve damage, anxiety, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, and Lichtenberg figures, which was what the burn specialist had called the marks where the electricity travelled over the moisture on my skin and left a branching scar pattern. I've been flirting with the idea of painting my bathroom a dark orange color to match all the prescription bottles that line my counter top: Vicodin for the pain (morphine for the really bad days, although I've only used it once and hated it), Xanax for the anxiety and insomnia, and Zoloft for the PTSD.

Twice as many people are stuck by lightning in Florida than any other state in the U.S., and Tampa is the lightning capital of North America. The area from Tampa to Daytona Beach is known as Lightning Alley. Along with being an English major at USF, I worked nights for a themed limo service based in downtown Tampa. Double Bug Limos. All of their limos were stretched Volkswagen Beetles. As if that weren't enough, each car had an asinine theme. They catered to the rich, spoiled, and stupid. Tourists, mostly—the people who're in love with Walt Disney and all of his abominations. For them, there was the Mickey and the Minnie, which were basically limos with giant aluminum mouse ears welded onto them, painted to look like either mouse, and driven by its namesake character. (They use makeup, not the grotesque costumes you see at Disney World.) There was the Hello Kitty, painted pink and white with cat ears, whiskers, and a bow. There's the London Double Decker, which is painted red and has a stacked particle board facade to make it look as if it were twice as tall as it actually is. And for the ex-hippies, now yuppies—the one I drove—there's the Woodstock, painted rainbow tie-dye with a white dove on the hood and a peace sign on the roof. I drove this car dressed up to look like Janis Joplin. I was chosen for the role because I have the hair for it. I have to admit, I loved dressing

up with the oversized sunglasses, excessive jewelry, and feather boas, though I wanted to smack the shit out of everyone who asked me to sing “Me and Bobby McGhee.” There was also a Jerry Garcia (aka Mike Spencer) and a Carlos Santana (aka Jimmy Ortega aka my boyfriend), for variety. They were never asked to sing. Mike looked exactly like Garcia, circa 1995, though he couldn't grow a full beard. He had to glue one on every morning and itch tortuously throughout his shift. Jimmy looked exactly like Santana as well, only circa 1969.

I loved everything about the way he looked, his deep brown eyes, thin sinewy body, and thick curly hair. I could've lived without the goatee. Although it wasn't his looks that attracted me to him. Maybe it was his sense of humor. He always had a way to get me to smile, even when I was in the darkest of moods. It could have been the fact that he loved and respected his mother. It could have been the fact that he always cleaned up after himself and was a superb cook. It could be a combination of all those things. I'm not quite sure why I stayed so long after I learned of his affair—maybe it really was because he's super sexy and I don't want to admit that I could've been so superficial. I don't know. I don't know why I do anything anymore.

Jimmy and I met at work. We never worked the same shift because we drove the same car, so “office romance” was never an issue. He'd left his wallet in the car after his shift one day and after one peek at his driver's license photo, I knew I had to have him. I came in early for my shift the next night so that I could run into him as he brought the car into the garage. I didn't ask anyone about him, just sat on a folding chair outside the dispatcher's office. He pulled into the garage at about half the speed I normally do and fiddled around inside the car for about five minutes before shutting off the engine and getting out. He glanced out at me occasionally while I never broke my gaze. If I was making him nervous, he wasn't showing it.

“You like Band of Horses?” he asked me. He twirled the key ring on his index finger and smiled. “I can't turn the car off until a song by them is over, you know?”

A lightning bolt contains up to 200,000 amps of electricity, but it only takes 1/10 of an amp to kill someone. So why do only 20 percent of people die from a lightning strike? Because the electricity does not travel through the body. The moisture on the skin conducts the lightning over the body and into the ground. I was sweating from my jog and that is what saved my life and also why my Lichtenberg figures were so prominent. I never knew Jimmy had such an aversion to a woman crying until I came home from the hospital. It was so loud in there that I lied about a lot of my symptoms so I could get out sooner. So many thoughts in there and so little of them positive. *I wonder if I could talk that red-headed nurse into giving me a hand job. How am I going to tell this woman that she will never walk again? I swear, if that fucking asshole doesn't stop staring at my tits, this place is gonna have one serious sexual harassment suit on their hands. Please, God, I don't want to die. I'll do anything, just don't let me die. Damn this bitch stinks. Where was she before she fell, litter box? Just die so I can have all your money already!* I could hear Death's snarling voice echoing through the corridors. He told me that he wasn't coming for me yet, but he would never be too far away.

Even though I was in constant pain, it was such a relief to get home where the voices were muffled through the walls of my house and distance from the outside world. I withdrew from all of my classes and quit my job. I had inherited my house from my parents and had enough money saved up that I wasn't worried about bills. I probably wouldn't have even cared if I was broke. I needed solitude. Everything was semi-peaceful, until Jimmy came home. He never came to visit me in those first few days because he was in Mexico City visiting his parents. I was

convalescing on the couch with a bottle of Tullamore Dew and Trochee, my cat when he came home.

“Oh my god,” He stopped short when he glimpsed the burns cascading from the back of my neck, over my shoulders, and down my arms and back. “Kaitlyn, I'm so sorry I wasn't here sooner. Why didn't you call me?”

I can't believe I had to find out from your fucking brother. Are those burns going to scar? Holy shit, she looks like she's about to crack open.

I'd always wondered whether he thought in Spanish or English. Now I knew.

“It's not as bad as it looks.” That was a lie. “I was kind of enjoying being alone.” That was the truth.

Well, fuck you too. He kissed me lightly on the forehead. “I've been alone for almost a week, Kat. Didn't you miss me?”

“Of course, I missed you. I miss you even when you're here. I just need to rest.”

Guess I'm not as good of company as a bottle of whiskey. Damn, she looks like shit. “Can I get anything for you? Have you showered today?” *Are you just going to lay there and stare at me?* “Babe?”

Temperatures in the air surrounding a bolt of lightning have been recorded up to approximately 55,000 degrees Fahrenheit. That is over five times hotter than the surface of the sun. The bolt which hit me blew my sneakers off of my feet, melted the promise ring Jimmy had given me the year before onto my finger, and fused the locket containing photos of my deceased parents to the skin around my neck. The Lichtenberg figures have faded, but I will be permanently scarred from my jewelry. But that's only cosmetic. The real problems were what was going on inside. In part, those problems were responsible for Jimmy's behavior. At first he

felt guilty, about the affair and about my condition. But then he stopped coming home straight from work. He made friends with the guy they hired to replace me at work. A young Neil Young lookalike named Sam. Jimmy brought him home a few times after work, so I believed that he was always hanging out with Sam on all of those nights that he came home late, until he started thinking about someone named Lola while we were in bed together. I couldn't bear to use my parents' bedroom, so we put our bed in the loft above the living room. I liked it up there because there were no windows to let in the morning sunlight. I assumed he'd had an affair with her while he was in Mexico because that was the only time he thought *en español*. I don't speak Spanish, but I learned enough in high school to know what had happened, and that's also how I knew that she was in Tampa.

Some scientists think that lightning might have played a role in evolution. The extensive heat created by a lightning strike has been found to convert elements into compounds that are found in biological organisms. I never had much to say to Jimmy after the strike, so I would spout these random lightning facts out to him when I could tell the silence was bothering him. He was so annoyed by my change in personality that he stopped asking how I was feeling. He started sleeping on the couch because two or three nights a week, I would wake up screaming—sometimes from the pain, sometimes from quick, white flashes of memory. Sam was fascinated by it all. He never said as much, but I knew. Not because almost everything he was thinking was being broadcasted to me, but because he couldn't stop asking about it.

“What did it feel like to be hit?”

“I don't remember.”

“Do your burns hurt?”

“Some of them, but they're getting better. The nerve damage is what really sucks.”

“You get any good drugs for the pain?”

“Yup. Want some?”

“Hell yeah.”

“No you don't,” Jimmy said and looked up from tweeting or texting Lola or whatever he was doing. It was getting easier to block people's thoughts, especially his. The headaches were getting worse, but at least it was getting quieter inside my head.

“What the hell, bro?” Sam said.

“If you could see her when it gets really bad, you'd know that she needs every bit of those drugs for herself.”

“It's really not that bad. I exaggerate because I know it bothers him,” I said.

“I can't stand to see you in pain, Kat.” *Or listen to your whining.*

“Is that why you spend so much time with Lola?” I don't know exactly why I decided to confront him. Maybe it was that last comment. Maybe I was finally fed up. Maybe I simply wanted to fight.

“What?” He dropped his phone and scurried to pick it up as it slid across the hardwood floor, facing up at my feet.

“Lola, your *chiquita* from Mexico City.”

How do you know about that? “What are you talking about? I don't know anyone named Lola.”

“Let me see your phone.”

“You've been snooping around on my phone?”

“No.” I've been snooping around inside your head.

“OK, well, I'm gonna take off.” Sam stood up. *Before shit gets too hairy.*

“Did you know about this, Sam?” I asked.

“I have no idea who Lola is,” he said, holding his hands up.

I could tell he was telling the truth. “Go then,” I said.

“Later, bro. Good luck.”

I stood up and looked at Jimmy. I concentrated as hard as I could. I pushed all my thoughts away, all of his away. I focused on one and projected it. Every spec of energy in my body, I summoned into my thoughts, into my head, but not out of my mouth. *I know you're cheating on me.* When his eyes grew to the size of basketballs, I knew that it had worked. “I’m going to stay with my sister for three days. When I get back, I want you and every trace of you gone.”

“Kat, wait.”

For some reason I did.

“Babe, I have never cheated on you,” he said. If I hadn’t heard his thoughts I would have believed him. His eyebrows were knotted and his arms open. He asked me to come over to him.

“I can hear your thoughts, Jimmy. I know you’ve been cheating!”

“What are you talking about? You can’t hear my thoughts. That’s insane.”

“I know you’ve been cheating,” I said, punctuating each word with a poke to the chest.

He shook his head.

“Admit it. Go on.”

“Sweetie, baby, darling, if you could read my thoughts, you would know that not only am I not cheating, I’m really worried about you.” *I can make this work. I can make her think she’s crazy and she’ll feel bad for accusing me and I can break up with her guilt free.*

“Oh, so you think I’m crazy now? Just leave, OK?” I ran upstairs to pack enough clothes for the weekend.

“Babe, wait.”

Despite my anger, I waited. It’s the way he says “babe” that makes me weak. How the vowel drops and the little pop to the b sound. I wanted him to invoke the good times and ask me to hear him out. I was also a little curious to hear his excuse. A sick part of my mind wanted to hear him declare her irresistible. I wanted him to apologize. I wanted him to beg. I watched him walk slowly up the stairs and waited for it to start, for him to say something like “I was wrong” or “I made a mistake” or “It was a moment of weakness and it will never happen again,” any clichéd excuse that’s been recycled throughout mankind when an adulterer was revealed for who they are. I wanted to rub it in his face how I would never forgive him and he was better off going back to Mexico with his little *puta*.

“I don’t think you’re crazy,” he said when he got to the top. “What pills are you taking? Are there any that shouldn’t be mixed?” He tried to put his hands on my shoulders, but I shoved them away. He took a step back and sighed.

“What do my pills have to do with anything? You said I needed them.”

The pain behind my eyes became excruciating and my skin started to tingle. At that moment I remembered what it felt like before I was struck, how the hair on my arms stood up and I got a metallic taste in my mouth. I screamed, covered my head, and fell to the ground. Jimmy bent over and asked what was wrong and I shoved him. He went flying backwards and down the stairs. I heard him tumble and grunt and a couple of cracking noises, but I didn’t get up to look. I froze there on the floor and listened for his thoughts.

He didn't say any of the things I wanted him to say. Only *I love you* over and over. I couldn't bear it and started to pack, though there was no door on the loft to help block him out. *Babe, I love you, don't go* crept into my head. *Te amo, Kitty Kat*. There are endless ways to say it and he seemed to say them all. It only fueled my need for escape. I didn't want to hear it anymore. I didn't want to hear anyone. Voices started leaking in from the neighbors, from the nurses back at the hospitals, from Sam. *Maybe I'll cook that roast tonight. It would go really great with those potatoes I picked up. If this blister gets any bigger, I'm going to have to name it. I wonder if I have a chance with Kaitlyn if those two break up. I love you, babe*. How could they reach me here? I decided I wasn't even going to go to my sister's. I'd rather drive, drive anywhere. And fast, so the voices sped by and I could only pick up a word or two, not enough to make out even a complete sentence. I decided to drive until the pavement ran out, until there was no one to hear.

Lightning tends to do extensive damage to the nervous system and may affect any or all parts of the nervous system: the brain, the autonomic nervous system, and the peripheral nervous system. When the brain is affected, the sufferer often has difficulty with short-term memory, making sense of new information and accessing old memories, multitasking, distractibility, irritability and personality change. I finished packing and realized that Jimmy's was fading among the voices. I walked out of the room with my things and to the top of the stairs. He was still lying at the bottom of the stairs. His left leg was twisted behind his body and there was a bone jutting in his neck, stretching the skin. He was facing away from me as if he were looking out the window, toward the bay. *Te amo*.

I couldn't believe he was still alive. I ran down the stairs to him only to find that he was most definitely dead. I pulled at his head to look at his face, but it wouldn't move. He still kept

saying *I love you*, but how? Could I hear ghosts, too? It was impossible. I don't believe in ghosts. Was it some kind of imprint of his last thoughts, or had I been imagining the voices the whole time? Was Jimmy right and he died because I wouldn't listen to him? I killed him over an affair that never happened. He was committed to me, despite my decline and I couldn't see it. I was too clouded by selfish pain to see that he was in pain too.

I looked out the same window he was and thought about jumping through it. But that wouldn't be fair to him. I was so consumed by my own miserable existence that I never stopped, even once, to appreciate that he'd stayed with me through all my tantrums, my drunken depression, my madness, and accusations. He had supported me when I could no longer work. He contacted all my professors so they would give me incomplete rather than failing grades. I repaid him for all that with a broken neck. That he was hiding something was in my imagination. I misread the looks of concern on his face as guilt. I threw all my irrational rage at his feet and expected him to clean it up, and he did.

I started to sob and pound on his chest like it was his fault. I didn't realize that I was screaming until there was a knock on the door. I guessed a neighbor had heard the noise and was coming to make sure everything was all right. But it was Sam. He saw my tears and held his hands in the air.

"Look, I'm sorry. I know you guys are going through some shit, but I forgot my cell phone and I kind of need it, you know?"

I invited him in and asked him to use it to call 911.

BLACK SKIES AND GRAY MATTER

I spend my time reading as we drive through most of Florida and all of Georgia. The landscape is familiar and doesn't interest me much until we get to Central Tennessee. The air gets colder and the pressure greater as my dad is doing 75 on I-75, up and through The Great Smoky Mountains. My step-mother, Tracy is in the passenger seat, and I have the back to myself. My mother moved to Tennessee a few years ago, but she is off to the west between Memphis and Nashville. We hardly talk anymore since I decided when I was twelve that I wanted to live with my dad.

I chew on a giant wad of two pieces of Bubble Yum, which does nothing to keep my ears from popping in the higher altitude. From the back seat, I check the digital thermometer on the truck's rearview mirror. Outside it's thirty-five degrees. It looks like I might actually get to see snow, as I hoped. It wouldn't be my first time, but living in Florida, I feel it's a treat. Dip a dirty sock in a tepid puddle, breathe through it, and you'll get the feeling of what it's like to live in Florida.

The fog that sits on the mountains looks as heavy as the blanket on my lap. A road sign says a town called Sweetwater is just off the next exit. I like the name Sweetwater, but there is something pretentious about it. I'd rather be in a place farther north called Stinking Creek. From that name, at least the Stinking Creekers seem have a good sense of humor and no delusions about who they are. Those are people I could party with. I'd rather have a beer with the people in Stinking Creek than sip tea with my pinky sticking up with the folks in Sweetwater.

As we drive along the mountainside, I watch for my favorite part of passing through this region, the small waterfalls that spill through the cut rocks. They're frozen into a cascade of

icicles, some of them as big as stalactites. I want to stop and snap a couple photos of them, but Tracy won't allow it. Next to my sisters, my father is the person I love the most in this world, but I'm close to risking fallout with him for a knock-down, drag-out brawl with this woman, his most recent of future ex-wives.

Tracy is the type who is sweet to your face and sour behind your back. Once, when she didn't know I was within earshot, she told her own son that she loved his new sneakers. When he left the room, she mumbled how they reminded her of the ghetto. She's usually eager to pass out this golden fashion advice like it's manna from God, yet she insists on getting the same haircut every time she goes to the salon, a haircut which prompted me and my sisters to dub her Shroomy McPenishead.

Any and every time her delicate little bladder feels the slightest discomfort, my dad will pull over without hesitation, and these stops each add at least fifteen minutes to an already thirteen hour trip. Surely, a few more minutes for a couple snapshots couldn't hurt.

"You have all the time in the world to take pictures when we get where we're going," Tracy says. "There is no reason to take pictures of places we are not even visiting."

"The trip up is just as important and memorable to me as the destination." This may not be completely true, but I have to sound convincing in order to make her sound like an asshole.

"There is nothing memorable about being stuck in a car for over half a day, eating fast food and listening to you whine the whole way."

I try to calm myself, putting the volume of my iPod up to maximum. The Distillers scream "I have freedom in my youth" through my ear buds, but it does little to drown out Tracy singing along loudly to my dad's favorite song, "Cheeseburger in Paradise." I feel I will do myself a stiff injustice if I let this behavior continue. I reach up to turn down the volume and ask

if we have any more Doritos.

“Dang it, Chelsea. Did you really need to turn the volume down to ask that?” Tracy says.

“Do you have to continuously assault my eardrums with your banshee wail the whole trip?”

“Chelsea,” my dad says and bangs his hand on the steering wheel.

Tracy turns her head in a slow motion that makes her look to me like a demented owl. The yellowish-brown of her eyes reflects the noontime sun through her thick black mascara, and her cheeks are slowly turning from her normal pink to a bloody red. I have to admit, I can see—at least physically—what my dad sees in her. She’s cute when she’s mad. That or I enjoy upsetting her. But her personality is not worth the torture of her extended company. I draw upon anger I have stored up from the many times she has cornered me into listening to her sprawling chatter about the everlasting love of her lord and savior. The only thing more annoying than blind faith in an invisible man who lives in the sky is being preached to about righteousness from someone who shoplifts trinkets from Wal-Mart because “they won’t miss it” and drinks wine when she’s thirsty.

I christened her with the epithet Sunny-Side. She thinks it's because of her “power of positivity,” but in truth, it's because those large yellowish eyes of hers remind me of fried eggs. I can see that within her calm blue sea there's a black undertow. I wonder how far I can push her before those fried eggs sizzle and pop.

“Why are you even coming on this trip with us?” I ask as coolly as I can manage. “We had to leave a day late and have to go home a day early because of you. Couldn't you just loosen the iron claw from the back of his neck and give us a whole week with our family?”

“Chelsea Lynn Graham! Why can't you act your age?” my dad interjects before Tracy

can reply. I've never heard him use my full name before. I thought only moms did that.

"Look, Chels," she says, "no one likes that we have to use our winter vacation to visit the sick and dying, but..."

"First of all, don't call me Chels. And no one? I've been dying to get out of the heat and away from home for months, and this is only half of our vacation. If it weren't for you and your shitty job, we could've spent a whole seven days on this trip, which I'm sorry if it's a burden to you, but I'm actually looking forward to seeing my family."

That was a lie. I don't want to see my dying grandfather. I have never witnessed any of his "episodes," so to me, they've never happened. They don't seem to exist to my dad either. At least, he never talks about it. "Your Aunt Katherine tends to exaggerate," he told me after she had given me a guilt trip for having gone years without a visit.

"I'm twenty-two and about to graduate from college, Kitty," I explained to her over the phone. "If I'm going to travel, it should be to places like Europe and Asia."

"You need to come and see your Papaw, Sea, while there's a chance that he might still remember you. He has his bad days and his good days, but the bad days are getting worse and closer together. And poor Kevin—who misses you, as we all do—has to take time that he could be spending with his new baby—a baby that you've yet to meet—to keep an eye on him. You know your poor Mamaw can't handle your Papaw alone."

It's all true, but I've never fit in with my extended family, except Kevin, Kitty's only son and my favorite cousin. On these trips without my sisters to keep me company, I usually find myself orbiting the conversations like a lonely satellite with nowhere to land. I'm the baby in the family and seem to have no place in it. My sisters, who are both in their early thirties with families and successful careers, say that's just an excuse that has kept me from acknowledging

the real problem.

My Papaw, a stranger who passed down to me his eyes. A man whose voice echoes in my father's throat and is a ghost in my mind already. Most of the stuff I know about him is from what my dad and Kitty have told me. Why change that now? Deep down, I know that this look into dementia and death I am about to get is a look into the future, even if it's a distant one. It's something I don't want to face. Not yet. Up until now, my most complicated thought was whether it's OK to wear a red sweater with a purple skirt. Now I have to bear witness to my Papaw's decay? No, thanks. It's not fair. Nevertheless, while I think about the unfairness of life, I realize that it's also unfair that I'm taking my frustrations out on Tracy. Especially since the only person I'm hurting is my dad and he's hurting enough already. I look at his ears growing redder and I get a dull pain in my chest.

"I'm sorry, Tracy. I think my blood sugar is just a little low. Can we stop and get something to eat?"

"Keep your eye on the road signs and let me know when you see a place you want to eat," my dad tells me, and I turn my attention back out the window. The sycamores below the highway have gone brown in the winter air and look like rotten broccoli, which makes me think I want to go to a sit-down restaurant and have a healthy meal, but when the next exit shows there's a Taco Bell, I opt for comfort food.

As soon as we pull up to the house, Mamaw and Kevin walk out the front door to the porch to greet us. The farmland stretches lazily around the old house, its hills brown and gray with speckles of white. Snow lightly drifts down and catches the wind which throws it around like confetti. The closest house I can see belongs to an Amish family. A black buggy sits

modestly in their dirt driveway. Mamaw, in her fuzzy slippers and blue-checkered dress, heads straight for me.

“There’s my baby.” She gives me a bear hug that could rival a pro wrestler’s and lifts me off my feet. “Come on inside, dinner’s ready.”

Kevin jerks his head to the left, flicking the sandy blonde hair out of his eyes. “Mamaw, they’ve been cooped up in that car an awful long time. I think Chelsea might want to take a quick walk with me and have a smoke, right, Sea?”

“You betcha.”

“Well, just hurry up,” Mamaw says. “I’ve got more food than I know what to do with.”

I check the thermometer on the front porch which reads fifteen degrees. I believe it’s quickly dropping. The frozen red clay earth crunches beneath my feet like cereal in my mouth. The only other sounds we hear are each other and Mamaw’s dog barking at a tree branch breaking under the weight of the weather. The clouds are a milky gray cataract over the sky. Snow like dandruff lightly covers the rolling hills. As we smoke, we walk toward a frozen pond, but the thin layer is deceptively opaque and Kevin warns me not to walk on it. He tells me the freeze is still adolescent, so the snow settled on top makes it only look solid. The cows follow us with sad eyes and thick, downy winter coats. A heifer nudges at my elbow until it dawns on me what she wants. She’s thirsty. They all are because they can’t get to the water underneath the icy pond. I ignore them because my curiosity, now that I’m here, has gotten the best of me.

“How bad is he?” I ask Kevin.

“You don’t want to know.”

“You’re right, I don’t. But why don’t you tell me anyway?”

“Last week, he hit her with the fire poker.”

“Why?”

“Because he was trying to stoke up the fire and didn’t realize that he had just done it five minutes before. Mamaw tried to tell him and take the poker away, so he hit her with it. Only in the knee, though. He didn’t hurt her too badly.”

I can only stand dumbly as the wind whips my hair into my face, getting it stuck in my lip gloss.

“Alzheimer’s is hereditary, you know,” he says. “Ever think about that?”

“I try not to.”

“Must be nice down there in sunny Florida, unmindful of the world.”

“Yep. Warm beaches, frozen margaritas, and sumptuous oblivion.”

“Nice. Real nice. Imagine what it’s like to have a new baby at home, but you don’t have any time to spend with him because you’ve got to babysit two grown-ass people. All the while wondering if you will one day put that child through the same shit? Is he going to have to go through the same shit with me when I grow old? Do you want to go through this with your dad? And my Grams on my mom’s side has it. So does yours. It’s out there and it’s closing in on us every day, Chelsea. All I want to do is think about what fun I had growing up out here and how happy his childhood will be too, but even the furthest future haunts me.”

Looking out again to the semi-tundra, I remember what it was like here during my spring and summer visits as a child and teenager, when the trees and grass were green and lush. Little patches of yellow wildflowers speckled the ground where snow now falls. When calves were born, all of us kids had dibs on naming them and pretended they were our pets. Rolling up our jeans, we would wade into the warm ponds and let the minnows nibble on our toes. We would smoke weed out of soda cans in the dilapidated barn and throw rocks in cow patties just to see

how far they would splatter. There was one particularly large and fresh pile where Kevin threw the largest, flattest rock he could find. Of course, I was standing too close and was distracted by something silly like a butterfly or dandelion seed floating by. He threw that rock without warning and I was showered in warm, stinky cow shit. Maybe childhood wasn't as full of as many good times as I think. But gross beats depressing in my book any day.

“You're getting a little too deep for me, Kev.”

“I hate to bring you down, Chelsea Graham, but you need to grow up. If I had to do it, you have to do it, too.”

“Oh, that's mature.”

He gives me a look down his nose which has the effect of making me feel smaller. He must be practicing that for the future. He's so worried that he will turn out like Papaw when it's Mamaw that he takes after.

“You're twenty-two and about to leave the nest and venture into the real world. What're you going to do with that fancy English degree once you graduate? If you ever do graduate, that is. You don't seem in a hurry to do so. How many times have you changed your major?”

“Only once. Pay attention.”

“So you think the world is your oyster?”

“Jealous?” That look again. “Like that guy from the eighties says, my future's so bright, I gotta wear shades. And why the hell are you being so preachy? You have a kid, and all of a sudden, you're Dr. Phil?”

“Who the hell is Dr. Phil?”

“I don't know. Why'd he hit her with the fire poker?”

“Don't change the subject.”

“You seem to forget, that was the subject.”

“She's got a short fuse, Sea. You know that. She was annoyed with him stoking the fire every couple minutes, so she tried to take the poker away. He was confused, and when he gets confused, he gets angry. He can't help it. He's just scared and don't know any other way. He talks about fixing the motor to a car they had before either of us was born and asks when Judge Judy is coming on when he's just watched the damn show. He polishes the same rifle over and over while it never occurs to him to cut the lawn. Just take a tour around the outside of the house, if you want to know how bad he is. I have to go in anyhow. This cold is making my bones ache. I can't stand it out here.”

“I love it. I wish the snow would come harder or at least stick to the ground.”

“Just don't stay out too long, OK? You know how Mamaw worries and I'm probably going to go home soon. I'm only supposed to be out getting diapers.”

“Don't go home yet. At least have a couple beers with me before you go. Or some shots. You got any moonshine?”

“I'm getting way too old for that shit.” He shoves his hands deep into his pockets and looks past me, into the pasture.

“Yeah, right. You can't fool me with your Mr. Serious act. Neither of us wants to nor will be growing up any time soon and you know it. Baby or no baby, twenty-one or late eighties, we'll never grow up, really.”

“That may be true, but since Ma broke her leg and I live only one town over, it seems my duty to mediate here. It drives Charlene nuts.”

“She'd do the same for her grandpa. Where is she anyway? I thought she was bringing the baby over so we could meet him.”

“She doesn't come around anymore. You'll have to come out to the trailer if you want to see him.”

“That bitch! You need to run these girls under my radar before you go giving them a ring.”

“This coming from a girl whose boyfriend plays for the other team.”

“Douche bag! I told you, Brendan isn't gay. He's just a little metro, that's all. Besides, any guy who doesn't swill Jim Beam, own a pit bull, and worship Dale Jr. is gay to you.”

He throws his head back and misty clouds shoot from his mouth in short bursts, his belly bouncing as he laughs. His voice is like a sonic boom through the silence of the hills. It startles the cows and some of them scurry away. “It's all a joke to you, ain't it?”

“Yep.”

He sighs, flicks his cigarette butt onto the pond, and walks back to the house. I put my cigarette out on the bottom of my shoe, put the butt in my pocket, and walk toward the garage to grab a crowbar. I want to break up the ice on the pond enough for the cows to drink. I could use some ice smashing therapy right about now. But the sky is starting to darken, snow starts falling harder, and the wind is picking up. It cuts through my coat and creates a prickly pain in my fingers. I decide instead that I could use a bit of warming up as well.

This time it's Phoebe who greets me from the front porch with black coat shining and tail gaily wagging. I tell her she's a good girl and ask her if she wants to come inside. She answers me with a grunt and a wet nose to the palm of my hand. I put one foot on the front step and think about what Kevin said. The porch is crammed with clutter and firewood. The white paint on the house peels down in large flakes, revealing the gray siding beneath. The house is so run-down that it makes me wonder if my grandpa really is too old to keep it up like Kevin said or if it's

always been this way. Living three states away from them, I've only been to this house a little more than a dozen times, but I refuse to believe that this is the same one I visited as a child.

I need to go into the house to warm up, and I know the cows are being neglected, but my curiosity about the rest of the yard is overwhelming. I walk to the left side of the house where there were once rows of corn stalks and sunflowers. Now there is nothing but brown grass, bare white-barked birch trees, and a rusty claw-footed bathtub full of frozen green water, wire hangers, and used soda cans. From there I walk to the backyard—the yard where I first saw snow. I made a snow angel in this backyard when I was two years old. Mamaw tells me the story of that snow angel every time I visit. *You looked so cute in your little blue coat with the fur around the hood. Like a little Eskimo. You lay down in that snow, flappin' your little arms and legs, and said "Look, Mamaw. I'm a snow angel!" And you were the prettiest angel I ever seen.* Even now, nineteen years later, she tells me I'm still her little snow angel. I wish that was all I had to be.

Of all the things about the house, it's the backyard that holds the most vivid memories for me; sitting on the porch swing, braiding my great-grandmother's long white hair, catching fireflies with my sisters and cousins, and giving Papaw what I thought were beautiful flowers. He put the small purple blossom up to his nose after thanking me graciously, but then shrieked and threw it in the air, claiming there was a bug in it. There was no end to my amusement in that and I must have given him that same flower ten or twelve different times that day, each gesture resulting in the same silliness. My mother had to finally tell me to stop and do something else. He probably doesn't remember it like Mamaw remembers her snow angel, and I know better than to ask him.

The sun is almost completely down now and the temperature has gotten so low and the

wind so sharp that I can no longer avoid going into the house. I walk around to the front, open the door to the kitchen, and Phoebe pushes past me, heading straight for the table. Her head is tall enough to spot the thick, pink ham her nose has detected, but too short to reach it. She must rely on the charity of those of us who use forks. The kitchen table is piled high with golden brown fried chicken, mashed potatoes dripping yellow with butter, beef gravy, buttermilk biscuits, homegrown green beans, collard greens, cherry cheesecake, sweet tea, coffee, and of course, ham.

The heat of the house hits me and I melt like a slab of butter dropped into a frying pan. Papaw sits on the left end of the round cherry wood table and my dad sits at the other. Their resemblance is undeniable and their differences typical. Papaw is eighty with a full head of salt and pepper hair, a mouth full of dentures, and pellucid blue eyes. Dad has the same head of hair, but his teeth are all his own, yet given to crowns, coffee, and nicotine stains. His eyes are sea green.

Tracy, even though we must have been here for at least an hour or so, still has not bothered to take off her coat. She pulls the crispy skin from a piece of chicken breast, leaving it on the side of her plate, and pushes Phoebe away with her knee. I sit down in the middle chair in between her and Papaw. He looks up when he hears my chair scrape the floor.

“Wow. Now where’d all these pretty girls come from?”

“Hey, Papaw,” I say.

“What's your name, young lady, and who’s your friend?”

“Gosh darn it, Tom, you know who that is,” my mamaw says.

He glares at her for a moment and fades away right before my eyes.

Mamaw pours Mountain Dew into the frying pan to take the salty bite out of the next

serving of ham. I peel the fat off of a cold piece of ham, and feed it to Phoebe who gently takes it from my thawing fingers. I look over and into the ocean of my Papaw's eyes and try to spot a refugee drifting on the waves. I find no one and look around for a distraction. I ignore the rest of the food even though it is causing a saliva overload. In the other room, I hear Kevin watching a fishing show. I guess he's not in that big of a hurry to leave after all. When I get up to make fun of him for it, I'm impeded by mamaw's concentrated gaze.

"I don't reckon you think you're goin' back out there in the dark, do ya?" She has her hands planted firmly on her ample hips, but her hazel eyes sparkle behind her stern demeanor. She is aging far better than her husband, though she is not much younger. While his hearing is barely lingering, his liver failing, and Alzheimer's is eating away at his memory, she still carries the sharp wit and mettle of our Irish immigrant ancestors. She only complains about her aching feet every once in a while.

"I need to break up the ice for the cows, Mamaw. I promise I'll only be a couple minutes. Besides, I like the cold."

"I reckon they are mighty thirsty out there," Mamaw says. "I wish to God that Bob wouldn't keep 'em out there if he can't come 'round to take care of 'em. It's all I can muster to keep up with this ornery bugger right here." She points to Papaw. He seems only to hear the song playing in his head and softly drums his fingers on the table.

"I don't know who Bob is, but I'll be quick, just as soon as I tell Kevin he has some frozen bird turds to clean off his windshield before he leaves."

"What?" he calls from the next room. "I got poopicles on my car?"

"Speaking of poopicles," my dad says, "the second you try and swing on that pond, you'll probably fall in and be one."

“Very funny, Pops, but I can handle it.”

“Your daddy's right,” says Mamaw. “I'll call Bob in the morning.”

“Who's Bob anyway?”

“He's their preacher,” my dad says. “He had to sell some of his land last year, and your Mamaw said he could keep his cows here, but he's been down with the flu lately.”

“The flu? Boo fucking hoo.” I would keep talking, but my head smarts from the fresh smack my mamaw gives me.

“She's right, Ma, even if she is a smartass. It's not right that you should have to deal with an extra burden. You said so yourself.”

“I'm doin' the Lord's work.”

“I know, Ma, and Chels wants to do this for you just the same.”

“Because I loooooove you,” I sing as I tickle her ribs. She giggles like a toddler and lightly pushes me away.

“I was just pulling your leg, you know that,” my dad tells me. “I'll go out there with you before it's totally dark.”

“Okie dokie.”

“Just go to the TV room and sit by the fireplace a little bit first.”

“You got it, Pops.”

“And put some mittens on.”

As I walk over to the other room, I stop to tousle what I call Papaw's movie star hair. This awakens him from his reverie and he looks up at my dad who now has a face full of ham and shouts, “Who the fuck are you?”

“Aw shit, Dad. It's me, your son, Pat.”

“Who the fuck *are* you?” he repeats, but louder and stands up, kicking out his chair. “Get the fuck outta my house!” he shouts, pointing to the front door with a trembling hand.

My dad just sits there, obviously not sure what to do.

Papaw turns around and stomps out of the kitchen, mumbling something about a rifle as Mamaw, throwing her dishrag too close to the burner, follows him. “Now you just wait here a darn minute.”

I pick the smoking rag off the stove as Phoebe rushes after them, growling her disapproval. My dad and I stare at each other wide-eyed as we listen to the struggle in the other room. Kevin must have gotten to the gun first because I can hear him doing his best to keep it from the frenzied old man. Papaw keeps calling him Frankie, a man Kitty once told me died in his arms in Salerno, 1943. Nasty words I’ve never heard from my grandmother’s mouth add an extra layer to the foul air that has inhabited the house.

Without putting on a coat, my dad retreats outside into the biting cold. Tracy has gone meek and doesn’t move or look at anyone. I follow my dad outside. The sky is black and oppressive. It falls on his shoulders and he falls to the ground. On his knees, he weeps into his calloused hands. Hands that once changed my diapers, taught me how to play the guitar, and will one day retire to a life of fishing and tinkering with old hot rods. As I watch him and listen to the thirsty cows crying in the distance, I don’t know what to do. The only thing I can think of is to walk back into the house where the foul air has thickened into a violently stirring maelstrom of curses, confusion, and anxiety. I grab my dad’s coat and hurry back outside. I put his coat on his back but refrain from consoling him. Tracy has made her way out to him to take care of that. For all of her faults, I have to concede that she is devoted to him, and I leave her to it. Besides, I feel awkward at the thought of putting an arm around him and telling him, “It’ll be OK.”

Why should I have to be the one to pick him up anyway? I am the child in this situation.

Right? All the time he is telling me to grow up, and now here he is crying like a baby.

I hate myself for thinking this way.

I raise my head to look up at the hazy black sky. I get dizzy and have to put my head between my knees. I'm lost in a place that's no longer familiar. I walk back to the porch and the reality of it finally hits me. It's lodged in my throat, like a gritty bitter pill. It's lodged too far to spit it back out. I have to let it dissolve. I grab a piece of peeling paint from the house and smooth it back to its original position. It's almost flush against the wall now, but the cracks around the edges are still visible, and I know that eventually, the paint will peel off again and one day soon, fall off entirely.

How badly I wish I could get inside his head and pick up everything that has fallen onto the floor. Just give me five minutes to re-shelve everything to its rightful spot. When my time comes, can I keep my mind from shuffling off into the deep?

I feel a warm, heavy hand on my shoulder. It's my dad. His nose is red and he can't look me in the eye. He hands me a crow bar.

"Let's go tackle that ice," he says.

APPENDIX: READING LIST

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