

BLOOD MOON

by

BRENDAN STEPHENS
M.A.T. Frostburg State University, 2012
B.S. Frostburg State University, 2009
A.A. Garrett College, 2007

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ABSTRACT

Blood Moon is a collection of short stories that explore friendship, addiction, and punk subculture. Centered around a hardcore band called Dead Phoenix, the three members—Eliot, Noah, and Josh—go on tour, live in a punk house, and plunge headfirst into opioid addiction. The stories explore their lives before they played together in the band, while touring with the band, and after the band’s controversial breakup. These stories attempt to show that music, identity, and temporary bonds forever alter the trajectory of a person’s life.

Dedicated to Bianca

(of course)

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RAW ONYX

I met Eliot at a basement show for his old band, Piss Fucker. During the last song of their set, he pulled out his dick, doused it in hairspray, and lit it on fire. It didn't seem to hurt at first, but, after the layer of chemicals, burned away little blisters bubbled to the surface. Eliot didn't notice—he later told me he was maxed out on Percocet, and he kept screaming into the mic about patriarchy or cops or something. I doused his boiling dick with malt liquor from my forty ounce in a stream of hiss.

I was a senior in high school, and Eliot was a sophomore in college. I'd never been to a basement show, and up until that night, I never felt like I belonged anywhere. After the show, he smoked hand-rolled Bugler cigarettes outside, which made me feel self-conscious about my box of Camels. Our sweat-soaked bodies steamed in the October air.

#

Eliot was small-town famous. At six foot six, Eliot was a force on *stage*. (They never actually played on stages, always demanding to play on the floor surrounded by everyone: no monitors, lights, or drum mics.) It was impossible not to stare as he sweated, stomped, and screamed until he couldn't speak. Black stick-and-poke tattoos littered his arms.

He played or set up every show worth going to; most were in the basement of Saint Broseph's Cathedral: the punk house he shared with his friend Noah. Noah was a lefty, often toting a sketch pad and always had an ink-stain on the fleshy underside of his hand. Noah was a pastor's kid, which meant that he flirted with Paganism, Buddhism, Satanism, Taoism, Hindusim—effectively everything outside the Judeo-Christian tradition—until he settled on atheism.

#

At shows Eliot occasionally talked to me. Every conversation felt like a gift. He practically spoke in a different language when he talked about music, using words like *DIY neo-crust punk*, *pornogrind*, *Gravity-era emoviolence*, and *D-beat influenced post-metal*. Eliot's band, he said, was actually *throwback 90's hardcore*, but everyone said they were *queercore* because he was the singer. He hated it; *Piss Fucker* only had two songs about his sexuality. For Eliot, it was a matter of misusing genre labels, which to him was a crime.

I hung out long after the bands played until it was just Eliot, Noah, and me smoking skunk weed on a dusty couch. Even though I was only two years younger, I felt like a kid brother or something. I tried to keep up in conversations as best I could and did internet searches on everything they said—downloaded discographies of bands long-gone. This was my education.

#

When *Piss Fucker* broke up, I begged my parents to get me a guitar and amp for graduation, good ones, name-brand. I'd skip every birthday and Christmas present for the rest of my life if it got me an SG and a Marshall. I'd never played before, but somehow, I would force Eliot into a band with me.

The only college I applied to was the local one with the party reputation that Eliot and Noah went to. I had the grades to go somewhere better.

#

That summer I spent so much time hanging out at Saint Broseph's smoking pot, playing riffs, and sleeping on the couch that eventually Noah suggested I move in and finally start paying rent. I moved out of my parents' and strung up a curtain through the living room to mark my territory. Every single riff I wrote, I showed Eliot, until he finally suggested we jam with Noah. I

couldn't tell if he was humoring me or not. I played guitar, Eliot played bass, and Noah drummed. I expected Eliot to handle vocals, but he wanted me to—he couldn't stand the thought of being stuck behind a mic stand. I'd never sung outside of my car before. My voice sounded so deep in the PA. I stood a foot and a half from the microphone, mostly lip syncing and mumbling, mortified that anyone would hear me. It probably would have been a one-time thing if Eliot hadn't kept making us jam.

Eliot was the only one who'd played in a band before. We sucked. My fingers were rubbed raw by the strings, I couldn't hear the dissonant warbling of out of tune notes, and we couldn't even come in together after Noah gave a four count. Even the weight of the guitar pulled the strap tight enough to leave a nylon track impression in the skin across my shoulder and chest. But after smoking enough pot it didn't matter. Eliot had started dealing, so there was a steady stream of smoke. At practices I smoked until I stopped feeling it, until my ears stopped ringing, until I could nap while Noah played blast beats and it didn't even register.

#

For weeks the three of us three of us came up with band names at a rate of something like five per hour. Everything was a possibility: conventional, puns, inside jokes, allusions, word salad.

#

A small sampling of rejected band names: Pins, Needles, Pins and Needles, Needle Eaters, Brick Eaters, Nicholas Cage Match, Arson Daily, The Uruk-Hai, Morgoth, White Witch, Bong Wizard, Riff Church, Weighed Down, Bleak Life, Lost Life, Fuck Life, No Life, No Future, No Hope, No Sign of Change, No Sign of the Messiah, No Meaning, Meaning Less, etc.

#

Dead Phoenix—I wasn't even there when Eliot came up with the name. To him it captured everything he wanted: it sounded hopeless and wasn't pinned to any specific genre. I thought we could do better, but I didn't say anything because Noah had already drawn up a logo: a sparrow sprawled on its back, toothpick legs stretched skyward like antennas, smoldering into ash.

#

After the first couple of practices, Eliot wrote everything: the guitar riffs, the drums, even the lyrics he wanted me to shout. If neither Noah nor I could play exactly what Eliot wanted, the song was scrapped, which happened all the time at first, but gradually happened less. Sometimes I tried to sneak in something like an octave lead because I hoped it'd impress him, but he'd stop the song and say that his way was better. Eventually, I stopped trying.

#

Things we did:

1. Played our first show to twenty friends in our basement.
2. Bought whatever beer was on sale no matter how watered down.
3. Rode fixies despite the hills.
4. Home-recorded a demo.
5. Toured before we had a fan-base.
6. Never said the word "fan-base," instead calling everyone friends.
7. Screen-printed our logo onto shirts and patches.

#

For eight years, every friend I made was through punk.

#

One time on mushrooms, Eliot and I ripped the doors off the cabinets and rode them howling like sleds down the stairs, bruising our bodies without remorse. I was tripping, but aware, and I suspected Eliot was too. When Noah came home, he didn't even ask about the damage. Damage was normal. We almost got evicted, until we decided to trash our credit, made an offer, and bought the punk house. The idea that anyone would move on seemed like a joke.

#

Like Noah, I learned to sleep in two-hour increments because of Eliot. He played a song whenever he felt one coming and refused to play without cranking it. It'd be four AM and then distortion like train wrecks. Or Eliot, on uppers, would watch the entire *Lord of the Rings* at midnight, running the sound through the PA speakers in thunderous orchestra. Or he'd shake me awake at three to say, *I just threw a forty at a Hummer. Fuck you.*

This sort of thing happened all the time.

#

Records flooded out. Our first album was an LP pressed only to vinyl—no digital download code. The goal: an LP every other year, split records on off-years. We never missed a deadline. Most of our records came out as co-releases for a bunch of labels. Each label pitched in \$250 and got 40 or so copies. The trajectory of most bands in punk is that over the years, they get more melodic, slow, and palatable. We strived to make each new song more dark and alienating. When we recorded, Noah broke sticks, Eliot snapped bass strings, and I swallowed blood between takes.

#

The worst day of tour was better than the best day back home. Every night was filled with other kids obsessed with aggression and a thirst for dissonance. And when I got “home,” I

couldn't sleep in my own bed. Home was a futon mildewed from spilled beer. Home was the van in a box-store parking lot. Home was a floor with a brown layer of grime that could be scraped off with a thumbnail.

#

Tour was about sitting. Sitting in the van. Sitting waiting for the show. Sitting behind the merch table. Sitting and hunger. All up and down the East Coast we skipped out on checks. We grazed the bulk section of grocery stores. We stole from tip jars to buy chips. If we were lucky, we'd dumpster-dive bagels and eat like kings.

#

A lot of those early years I was too fucked up to remember. We took everything offered, said yes to everything. We smoked spice and dippers—cigarettes wetted in liquid PCP. We ate mushrooms and acid and amphetamines. In the Midwest we tried meth. In the Northeast: dissolved Suboxone. Every single day we drank cheap beer and smoked pot, and if the show sucked, one of us would take a beer bong to the asshole just because. As a joke, we smoked joints of hash and opium and passed it off to strangers. If we stayed in the same place as a straight edge band, we blew smoke in their sleeping faces. Once in Richmond, a random dude said to me, *You guys in Maryland know how to party. I heard about these dudes up there that actually shoot up vodka.* I didn't tell him that I was one of those dudes.

#

At some point during the fuzzy haze of those years the novelty wore off. I felt old in my twenties. Sometimes I mysteriously bled. I woke up one morning with an incisor chipped into a fang. But it wasn't any of that. We were sloppy, imprecise, out of tune, and too fucked up to

care. That was the problem. For me, tour was life. Tour was proof I existed. Tour was God. Tour was the fountain, the grail, the elixir. And tour didn't mean much when we sounded like shit.

I called a band meeting: we needed to start taking this shit serious. I practically quit everything. Noah scaled back to a steady diet of beer and weed until we played, saving the hard stuff for later. Eliot was all empty promises.

#

While screen printing our logo on an alternate tour cover for a seven-inch, Noah off-hand mentioned that a few months back Eliot had turned down a week long mini-tour for us with Super Moon, a guilty-pleasure band I liked. I thought he was joking until Eliot went off on how they had their "booking agent" contact us, how they talked about the way our audiences would expand both of our "brands," how this would be a great "opportunity" for all of us, how fake all of that was. He ranted about how bands like Super Moon *leached DIY*. A year before I would have trashed their records on the altar of punk for Eliot, but for the first time, I didn't really care about any of that. I thought only about how Eliot turned them down without even telling me.

#

Sometimes I still tried to write songs, but they sounded stilted and typical, like a knock-off of our own band. My songs lacked something vague and out of reach. I hated that it came so easily to Eliot.

#

Eliot and I were best friends and roommates, but we shouldn't have been either. We fought over bills and dishes and soy milk. On an album mix where we both thought our parts were quieter than the other's, we didn't speak to each other for over a week. If he was drunk,

high, sleep deprived, or fucked up in general (often all of the above), then sometimes we actually fought, like with fists. Noah locked himself in his room, no longer trying to mediate.

#

I caught Eliot stealing out of our band's cash box. He pleaded with me not to tell Noah. Eliot had run out of Suboxone and found a dude at a show who'd sell. He'd have the money as soon as we got home—he'd have his mom wire him money tomorrow, whatever it took, but he just needed this right now. And for some reason I believed him. I even gave him \$30 from my wallet. Later, we smoked a bowl together in a weird intimate moment.

You know I'll never do that again, right?

Yeah.

#

Two weeks later, Eliot did it again. For the first time we fought stone cold sober, and after it was all over—with stretched out shirts, bloody lips, and pulsing ears—we both had quit the band. Eliot refused to let me ride home in the van: *my van, my rules*. I walked three miles to a Greyhound station that didn't have a bus to Maryland until noon the next day, nineteen hours of waiting.

A few hours later, Noah pulled up in the van and told me to get in. Eliot was in the passenger seat. We didn't speak. After the show, the two of us smoked outside, and he asked if we were cool. For some reason I said yeah.

#

Eliot had lost so much weight over the years—his body gaunt and treacherous. Between his graying tattoos there were oblong, dark bruises like muddy ponds.

#

On tour I felt like a babysitter. When we stayed at people's houses, I hid all the prescription meds after the time I found Eliot puking in a bathroom, his mouth foamy from pills. I never asked if he was trying to get high or kill himself. Tour now ran on schedules, not the schedules of rock stars but the schedules of children.

Don't forget to eat. Make sure you pee before you get in the van. You need to sleep in tonight because tomorrow is a very big day.

#

Eliot stopped paying his share of the mortgage. He sold pot to buy Suboxone strips that he dissolved all day. His room was sparse after a third round of eBay—even selling his own personal copies of our band's records for a couple extra bucks. Once he tried to sell Noah and me the flyers he'd collected from all of our shows for \$20. Eliot said he'd burn them if we didn't. I refused because the whole thing was so fucked. I didn't care when I saw all the ash on the porch.

#

I didn't feel at home either at the punk house or on tour. I didn't feel at home.

#

We canceled our last tour three days in because Eliot was detoxing off heroin. He said he was fine, he needed to ride it out, he wanted to play. But after his three sleepless nights and four pairs of diarrhea-stained pants, Noah and I thought he might die.

In the middle of the night on the north shore of Staten Island, I bought dope to save him from some dude with a Boston accent: black tar; it looked dull like raw, uncut onyx. Eliot didn't have any needles, so he coached me on grinding the stone into sand and cooking it in foil. Using a straw from a discarded Wendy's cup, Eliot sucked the vapor hungrily. Tour was over. Eliot checked into rehab, but we all knew sobriety would never stick.

#

I still think about how I watched my best friend, at times, my hero, dying, all that time spent with a distorted reflection, something like a funhouse mirror image of someone who once meant everything. Eliot was undead, a lich, a revenant, that just went on existing. His body, his mind, everything that made him “Eliot” decayed more each day. Most nights, I fantasized that I’d walk into his room and find him cold and frozen stiff with rigor mortis, so that maybe everyone who didn’t know him quite so well, who still remembered him as that person five years, three years, even just two months back, would still have a fantasy of him worth dreaming.

ELIOT

I hadn't seen Eliot in the decade since our high school graduation. When I finally saw him again, I could have walked right past him. I was grocery shopping with my wife when he came up to me and said, "Hey Alan." The only reason I recognized him was because of the peculiar way he had always pronounced my name; it almost sounded like "owl in." He'd changed so much. He used to be a tall, commanding high school punk—hair dyed black, always wearing two belts. But now, in the market, he stood before me with a buzzed head and, starting at his neck, tattoos creeping out of his shirt sleeves down his thin forearms to the back of his hands. Every single tattoo had faded gray: gray skulls, gray ghosts, gray band logos, gray song lyrics. He looked ill. He carried a basket full of junk food.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I'm not really sure where to begin," I said, scratching my goatee. Too much time had slid by. I could have listed off life events—a bachelor's I didn't use, a wedding that pleased no one, and a house with too many rooms. But those usual catching up topics didn't seem like a given for him. Based entirely on looks, I figured our lives had diverged so far apart that we might as well have been different species.

He said, "I don't even know how I recognized you."

I didn't either. I'd long since cleared out my stockpile of comic book character shirts that I wore every day back then. In their place I wore striped dress shirts tucked into khaki pants. My hair had started thinning recently, but I grew it out anyway in defiance.

My wife, April, pulled at one of her amber curls. I could tell she was impatient. Eliot didn't even glance over at her, focusing all of his attention on me. I didn't want to introduce her.

How do you tell your wife, *This is Eliot. The only other person I've been with. The one I've kept secret.* I only said each one's name as an introduction. They shook hands quickly, said a few *nice-to-meet-you's*, and went back to ignoring each other.

I asked, "Are you back in town?"

"I'm still in Frostburg," he said. I was jealous he'd made it out of Oakridge. Even just making it an hour away to Frostburg felt like something. No one ever intended on sticking around after high school in Oakridge. It was a tired, rural town tucked away in the Appalachian Mountains of Western Maryland. It was a whirlpool we all fought to escape, and once you thought you were safe, if you stopped to catch your breath, you'd be sucked back in. That was what happened to me after going to college in Chicago. I swore I'd be back only for a summer, but years kept drifting by. He motioned towards his shopping basket of gummies and pixie sticks and said, "I'm just picking up snacks for my sister. She's still in the hospital."

I didn't know his sister was in the hospital. I barely knew he had a family. He'd barely told me anything about his life back then.

April started tapping her foot. Her pursed lips told me that she was bored and ready to leave.

"You'll have to tell me all about it sometime," I said, never expecting him to immediately ask for my number and start making plans to meet up at the driving range, which is what he did. April's gaze seared the side of my head, but I ignored her and agreed to see him in a few days. We said goodbye.

On the walk to the car, April asked me, "Who was that guy buying all the candy?"

"We worked together at the driving range one summer."

"Were you friends?"

“No,” I said too quickly. “We just worked together. I was a year older anyways.”

She grabbed the bags from the cart and loaded them into the trunk. “Are you actually going to meet up with him?”

“He’s harmless,” I said. “Forget about him.”

#

I bought a bucket of golf balls. It all seemed familiar to me: the dull grass shooting its way up between the gravel, the faded green tees, the wooden signs covered in rot that marked the distance in yards. It was like nothing had changed. Eliot was late. I felt as if that was unusual even though I couldn’t remember anything specific about him being punctual or not.

As I hit through the bucket, I imagined myself back in that one-room booth off to the side of the tees. Inside the booth, there had been only enough room for a wooden stool and a backpack with my lunch and some books. Every other inch of that booth was devoted to the buckets, some spare clubs, and the cash register. I’d mostly reread stacks of comics for those eight-hour shifts. I’ve never read so much in my life. I wondered if my name and Eliot’s were still carved into the floor. He brought a pocketknife on the last day of summer before my senior year and insisted on leaving our marks. That summer that we worked together, we spent too many hours there. The owner skirted labor laws—scheduling us seven days a week, ten hour days, no overtime—by paying under the table. But even after we closed, neither of us went home. Instead we hung out long past dark, driving golf balls in the light of our idling cars’ high beams.

I hit a ball barely 20 yards. I’d never been good at driving a golf ball. I saw some new kid driving the golf ball picker across the range. I couldn’t make out what the boy looked like

through the metal fencing around the cart, but I imagined he must look like Eliot. Eliot had driven the picker when people were hitting and the mower when things were slow.

Shortly after I bought a second bucket, Eliot showed up. He drove a beat-up van covered in band stickers. All he said was that he had to pick some stuff up. I didn't pry.

We hit a few, and he told me about his old bands. I was actually surprised that he'd pieced together a band a few years back that put out some records and toured, even though he said they never made any money with it. It was almost like back then. He used to always talk about his bands, usually playing in more than one at a time. Most never practiced more than twice. Those high school bands had names like Drug Money, Guns and Rosa Parks, I Will Burn the Whole World to the Ground, and The Backup. I remember that he once invited me to go to one of his shows, but I couldn't bring myself to go. I had heard bands that Eliot listened to, and I didn't see the appeal of the noisy dissonance. I didn't want to see Eliot screaming himself hoarse while flailing around, and I definitely didn't want to have to pretend like I wasn't embarrassed for him.

I told him about how when I came back to Oakridge after college, I took the first job I could find at a call-center and figured it'd just be temporary. But I never moved on. He asked how I met April, so I told him that she lived across the hall in college and how embarrassed I had been when she was the one to ask me out.

We talked about some of the people we went to school with. He didn't know that Jeremiah and Blake both died in Iraq, that Carey OD'ed, and that Ryan competed on some reality show. He said that he purposefully avoided everyone he knew back then. It didn't make sense to me. He hadn't been popular like some sports hero that was friends with everyone. What he had was more powerful than that, a quiet confidence that didn't need anybody's approval.

“It’s kind of hard to believe that we were ever friends,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

His powerful swing launched a Titleist well past the 200 yard marker. Despite the fact that he looked thin, especially compared to before, he still retained his strength. “Like the whole culture of school. I mean, we ignored each other in school. Even as bored as we were here, we shouldn’t have ever really talked or hung out.”

“I know what you mean,” I said.

He hit another ball with perfect form. He changed the subject: “They still haven’t fixed the 250 sign.”

The sign still had the lower right corner broken off of it.

“Didn’t you drive straight into it in the middle of the night?” I asked. “You brought moonshine and chased the duck on the picker.” I smiled up from my stance before taking another shot that barely made it 50 yards.

“It *was* the night that we got blitzed on moonshine... but *you* were definitely driving.” He laughed, a low chuckle with a controlled wheeze.

I couldn’t picture myself driving. I remembered him driving while laughing big guttural laughs. I saw myself hanging off the back of the riding lawn mower with one hand. In my other hand, a mason jar fumed. I had tried to sing Nirvana songs I only half knew. When we hit the sign, we kept laughing and lay down in the grass.

“Why did we pretend like we didn’t know each other when the summer ended?” I asked, even though I knew the answer. For the first few weeks of school, I used to take the long route between classes just to say hi, but he kept his eyes fixed on the ground. Sometimes late at night he’d instant message me as if we were back at the driving range, nothing having changed. We’d

talk about meeting up and working at the range the next summer and going to the same college when we both graduated. Nothing came of any of it.

“Beats me,” he said. “We should have done more shit like this. Just chill, you know.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I would have liked that.”

I tried to hit the 100-yard sign, but I missed by a mile.

#

The doorbell rang for a third time. Between the bells, hard pounding knocks echoed throughout the house. I checked my phone by the bed for the time. It was nearly three in the morning.

“Jesus Christ, it’s the middle of the night,” I said. “Who do you think it is?”

April said, “Just go check. It must be an emergency.”

She started to push me out of bed. I felt my way through the dark house. I opened the door to find Eliot.

“About time,” he said smiling. He’d obviously been up all night.

“What are you doing here?” I asked with a yawn and a small stretch.

“Me? Nothing. What’s going on?” He smelled like cheap boxed wine, and his teeth were red.

“It’s the middle of the night, Eliot. Go home.”

He swung in the door frame a bit. It didn’t seem like he’d processed what I said.

“So, look,” he said. “I know this is out of the blue. It’s totally cool if you say no, but it’d be a huge favor.” He tried to read me, but I stood there with a blank face. He continued, “Do you think there is any way that I might—look, it’s not a big deal. Can I borrow your Honda?”

I sighed.

“I’d have it back in the morning. I promise,” he said. He covered his heart with one hand.

“Are you being serious right now?” I couldn’t even conjure up a guess for why he needed my car. Why was his van not good enough? It was parked on the side of the road. I couldn’t remember Eliot doing this sort of thing before.

“Come on. Give me one good reason.”

“You’re drunk.”

“Besides that.”

I shook my head. “Get some sleep, Eliot.”

“Come on man,” he said, taking a step closer to me. “You know the kind of guy I am.” He reached out to touch me, but I side-stepped him and winced.

Had I ever known him? Back then, he had avoided questions about anything personal. I didn’t even know he had a twin sister until I looked him up in the yearbook years later. I had told him that he was the only person I’d ever been with before, but he only smiled. For weeks I kept trying to get something—I didn’t even care if he’d also been a virgin, if I was one out of a hundred, even if he was currently with someone else. Just something. He never budged.

I said, “I don’t know about the kind of guy you are. I don’t think I did then, and I definitely don’t now.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked.

“You were supposed to go off to Chicago with me when we graduated. You even got accepted. For Christ’s sakes, you ignored every email and text.”

He loosened his grip. He wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “I figured you would understand.”

Seeing him tear up made me consider walking back what I said, but I didn't. He was drunk. I'd probably never see him again. What was the point? Instead I said, "Just take it easy, alright?" I closed the door, but I couldn't bring myself to go back to bed. I watched him from the window.

Eliot saw me watching him. He gave me the finger, turned and walked stumbling into the dark street. He kicked my car before he turned and spat towards me.

#

Eliot was in the obituaries, dead a few hours after he left my house. I tried to piece together what happened from newspaper articles and police reports, but it was impossible. It was just another OD from a bad batch of heroin. Did he have the heroin on him when he stopped by my house or did he get it later? Was that why he needed to borrow my car? I like to think that he wanted the car to buy that lethal dose of laced heroin. That way, my actions were a speed bump to his death and not the catalyst. That way, I did all I could. But sometimes, I wonder if I had lent him the car, maybe he never would have shot up.

I went alone, leaving the house without even giving April an excuse, only saying that I'd be back later.

Throughout the church, friends and family posted pictures of every point of his life. Pictures of him smoking a cigarette in the Arizona desert. Pictures of him popping a wheelie on his first bicycle. Pictures of him with the family I'd never seen. Pictures of him playing in his band. None of them seemed real to me.

Later at the graveyard as they lowered his coffin, I remembered Eliot as the boy who would sneak beer to the driving range to drink under the stars after work. He cried all the time

when he was drunk. He made me promise not to tell anyone about how scared he was to leave Maryland.

Most of all I remembered Eliot's body against mine. He was so gentle, even more delicate than April. To me, Eliot was a memory long before he died.

After the burial and after a few drinks at a nearby bar, I went back to his grave. I pushed a tee into the fresh earth and placed a new Titleist on the tee. I lined up a shot over the cemetery's pond and swung as hard as I could. I didn't think the ball would make it to the water, but, somehow, it did. The ball hit near the center and sent ripples over everything.

BLUE NOTHING

When Coach blew the whistle, along with the rest of the kids, I returned the soccer balls to the rack in the closet, took long gulps from the armory gym's water fountain, put on my puffy snow jacket, and walked out into the parking lot slowly filling with January snow. I looked for Dad's lapis-blue Cherokee among the idling cars, heat on full-blast. As always, he wasn't there. One by one, other kids piled into cars until it was just Derek and me enjoying the sharp wind on our sweaty bodies. Despite the oversized snow jackets (*You'll grow into it*, Dad would say), we still wore our shorts and shin guards. Our knees clacked.

"Fuck this, Eliot," Derek said. "When the fuck are they going to get here? I'm freezing my nuts off."

I envied how effortlessly he cussed. I hadn't perfected it. When I swore at the lunch table or during unsupervised gym games, my friends made fun of me—snide remarks (*Woah, guys. Don't mess with Eliot. He's serious today.*) and exaggerated imitations—because I sounded like a kid. Cussing to me was all missed shots and no bicycle-kick goals. Sometimes in bed in the middle of the night I practiced swearing in whispers: *damn, shit, bastard.*

"I'm sure they'll get here soon," I said to fill the silence.

Christmas break dwindled, but school wouldn't start until Monday. Without classes to complain about, we stood around, uncomfortable with our silence. Derek towered a full foot over me, having already finished his growth spurt. I hadn't even started mine, and as each month passed, I grew more impatient to close the growing height gap between my twin sister, Emily, and me. The sky purpled.

I asked, "What'd you get for Christmas?"

“A bunch of stupid shit because of Chase-Glazer.” Both our dads lost their jobs when the glass-blowing factory closed down. My dad lucked out and picked up a job delivering bread, but most still lived on diminishing severance. “You?”

“Not much,” I lied. His gaze bore down on me, yet I kept my eyes on the ground and kicked at snow.

“Bullshit. You get two Christmases now. I bet you can’t even fit all your presents in your room.”

I shrugged and sighed. Dad and Mom each spent more money on Emily and me than they had the year before. I couldn’t tell if they were trying to buy love or apologize. “Both got me a Playstation. So I’m going to return one and get an N64.”

“Damn. I wish my parents were divorced.”

Mine weren’t divorced, but I didn’t correct him because I barely understood it—something about a year of “voluntary separation” and “notarized separation agreement” to get a divorce that was “no-fault.” It didn’t matter though because they talked about it as if it were a divorce and it felt like what I imagined divorce felt like: a vague, foolish longing for last year.

Our breath steamed as we pretended to smoke; neither of us could blow rings. The winter breeze no longer felt refreshing. I pulled my hands into my jacket’s sleeves. When headlights appeared at the edge of the lot, I held my breath and hoped to see the boxy Cherokee, but it was a sedan: another night with Coach and me.

Derek said, “Want a ride?”

“Dad’s on his way,” I said, because I wanted it to be true.

Derek shrugged and marched through the snow to his mom’s sedan, leaving dark blacktop footprints in the powder.

Coach stood waiting at the foggy window stroking his thick, ink-black mustache. When I walked in, my skin ached from the warm air. My wet sneakers screeched along the hallway. Coach must have counted the minutes waiting for us stragglers to be picked up. He must have wanted to get home to do whatever widowed, childless science teachers that coach indoor soccer do at night. Yet, without saying anything, he walked to the gym, unlocked the closet, retrieved a soccer ball, and kicked it to me.

#

“Well,” Coach said, checking his watch. “Should we try your father again?”

Outside the window it looked like cooled lava: lumpy, snowy, and dark.

“Okay,” I said. I dribbled the ball over to him, small taps, under control. Using Coach’s blocky cell phone, I left another message on the answering machine. At least Dad wasn’t at home. If he picked up, then I’d know for sure he had forgotten me.

“Maybe we should try your mom.”

“He’ll be here,” I said.

“Let’s call her anyway.”

Dad, if he was here, would’ve said something like, *Don’t talk to him about my business*. Somehow Dad still believed that the news of the separation hadn’t spread.

“She’s out of town tonight,” I lied, not because Dad would have wanted me to, but because Mom was reconsidering the custody agreement. They’d forgone courts and let Emily and me decide who we would stay with—a gift from Mom to Dad. Emily went with her, but I chose him. Mom wore guilt like a gown and made herself a stranger overnight. I didn’t feel like I knew her anymore. It wasn’t even Mom’s coming out of the closet (I could deal with that), but she now treated me like a glass child liable to shatter at a misplaced word.

I wasn't fragile or depressed, just nostalgic. If anything, Dad acted like a friend, at times a peer, with all the rawness that entailed: driving ranges, sour sips from his wine, R-Rated action movies, shooting clay pigeons with 20 gauges, carrying me from the Cherokee to my bed when we stayed out too late, helping him from the couch to his bed when he drank too much.

Looking away from me, Coach said, "I could always give you a ride to Gina's."

I winced at the name of Mom's girlfriend. Of course he knew. Everyone did. We were water cooler topics in places without water coolers—the teacher's lounge, run down bars, church prayer calls. I never appreciated anonymity before; I wished I could dissolve.

"Can't you take me home?" I asked.

"Teachers aren't allowed to anymore," he said, shaking his head and pursing his lips. Coach grudgingly followed the new policy from the Board of Ed that removed the simple solution. Letting Gina pick me up must have been as far as he was willing to bend the rules.

"Can we wait fifteen more minutes?"

He sighed. "I'll give him ten, and then..." Coach trailed off struggling to come up with some sort of backup plan. "I'll call Gina," he said, as if it were a question.

We passed the ball back and forth on autopilot. My mind drifted: every time Mom picked me up because Dad forgot, every time I missed school because Dad didn't come home the night before, every time Emily told Mom about Dad's tipsy flirting with married soccer moms, every time she heard about Dad and me eating grand slams at two in the morning on a school night, Mom strengthened her threats until last week she dropped the ultimatum: one more shot—she'd be looking for an excuse. She'd take him to court (she had the money), and she'd win every time.

#

Ten minutes that felt like two hours later, as Coach returned the soccer ball to the closet, promising to call Gina just as soon as he locked the doors, and I put my coat back on, high beams flooded the parking lot. I tried unsuccessfully to hide my smile. Coach didn't look relieved. Instead he looked the way he did on the day he reamed out my whole class after discovering our elaborate classroom-wide network for cheating on labs. With eyes narrowed and forehead furrowed in the quiet fury that only teachers know, he followed me outside. The cold made it difficult to breathe.

The passenger window lowered, and Dad's slow, careful articulation failed to hide a gentle slurring as he said, "Crazy night. I got here as soon as I could."

"You didn't try that hard," Coach said.

I wanted to tell Coach not to give my dad a hard time, but I couldn't think of how to phrase it in a way that wasn't combative. All I wanted was to climb into the car and get out of there, but Coach refused to let Dad and me slink away as we usually did. The snow that covered my ankles slowly dissolved into ice water, sogging my socks.

"Trust me. If only you knew." Dad laughed and fumbled for something between the seats.

"Indulge me." Coach's jaw locked into place. His mustache didn't hide a scowl.

Dad stopped trying to laugh his way free. Barely above a whisper, he said, "Eliot, get in the car."

I stepped forward as Coach's hand fell to my shoulder. He didn't grab or squeeze, yet the dead weight of unfamiliar touch froze me in place. His gaze never left Dad. I imagined myself freezing time—snowflakes hanging still—climbing into Dad's car, driving off, and unfreezing time when we were home.

“I’ve got time for a story,” Coach said. “Where were you?”

Was Coach not as oblivious to Dad’s drinking as I thought? Was he stalling to gauge just how far gone he was? Neither spoke; the stillness unnerved me. I stood there letting the cold sting my legs while the heat hummed in the car. Unable to stand it, I tried to pry his fingers away, but Coach’s fingers dug into my skin. Even through the thick padding of my coat, his grip hurt. If I were more like Dad, I’d be able to break free.

“Let go,” I said.

“I don’t think it’s safe to get in a car with him,” he said to me.

Dad lowered his head. The world narrowed. I felt reckless.

“You aren’t going anywhere with this drunk.” Coach pointed a bony finger at Dad.

Drunk. The word jarred me. I’d never heard anyone call him that, not even Mom. He never hit anyone, so he couldn’t be an alcoholic. Would that be how a judge saw him if Mom changed the custody agreement?

Coach continued, “I’m calling your mother or grandparents. Anyone. Even Gina.”

I suddenly pictured myself in my old bedroom overhearing Mom’s side of a phone fight with Dad, imagined daily dinners of Gina’s cooking—almost always pasta and store-bought sauce—ad nauseam, and, worst of all, Mom’s over-compensating concern for everything: the way she now always prefaced requests with “if you are up to it....”

I fought dizziness. If I could just escape Coach’s grasp... yet my squirms only tightened the grip like a Chinese finger trap. I bit at his fingers, meaty bites almost breaking the skin, until he let go.

“God damn it,” he said, as his grip softened enough for me to wriggle away and climb into the back door of the Jeep, locking the door behind me. As soon as Dad processed what I was doing, he locked the other doors and rolled up the window.

Coach yanked at the door handle and said, “Get out of the car. Both of you.”

What had come over me? I liked Coach and his class. How could I look him in the eye on Monday? The adrenaline simmered to regret. I fantasized about quitting indoor soccer and dropping out of school to avoid ever having to face Coach again.

Dad cradled a brown-bagged bottle between his legs. He opened his mouth to say something (another apology, maybe an insult), but instead shook his head and exhaled.

Coach pounded at the window, looked at me pleadingly, and, muffled by the glass, said with slow articulation, “Eliot, this is a mistake. It’s okay. Just unlock the door. If you don’t, I’m going to have to call the cops. And if that happens, nothing good will come of this.”

I looked at Dad, and he gave me a timid smile as if to say, *Your choice*.

I said to Coach, “I’m sorry.” I nodded to Dad. I knew choosing my father was nothing but risks, but as the end loomed, all I wanted was time with Dad, even short minutes as they ran out.

Dad ground the gears into drive, his body shaking, almost quaking. As we drove off, in the mirror Coach shrank as he dialed his phone.

#

Colossal snowflakes caught in wind currents shot over the windshield like stars in a screensaver. Dad wrung the steering wheel with his hands as if the tactile feeling of sticky rubber might calm him.

“I’m really sorry, Eliot. Next time I’ll be there. I won’t even leave. I’ll stay in the car and wait the whole time,” he said, making momentary eye contact. At least for right then he believed it.

How could he think about something that felt so trivial to me? I wondered if he grasped the bigger picture: the impending holding cell, DUI, license suspension, job loss, and court cases. I said, “Dad, we’re in trouble.”

He ignored me and said, “You don’t think I would leave you there on purpose, do you?”

“We’re going to get arrested?” It surprised me to hear me include myself. Could I end up in juvie?

“No one’s getting arrested.”

“Coach called the cops.”

Dad shook his head. He slowed the car down to a crawl on the dark road. He licked his lips, making a clicking noise with his mouth, and said, “Then we need to go someplace where no one will find us until I can pass a breathalyzer.” It sounded like a question, as if he wanted me to offer suggestions.

I didn’t want to hide out like criminals. I just wanted to get home. I stayed quiet.

As he made an illegal U-turn, he smiled and gave a self-satisfied chuckle, soon turning onto an off-shoot from the highway that led through woods, a road I’d only ridden a handful of times and only ever to one place (always staying in the car while Dad picked up his pay check): Chase-Glazer, the glass factory.

#

I’d never seen a parking lot so desolate. An abandoned car rusted in the distance, the only other vehicle. Dad drove past row upon row of unlit lamp posts in a field of snow. Somehow,

even knowing it was closed, I still imagined smoke billowed from the stacks or that night-shift security guards still patrolled. It looked haunted; the emptiness, the void scared me.

“I don’t have enough gas to leave the car running,” Dad said, putting the bottle in the glove compartment and killing the engine. “Want to go inside?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “You’re treating this like it’s an adventure. We’re in really big trouble, Dad. Don’t you understand that—”

“Of course I understand,” he said with force that made me shrink into the seat. “I get it. It’s a new low. Which is why I don’t want to just sit here thinking about it.” For a second, I thought I heard his voice waver. He exited the car and lit a cigarette.

He used to hide his emotions so well that I wondered if he even had them. Before we moved out, I didn’t realize how much I counted on his dependable even-mannered patience. Any outburst unhinged me. I stepped out of the car and, trying to sound hopeful, said, “Let’s do it.”

He looked surprised, but he smirked and mussed up my hair. When he did that, it made me feel like a kid, but not in the way that Mom did. It was like he saw himself in me, and vice versa. He fumbled around in the back of the car, until he emerged with an oblong black tire iron spotted with rust. “Follow me.”

Walking toward the factory, I took cautious steps; underneath the blanket of snow, a sheet of ice blanketed the parking lot. The worn tread on my shoes made each step treacherous. I wondered what Dad was thinking. He drank, but that’s what Dads did.

I heard the crack from under the powder before I felt my foot plunge through the snow and ice into a puddle of water. The icy water burned, and I made an involuntary whining noise.

I tried to walk normal, but the numbness gave me a slight limp. How long until my toes froze off?

Dad looked around, mostly concerned but with traces of annoyance, and said, “I think we can find something inside.” As we approached the glass door, Dad said, “Stand back.” With the tire iron, he busted out the panels. The building was cold, dark, and dusty, but it wasn’t empty like I thought. Glass furnaces and kilns remained where they always had been.

Sensing my question about why the furnaces were still there, Dad nodded towards the industrial equipment and said, “It was easier for those crooks to buy new furnaces overseas than to ship these over.”

I nodded. I imagined my dad packing huge plates of sheet glass into cardboard, carting them to trucks to load. Or did this factory make artisan vases and sculptures? I never asked him about his job, and now it seemed pointless.

He walked me over to an empty office. “Take your shoe and sock off so you don’t get frostbite and wait here.” He motioned towards a radiator. “If the backup generator has any juice left, then we can dry your sock out quick.”

He walked away out of view, navigating with his lighter’s delicate flame. I soon couldn’t hear his footsteps anymore. I rubbed my numb foot.

A whirring, then built up air suddenly sputtered out of the vent—cold air, a breeze.

“Dad,” I called out. “I think you got it.”

Barefoot, I walked around feeling for a light switch in darkness. My hand touched the plastic and metal of an uncovered switch, exposed wiring barely distinguishable until my clumsy fingers prodded the copper. With a jolt-like punch, I was blasted away. Midair, in a fraction of the smallest second, my every muscle including my heart contracted with electricity and seized.

For a moment, I floated utterly alone in a warm baby blue, time lacking distance and sound stretching out in indiscernible reverberation: no life flashes or mourned regrets or loved ones or prayers—only that blue nothing.

The blue lifted abruptly with bright lights and burned lungs. With a lingering taste of whiskey in my mouth, I breathed exaggerated gulps of air. Each breath sent excruciating pain into my ribs.

Dad sobbed—snot and tears indistinguishable—beside me. I'd never seen him so human. He cradled me and said, "Eliot. Eliot. It's alright."

I wanted to say, "What happened?" but no words came.

"You didn't have a pulse, Eliot. I didn't know if I could bring you back."

I didn't believe it. Old teachers talked on the sly in class about near death experiences they'd read about in church tracts, but I hadn't seen the pearly gates. Near death experience. Death. I'd never thought much about it. I could live with solitary blue-ness.

I whimpered wordlessly, and Dad stroked my hair.

I felt a lingering magnetic pull to the blue. It ebbed with a racing half-life but failed to disappear.

#

We waited in the warming office as the sock and shoe dried, refusing to talk about the jolt. Blisters bubbled on my fingers where the arc occurred—second-degree burns. Slowly sobering, he asked me if I wanted to live with Mom now. Pulling at his scruffy jaw, he seemed to blame himself even more than I did.

It didn't matter what I said. By the end of the night I would be there. "I think so," I said.

"That's fair."

For a long time neither of us spoke. It wasn't that living with Emily, Gina, and Mom had become any more palatable. Maybe if Dad dropped me off, we could forgo the courts until Dad was more stable.

Wet footwear dried to a hot dampness. I asked if we could leave, so Dad did a few sobriety tests (touched his nose, stood on one foot, said half the alphabet backwards) and determined he was fine, so we returned to the car.

He took off. Dad turned on the radio, flicked from station to station and turned it off. Snow pummeled the earth in moth-sized flakes.

"Do you still love me?" he asked.

"What?" I said.

He swallowed hard. "Never mind."

The digital clock beamed 8:53. It felt much later.

I wanted to tell him that I loved him, but we so rarely talked about it that I couldn't bring myself to say the word. I said, "Yeah Dad, I do."

"I don't feel like anyone loves me anymore. And I can't stop thinking about if anyone ever did." His voice wavered, and his grip on the steering wheel looked like it would crush the plastic, foam, and vinyl, making it ooze out of his hands like squeezing a ball of fresh mozzarella.

Everything crept into focus—the mess of it all. Was this sober honesty or drunk neediness? Before, I thought he was emotionless, stoic even, but now he sounded more like Emily on a bad day. If he'd really felt like that, I felt bad for Mom. It must have been so hard not just being married to a man but to someone this insecure.

I said, "I know Emily does. I bet Mom still does too in a way."

Dad snorted.

I wondered if everything that happened since the separation was secondary to his suppressed question about whether any part of the family, the marriage, was ever real to her. I pitied him and wanted more time. All we had left was fading seconds before an arrest or whatever came next, so I promised myself I'd stay until the end.

"I want to go home tonight. Our home," I said.

Dad's grip on the steering wheel loosened. He looked at me wet-eyed. He made an illegal u-turn, swerving, and tires slipping on the snow and ice-greased road.

As we regained speed (five, ten, fifteen over the thirty), I said, "Slow down." I braced myself for a new patch of black ice, but the Cherokee kept traction.

Full crying, he said, "You know, you mean everything to me, right? I know what people say about me—"

"Slow down, Dad."

Black and white, darkness and snow slid past us. Black nameless trees crowded the road, as Dad sped away from aloneness, large and small, escaping even if just for the night. Black and white, shadows burst from the tree line, a pack of white-tail deer.

"Dad! Look out!"

#

My ears rang before I felt any pain. Neck hurt, but my fingers worked. Not broken. Did my blisters pop? Something bloody. Nose? Lip? The seatbelt cut into my shoulder. Car horn jammed on. I couldn't see through involuntary tears from an airbag to the face. As I wiped them away, I marveled at the windshield spider-webbed across all four corners: how did it crush but not shatter?

“Dad,” I said as I massaged my neck.

His head hung in an impossible angle as if it could roll off. I thought I saw the forehead bone, leaking blood covered it. He hadn’t been wearing his seatbelt.

I clamored out of the car. Through the passenger-side door, I struggled to drag Dad’s weight to the tree line. Each inch took all I could muster, until finally I had him in the grass. I sat against an oak, but he slid over onto his side.

I thought I would cry but puked instead.

“It’s alright, Dad,” I said. “Everything’s okay.”

Dad lay there, snow falling on his unblinking eyes. Things like this never actually happened. I’d awaken any minute.

The front of the Cherokee was a mess of bent metal and broken glass. Crumbled at the foot of the bumper, the deer was a furry mass of colors in the headlights. The snow dyed green with leaking coolant met with deer blood and turned an awful dark khaki brown.

The deer let out a sickening, throaty yelp. It tried to stand on broken legs and collapsed, bones piercing brown fur. A buck: barely antlered. All that blood from a toddler.

I looked around frantically. “What am I supposed to do?”

Dad said, *You’ll have to put it down, Eliot.*

It was never the kind of thing Dad would ask of me, still a kid. But it needed to be done. I remembered back when I was a kid, we had a mouse in the walls. I checked the trap in the morning, and I found the mouse alive, back broken. When I told Dad, he said he’d stop the suffering. On the back porch, he crushed the mouse with a brick. Emily watched, but I closed my eyes before he brought down the brick. Afterwards, I locked the door so no one would see me cry.

“How?”

I'm not sure. Look in the car.

Even though I was pretty sure that the car wouldn't explode (there wasn't even smoke), I approached cautiously, steering clear of the deer. I ruffled through the back seat. “Did you have a pocket knife or something?” I asked. In the glove compartment I only found pens and the bottle. “There's nothing here.”

Check the back, Dad said.

I climbed into the backseat. “I don't see anything.”

The tire iron. The one I broke the window with.

In the darkness I found the cloth loop to lift up the seat cushions. Underneath I found it. The iron felt heavy and rough.

I took it over to Dad and held it out to him. Blood so dark that it looked black haloed his head. *I can't do it for you.*

“I can't either.” I'd never killed anything before. Just thinking about hurting the deer made me want to cry, but I fought it, hard.

It's in pain.

The rough metal in my hand felt as dense as a black hole. I took small deliberate steps towards the deer—barely no longer a fawn. Up close, I noticed the gruesome details that the night hid: a heap of sinew, fur, muscle, bone, and blood, pools of blood. My stomach churned. Wishing it were true, I said to the deer, “It's okay. It's going to be fine.”

It blinked big, dark eyes at me. Every breath looked like agony. It tried to rise again on legs snapped like Popsicle sticks but immediately collapsed. It lay on its side looking at me.

As I raised the iron above my head, I felt weak and dizzy. It was as if I were floating somewhere outside all of this, watching myself from a bird's eye view.

I said, "You're going to be all right."

Using every bit of strength I could find, I brought the tire iron down on the fawn's head with a dull thud. That head looked so delicate, like you could crush it with a hug, but the bar bounced off with sickening reverberations. Its skull felt like hitting a tree with an aluminum bat. The deer thrashed and yelped like a child. I swung again. Again. And again. It didn't get easier or harder. Every blow took everything I had each time. Slowly cracking the skull, popping an eye out of its socket with a whoosh. It stopped thrashing but still swayed in spasms, until finally the head caved in with the sound of squashing rotten fruit.

I dropped the iron—wet with blood and yellow with something goopy—on the road beside the fawn.

I sat beside Dad. I brushed a layer of snow from his face.

I filled my mouth with snow. "Holy fuck." I said the words without thinking.

You did the right thing, Dad said.

I didn't say anything.

Trust me. Right now that deer is happy alone in the baby blue nothing.

Sitting in the red snow, a haze of headlights built indistinctly on the horizon, darkness fading to light blue above the tree line—any moment some car or other would find me and carnage. The blood spread.

LEGION

I eat cloyingly sweet cereal with Eliot, my twin brother, who sits beside me at the kitchen table. It's early, and the August sun hasn't dispersed the fog. We're both working the early shift at Fun World today. Mom is still asleep, but her partner Gina stretches her legs in the kitchen before her morning run, leaning against the granite countertop. A Nobody tells me to cut out Eliot's lungs with the filet knife. I ignore it. Everything is normal. This is the last day of summer before senior year. My name is Emily.

One minute I'm watching the flakes sog between bites and then I look up and you're there peeking around the living room door as if you always belonged in our house—noticing the asymmetry in our twinness, the difference between my wispy blonde to his dyed blue black, my unremarkable build to Eliot's lanky. You pick up the pictures of Dad: first a faded old one where you can see that I got my deep dimples from him and then the most recent picture we have, the one after the separation and just before the wreck, where he had faded eyes. I can tell you feel his death, how he died four years ago. For me he feels like less than a memory. So many of the things he once held have been sold or donated. My mother gave me his wedding ring, which I wore on my thumb until I lost it in the hospital. Every memory I have of him is so distorted that his moving body has a superimposed static picture face.

You walk over and sit next to me, waiting for what happens next.

Emily, no one else is here, a different Nobody says.

It's too early to tell if Nobody is right. I've been off my meds for weeks, but none of my hallucinations before were visual. I hope if you're not really there that you're just sleep deprivation.

You seem so confident in your home invasion. Nonchalant. I wait to see if Eliot or Gina explain your presence, but neither even looks at you when you put the pictures back.

A demon? a Nobody suggests.

I kick Eliot under the table, nod my head towards you, and say, Who's that?

He scans the room, humoring me. He leans in close, says, What are you talking about?

You're not joking, are you? I chew my lip for a bit.

He goes back to eating and avoiding my gaze.

You stand between Gina and me and tell me to imagine that you aren't here, just pretend I'm alone.

Nobody says, hang yourself with bed sheets.

I don't.

Maybe I should take my medication. Maybe half a dose or something. I've been flushing the pills. They make my eyes droop and only dull Nobody. Not worth the drowsiness to cut out only a fraction of the hallucinations. But before the hallucinations were only sound, taste, and touch. Until now I half didn't believe in true head-people. The kind people like me see in movies.

Just to be sure, I side step past you to get to Gina. I avoid looking at you directly, but I'm sure you catch my glancing. Sleep lingers in Gina's eyes.

I say, Is there any—are we expecting company this morning?

Without looking up, still reaching for her toes, stretching her hamstring, she says, No.

A second later her head pops up. She blinks once, twice, and says, What do you mean?

It's too late, Emily, Nobody says.

Reality is hard to organize. Sometimes a Nobody speaks blind wrath, which at least is discernible. But it's confusing when a Nobody speaks pure banality. Like Nobody will say my name or ask, What's that? Sometimes there are so many Nobodies that I feel like the only way to quiet them would be to drown a herd of pigs like Jesus did when he banished Legion.

Still, I wonder what you're like.

It's nothing, I tell Gina.

I start to walk away but Gina catches my wrist. She scans the room—unlike Eliot, she takes my questions almost too seriously—as if she believes that if she tries hard enough she'll see my hallucinations shimmer like *Predator* special effects. But her eyes pass over you like sunlight, taking in only the refrigerator and not you leaning against it. Uncomprehending. She asks, Do you see someone here?

No, I say.

I try to pull my wrist loose but her grip tightens—with her it's better not to try to escape. She asks, Have you been taking your medicine?

Lie. Lie. Lie, Nobody says.

I was just about to take it, I say.

Clench.

She says, So you haven't taken any today.

Yeah, I say.

You see someone, don't you? she says.

Nobody tells me that Gina's been expecting me to break. No, she wants regression. She wants me gone.

You can't trust her, Nobody says.

Thin lips zipped. She studies my face. I feel the contours and minor blemishes of my face in her gaze. Finally, Gina lets go.

Go take your meds, she says.

I run out of the room, stumbling on the way upstairs to the bathroom.

Hurry, she shouts after me.

Someone, maybe Eliot teasing or my mom waking up or Nobody says, Don't run in the house.

My hands shake as I fumble to punch out my daily-dose from the flimsy package. Pinch the pill between thumb and index.

Don't forget what we do with medicine, Nobody says.

I steady my breathing and gasp when I see you in the hallway watching. I ask if you think I should take the pill.

You say to take it even though you know it won't help.

It rings true to me, but I'm still suspicious of you.

Then why? I ask.

You say that just taking medicine never fixes anything in a story like this. It's a plot point and little more. It isn't that easy; it won't just work itself out.

Story? I ask.

Motioning around at the toothbrushes in a mason jar, the tiles with discolored grout, the mirror flecked with toothpaste and spit, the whole house, myself. You say that all of this—everything I can see isn't real. You say that eventually you'll leave, but not because of medicine.

You make less sense than Nobody. I roll the chalky pill around in my palm.

Don't listen. Flush it, Nobody says.

I know. I know.

In the porcelain, the pill fizzes its way to the septic or sewer.

#

On the drive to Fun World, I can't get a handle on you. At times you're in the backseat of the Honda that Eliot and I share. You try not to disturb the Taco Bell wrappers and CD cases. At other times, I see you on the side of the old state road, scanning the tree line for black bears and deer or wading shoeless in the cold lake water.

Eliot turns down the music, some obscure hardcore punk tape from a messageboard pen pal. Music he got while I was in the hospital in June. He scoured the internet for bands, each one more lo-fi and unlistenable. I was in inpatient for less than a month. They called me *high-functioning*. Eliot and I used to be so similar. By the time I returned home, he'd changed so much: his hair dyed black, the door to his room locked, his eyes rarely meeting mine. Now he speaks almost imperceptibly slower than he used to, like I'm bordering braindead.

Are you alright? Eliot asks.

Sure. Yeah. What do you mean? I say.

He turns the music down even more and says, You seem more spacy than usual.

Medicine. Sleepy. I don't know, I say.

It isn't quite a lie. I haven't been sleeping much since Eliot told me how he regrets that he isn't me.

He was the one with Dad when he died in a car crash after picking Eliot up from soccer practice, he's the one who was never careful with drugs, he's the boy—basically if one of us is supposed to be like me, it is him. I can't argue. I'm unlikely, an outlier for my age, experiences, and biology. Sometimes I think about that. Genetics misfire. But his guilt-weight must be more

than my jealous-weight. Since then, I've had a hard time being around him. I feel bad he feels bad I feel bad. Ouroboros.

I could call Mom and have her pick you up, he says.

Eliot is trying to get rid of you, Nobody says.

Everyone wishes you didn't exist, another Nobody says.

It builds, and I can't breathe, and oh my god, what should I do, and I'll unlock the car, and jump out, and with any luck, I'll just be a smear.

You put your hand on my shoulder and say not to listen to them—they're lying.

I open the vanity mirror, pretending to check my eye makeup but really checking to see if you are in the backseat at that moment. You are. I want to thank you. I give a slight nod.

I say, Don't worry about me. I'll be fine when I get some caffeine. I'll mainline sodas.

Eliot glances over, unsure, and then turns up the volume.

I wish I were him.

#

Only employees are at Fun World at a quarter until nine. Ocean of blue polos. Red polo for Eric, the manager today. We all make our way from our beater cars to Headquarters, which is actually just the upstairs office that doubles as storage above the deep fry heavy kitchen. A print out gives us our assignments for the day—disperse to batting cages, laser tag, go-karts, arcades, ice cream, and mini golf. Eliot gets assigned to laser tag. I'm on mini-golf, which is no surprise. It's in a separate building away from all the popular attractions. Eric has been worried about me scaring off tourists ever since inpatient. You follow me. Inside, everything is in its usual place—the sticky putters, the paint-cracked balls, the out-of-date touch screen monitor, the out-of-place

fountain soda machine that gives employees all-day caffeine-buzzes. As usual, last night's blue polo didn't vacuum, a daily-task everyone skips but me.

I pour myself a suicide of caffeinated sodas and take long swills.

Most of the summer tourists have left. The only customers this close to school are locals. Over a couple of hours, almost no one comes—a four year old's birthday party here, lingering rich lake kids there. Almost no one.

Time crawls on its stomach. Even though I know you aren't really here, I talk to you because you make the silence with no one but Nobody bearable. I tell you about how Fun World mini golf is a relic. Tourists and locals go down the road to Fun Castle if they really want a decent course because they have a waterfall. A few years back, Fun World and Fun Castle were ambivalent competitors, both proud of their own brand of mediocrity. Then Fun Castle got bought out, made a ton of renovations, and gobbled up the tourists and birthday parties. The people who still come to Fun World are the type who buy RC Cola.

But I can still remember Fun World's mini golf course at our 12th birthday party six years ago—when the paint looked fresh and the water looked spring-clean. It was the only birthday where I was taller than Eliot. I caught Dad fudging the numbers on the score card so that Eliot and I were always tied for first. Mom was quiet, as always. In retrospect, it shouldn't have surprised any of us that she was cheating with Gina, because she was withdrawn for those two years before she came out.

Now Fun World is all different. The torn green reveals concrete underneath, the sand trap is sandless, three of the holes have no obstacles, and the centerpiece—the pond—has brackish water dyed Slurpee blue to hide its brown. I like the decay and emptiness. Quiet. Still.

Eric stops by. He's older by a few years, but noteworthy for being short. His long, pointed beard is compensation, but it just makes him look gnomish.

Pleasantries. Nothing talk.

Bored? he asks.

Out of my mind, I say.

You should pick up trash on the course, Eric says.

Break the windows, Nobody says.

I'm not that bored, I say.

He says, I'm trying to be subtle. Don't make me get all manager-y.

I get a trash bag and head out to the course, making the rounds collecting candy wrappers and plastic bottles. You watch.

We're still strangers, but I've learned a little about you. You're the type I would have wanted for a friend. Still, you aren't wish fulfillment. I always manage to get good enough grades, yet I get the sense that you're smarter than me. If I could conjure up an imaginary friend, I'd want to be the smart one. Whether you want to or not, you make me feel inadequate. Like Eliot does.

At a garden bed that has long since been overtaken with weeds, the place where half the employees smoke pot after work because it's partially hidden, a glint catches your eye. You point through a patch of creeping charlie. While I walk through the weeds, dew soaks through my Tom's. I reach down into the thick and find white gold. I recognize it immediately: my father's ring that I lost in inpatient. I breathe on it, and polish it with my work shirt to make sure. I used to carry it with me everywhere.

Weird. I thought I lost it, I say.

You ask how it got there, in the weeds.

A therapist must have found it, brought it here to return it, and then lost it again.

You think that is unlikely.

I say, But Eliot told me I lost it. He wouldn't lie.

You're quiet.

I say, He never hides anything from me. He'd never even come down here to smoke. He quit smoking when the doctor said there might be a link between smoking and hearing Nobody.

You call me naïve.

A couple of tourist families come through. I try my best to look at ease even though my mind races—Eliot worked last night. He wouldn't lie, would he? Maybe last night he saw something. You seem skeptical, like you think I'm just looking for a reason to talk to Eliot.

I'm outside of my head watching myself pace and mentally flail. I'm acting that word that sometimes people pin on me, the one I don't use.

Why does the truth matter to me? I shouldn't care. But promises are the only permanency I have. I smell cherries and taste gasoline.

Even though I'm not supposed to leave my post, I go over to the arcade and laser tag. Ski ball—kashunk. Digital soundtracks. Kids play Dance Dance Revolution, all left feet, missing steps in metallic thuds, wasting a dollar. Beat blasting dissonance. Eliot fixes a coin jam on a racing game and gives a kid with a Kool-Aid mustache an extra free game. That game jams on every other token.

It feels like the entire world is watching me.

Emily. What's up? Eliot says.

I don't know what to say.

Get back to mini golf, he says.

No one is in the laser tag course, so I pull him into the arena. Black lights and fluorescent pads are supposed to make it look sci-fi, but it mostly looks like the back of a Spencer's.

What are you doing? he asks.

Did you do anything weird last night? I ask.

Like what? he asks.

I don't know. Were you smoking out by mini golf? I ask.

Yeah, he says.

He laughs as if he doesn't remember the promise. His teeth glow: a little blue and a little white.

Whatever happened to Dad's ring? I ask.

His hand instinctively thumbs a pocket. He swallows hard and says, You know this. You had it when you checked into the hospital, and you lost it.

Woozy. My legs give out, so I lean against the wall. It makes a small puff—they are covered in black shag carpet with a layer of foam between the carpet and drywall.

Are you okay? he asks.

I need to think, I say.

Get back to mini golf before Eric notices you're here. You're acting fucking crazy.

He said the word. Eliot leaves us in the maze.

He's not like this, I say to you.

You smile reassuringly.

He's hiding something, Nobody says.

My mind races as we walk through the arcade across the parking lot to my isolation booth. My stomach is bile, and I can't escape the empty rot in my center. Eliot didn't answer—he could(n't); it does(n't) matter; he's (outgrown me, and without you I'm) alone.

I wait and wait and wait until Eliot and I can go home. In the car Eliot and I don't look at one another. The music is loud, but we are quiet.

#

That night I watch TV, volume loud as cannons to try to drown everyone out, even you. Aware of aloneness. The caffeine crashes and even with the TV rumbling, I somehow—for the first time in a long time—nod off. I awake groggy. In a daze, feeling more disoriented than before. You're still here, waiting for the end.

I shuffle out of my room on the second floor. From downstairs I hear my name. I shush you, and we inch our way down the hall. Hidden, I sit against the wall. Across from me there is a wall socket. The surprise stacked faces of each outlet—rectangular prong eyes and a circular hole beneath a mouth—seem to warble until the grounding moves like a mouth in time to the talking.

She'll never go for it, my mom says.

Gina says, She's getting worse, and I'm sure she knows it. I'm pretty sure she's not just hearing voices anymore. She's seeing people.

Huh? Mom says.

This morning she asked if I saw anyone else in the house, Gina says.

She asked me the same thing. All day she's acted crazy. I think she knows that I have Dad's ring, Eliot says.

I thought you were only holding onto it while she was gone, Mom says.

Eliot says, I was, but I never knew when the right time was. It's important to me too, and I was lucky I even found it when she tried to purge the house of metal because the government was listening or whatever she said. I mean, it was in the trash compactor crushed with her molars she pulled out with pliers because of the fillings. Why would I give her something she'd just throw away the next time she goes off her meds and imagines some conspiracy?

When were you going to tell me about this? Mom says.

I'm sure deep down Emily knows she needs to go back. She probably even wants it. That's why she's acting out, Gina says.

Pause.

Eliot says, If she doesn't want to, you could still force her, right? Like call them or something, right?

Quiet.

I can't listen anymore. Nothing makes sense. I creep back to my room, steadying myself each step with one hand to the wall. My first thought is the same as Nobody's simultaneous suggestion: I could kill myself. I don't think I could ever follow through, but I think about it a lot. Mostly, I want to be alone. I ask you to leave; you don't. You try to console, but I won't let you.

Everyone—Mom, Gina, Eliot—is unrecognizable. I'm the only constant. I dwell on them, and Nobody after Nobody piles on one another: no one loves me, I'll be happier dead, smother my family in their sleep.

And then one Nobody cuts through with the truth I ignored back at Fun World: Eliot's hiding something that happened last night.

I don't care about the small changes, the way Eliot has eyed me since I returned. Whatever happened, it changed everyone and everything. I see the outlines of connections binding my family to Fun World and Dad's death and the mind control I'd suppressed, but they're vague.

You tell me that I'm not thinking logically, that I'd heard the explanation already. But even though I want to believe it's as simple as Eliot said, I can't. Adrenaline. Pacing. Growing up, neither Eliot nor I felt normal.

My mind drifts to the security cameras overlooking all of Fun World. I've seen the recordings only once, when Eric called everyone into the Headquarters after hours to watch a fight captured on camera that he thought was funny. If I can't trust Eliot to tell me what is going on, I'll have to see for myself.

I wait hours until I know Fun World's closed and creep out of the window. Drive. When Eliot and Mom call me—they must have noticed my absence—I don't answer.

The parking lot is empty, and the building is lightless. The moon is clouded over. Dark, dark. Only managers have keys. I have to break a window. I've spent so much time here that I know which bricks around the overgrown flower beds are loose. I pick one up. The edges are weathered. You say it's not too late to go home.

They're hiding something, I say.

Don't let them find you, Nobody says.

This will fix everything, I say.

Once you find out, Nobody says, life will return to normal.

Back to weekend trips with Eliot to Baltimore to see pop-punk bands, our tastes synced. We argued in twin-talk over who would drive each shift, and I'd always win. I'd get the day

drive, and he'd do the midnight drive on an empty I-68, swerving between lanes like a game to keep himself awake. He'd pout. I'd gloat. We'd be fine. A future that's the past.

The brick hits the glass door with a thud. With each throw you plead harder for me to leave. You say that I'm not thinking right, that I'm sick. You are starting to sound like Eliot. The glass splinters. Then webs. Then shatters.

Almost there, Nobody says.

I kick in the remaining shards and crawl through the frame, gashing my calf. Within moments, my sock is wet. Inside, the door at the stairs is locked, and, no matter how much I bruise myself against the door, it doesn't give.

Window, Nobody says.

I go outside and see the window to the upstairs office. Eric left it cracked to save on AC. A big white oak with long limbs like spider legs grows nearby, and I think that if I jump just right, I'll catch the lip and be able to pull myself up and shimmy in.

But as I grab hold of a bottom limb, headlights and bright-red police swirls flood into the parking lot. Just one car. I always thought that the sirens had to blare with the swirlers—it seems fake.

None of this is real. You were right.

I hop up and pull myself into the tree—the kind that has bark like alligator skin.

The police car stops with a screech. Leaving his car idling, the officer steps out and says, Hey. You. Yeah, I see you. Get out of the tree.

I look into the lights and can't make out anything beyond a blob. Another head person, I think. I climb higher.

Almost there.

Keep going, Nobody says.

Get down, he says.

Grab his gun, Nobody says.

You tell me to stop. Your voice joins the crowd, and my head roars tsunamis.

Shut up, I say. Just shut the fuck up.

The others crescendo, and you quit trying to stop me. You resign and watch.

The policeman says, Get down here, now. He climbs after me.

Up. Every dark limb takes me closer to that window where I'll find out how I can fix everything. Then I'll be safe with the old Eliot and finally understand all the things that everyone else and the legion know—things will go back to the way they were before, back then, back then.

Stop, he says.

Climb, Nobody says.

The window is there, just inches from my fingertips. I straddle the branch and pull myself forward, and then I feel his hand on my foot. I shake out of my shoe and pull myself to stand on the branch. It bends under the weight.

I visualize a jump where my fingers catch the lip. Pulling myself up with grace. I steady myself and spring. Haphazard—falling short. Midair, for the first time in a long time, I feel absence. I anticipate snapped bones and hard unfamiliar mattresses, but all is quiet. No one is left. Nobody is here—not Gina, not Mom, not Eliot. And not you.

AS GOOD AS GONE

Jenny wondered how many sugary, cream-heavy mugs of coffee she'd have to down to miscarry. Her mug was stained all over with drips of coffee and spit. With trembling hands, she signaled for her sixth refill. This was in 1989.

She sat in a booth, the leather cracked, revealing the Dijon mustard colored foam beneath. The diner hadn't been remodeled since the 50's, which Jenny first assumed was purposeful: checkered floor, metal Coca-Cola signs, a jukebox filled with forty-fives of Elvis and Little Richard. But the more time she spent in here, the less charm it held. A thin layer of smoker's grime clouded the windows, coated the countertops, and stained the ceiling tiles. The jukebox wasn't even plugged in.

For nearly three weeks she had blamed her late period on stress. She told herself that after she finished grading the stack of ninth grade final essays she'd take a pregnancy test. Earlier that day, when she finally had the open summer stretched before her, she took the test, and, clear as rainwater, there was a circle in the EPT: her life was over. She couldn't even imagine raising a child with Steve without traumatizing the child emotionally in one way or another.

Sarah, the waitress, scooped up the pot of coffee from the burner. They vaguely knew each other from growing up attending the same church. They'd barely ever talked and hadn't seen one another in almost a decade, as one after another they went off to college and inevitably returned home. Sarah never came back to church.

Jenny was surprised Sarah hadn't fled the state. Everyone at church had heard by now that Sarah was a homosexual.

Sarah had a head full of blown-out curls and wore a white apron stained with tomato soup and chocolate ice cream. To Jenny, Sarah seemed forgettable in every way except for her walk. She marched with heavy steps devoid entirely of grace, like each step was a battering ram to the tiled floor.

“I feel like a bartender,” Sarah said. As she topped off Jenny’s mug, Sarah dropped her voice an octave and said, “Don’t you think you’ve had enough for tonight?”

Jenny laughed too hard and then said, “Just pour me another. I can still drive.”

“What?”

“I was playing along. Like I was a drunk.” Jenny sipped the coffee. It was getting late. The coffee was old, smelled like nothing, and tasted acidic, almost sour.

All the other customers had paid their bills and left what seemed like a long time ago. In the back there was probably a cook in the kitchen and maybe a teenaged dishwasher working his first summer job. But in the dining room, there was only Jenny and Sarah. The bill was left out hours ago and was now decorated with coffee rings.

“Are you waiting on someone?” Sarah asked, glancing at a clock ringed with a burned out neon bulb: twenty minutes until closing. “Your husband?”

“No. Do you know Steve?”

Sarah pointed at Jenny’s engagement ring.

“That? No. He’s just a fiancé,” she lied. It felt more palatable to pretend she’d never said *till death do us part* in front of her friends, her family, and God. Every day she asked herself if she was the type of woman who would get divorced. She sometimes thought of paying someone to get him drunk and seduce him so that she could leave him without anyone lecturing her on how divorce made them both adulterers, but she didn’t think he’d ever do it.

Jenny took off the engagement ring and dropped it into her purse. She wished she had taken it off earlier. How could Jenny tell Sarah that she was here to see Sarah herself? Jenny often thought about Sarah with a borderline obsession. Jenny prayed until her mind was too exhausted to form words that God would let her forget about Sarah.

She had daydreamed about making this trip just to see Sarah ever since Mrs. Shaffer, Sarah's mother, asked for prayer during Sunday school. Mrs. Shaffer said that Sarah was confused and thought she was "a gay." She said the word in a hush like it was contagious. All the other women looked as if she'd said Sarah was dead. They'd all known Sarah, had been to her baptism, and now she was as good as gone. No one, Jenny included, could bring themselves to make a prayer request after that. Suddenly everyone else's concerns for sicknesses, routine surgeries, and work troubles brought up every week seemed too trivial. Seated in metal chairs around a particle board table, the women joined hands and—with the exception of Jenny—bowed their heads and prayed.

Instead, Jenny's mind raced too fast to multi-task. She'd seen Sarah at cover-dish dinners, even held a conversation or two, but they were acquaintances at best. Jenny was three years older than Sarah, and growing up, that gap felt cavernous. She'd never met a lesbian before. She'd heard about the gay clubs and bathhouses in the cities, and on the news AIDS was everywhere. But in Appalachia, no one was gay.

Before the church service, Jenny forced herself to talk to Mrs. Shaffer, a plain middle-aged woman who carried herself like a senior citizen. Jenny knew little about Mrs. Shaffer except that she prided herself on her garden, so Jenny said she too wanted to garden and was wondering if Mrs. Shaffer would be willing to help her onto the right path. This wasn't exactly a lie, but Jenny did realize it was mostly an excuse to learn more about Sarah. From then on, at

least twice a week, until Sarah cut off all contact, Jenny went over to Mrs. Shaffer's, always guiding the conversation to Sarah, taking in every detail, memorizing every picture, trying to understand her. Part of Jenny hoped that nothing about Sarah would make sense to her so that she could continue thinking that God simply made her lacking. But in Mrs. Shaffer's stories, Jenny saw so much of herself. Jenny remembered the daze of disappointment when she'd learned Sarah had a girlfriend and the secret joy when she'd learned that Sarah had been dumped and was moving to Cumberland in the next county over.

But she always thought she lacked the courage to travel to see Sarah. Even a step removed, she felt too close—like just being in the same room together was a sin.

“He’s just a fiancé? Ouch,” Sarah said. “Mental note: don’t get on your bad side.”

Jenny bit her lip. “I mean, he’s fine.”

“Fine? That good?”

“No. That’s not what I mean. He’s great. He’s...” Jenny looked around the restaurant as if the word might be plastered on one of the tacky signs. When a more precise adjective didn’t come, she said, “He’s just a lot.”

“I know that you mean,” Sarah said, sliding into the next booth over, leaning out into the aisle. Somehow it felt more acceptable to not sit across from one another.

“I don’t know how you could if you haven’t met him. Steve has this ability to go into a room and say just the right thing to every single person. Practically everyone he meets loves him. It doesn’t matter who: grandparents, little kids, whatever.”

“I hate people like that.”

“You can say that, but if he came in here, he’d be your favorite customer all day. He heaps compliments on everyone and dresses everything up with a joke. People love him because

he makes them believe that they are more attractive, smart, interesting, and important than they really are.”

When Jenny had first met him, she thought that maybe this attraction to him was love at first sight. It was addictive, introducing him to her friends and then later being told she’d found a “keeper.” She’d never been with anyone before. But Jenny had seen him alone and grown comfortable, and though he wasn’t cruel, he was a closet introvert that wanted nothing more than to watch Hollywood Squares and Family Feud. In public, Steve only put on a show. She didn’t love him. She loved the way other people loved him and the way they loved her by proxy.

Jenny said, “And if he thought you didn’t like him, he’d probably tip you twice as much as the meal cost, then linger at the door just to see you pick up the pile of bills. That’s what he does. He can’t not be liked. He wants all the adoration in the world, and I don’t have much to give anymore.”

“Sheesh,” Sarah said, shrugging.

It was the sort of response intended to fill silence. Jenny was glad Sarah didn’t try to give her advice. She never said anything remotely critical about Steve out loud anymore. Everyone else made her feel like she was the problem. In a way, she agreed. The most innocuous comments and actions made her so angry she shivered. She looked for things in him to annoy her: how he put ketchup on fries, flossed after brushing his teeth, changed the channel during commercials.

She didn’t feel ready for any of this, least of all a baby. There was so much overwhelming her. How long could she pass off her pregnancy as weight gain? When would she need to start prenatal care? What was she even supposed to look for in a midwife? For that matter, did people still have midwives? When would she know whether she was a natural birth or

epidural type of person? Jenny couldn't picture it, so it didn't feel real. She'd never felt blindsided by anything before. Her life had followed a predictable trajectory: school to college to job to matrimony. She even correctly guessed the day that Steve would propose—during the fireworks on the Fourth of July. Even their sex was what she expected: mammalian, biological, messy, frictional, and a little painful. It wasn't unpleasant, but given the choice, she'd forgo the whole ordeal. She used to fake orgasms because Steve held out as long as he could until she writhed underneath him. But then she stopped to bruise his ego. After a while, he gave up so they could both be through with it quick.

Jenny gulped the coffee hard, the cup jittering. Without looking up from the mug, she said, "I'm pregnant." Jenny was surprised she blurted that, having not intended to say anything.

Sarah looked away and cracked her knuckles. "Are you going to keep it?"

"Of course." As often as she thought of getting an abortion each day, it never was a real option. "I'm a teacher in Garrett County. If anyone ever found out, there would be murmurs everywhere I went for the rest of my life. I'd never live it down." Although partially true, what Jenny didn't say was that she thought of herself as the type of person to go to clinics holding glossy signs of fetuses like piled livers. The only reason she'd never done it was because she didn't know where the nearest clinic was, maybe Hagerstown or even as far as Baltimore. But still she entertained the fantasy of convincing a godless sixteen year old to keep her baby—it seemed even more important than reciting the sinner's prayer. Now she wondered how many women like her might cross those picket lines, heads down and praying Psalms: *When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears, and rescues them from all their troubles.*

"That's the problem with this fucking area," Sarah said. "There is nothing to do besides talk about other people's shit."

Jenny tried not to wince at the mention of gossip, which Jenny gobbled up when it came to Sarah. Instead Jenny agreed, nodding her head up and down over and over. Jenny recognized her own hypocrisy.

Jenny knew so much about Sarah: how her only boyfriend, back in tenth grade was a short boy with a buzz cut; how Sarah took her cousin to prom; how Sarah drank too many beers at a family reunion and came out to everyone in one fell swoop just to win a fight with her mother; how Sarah was technically homeless—sleeping on an old friend’s couch to save up money to move to Baltimore or Pittsburgh or Philly or anywhere else away from here.

Without asking, Sarah poured Jenny another mug of coffee.

With only ten minutes left before closing, a man came inside. He had a bushy overgrown mustache and something between stubble and a beard otherwise. He wore dress shoes flecked with paint.

“Same as always, David?”

“Yeah—glass of ice and a glass of ice water.” He smiled, revealing a mouth of just a few scum-colored, chicklet-sized teeth.

He sat at the counter nearest to the door and tapped his foot impatiently.

Sarah placed the two glasses in front of David and came back over to Jenny. She said under her breath, “Do you know about David?”

“No.”

“You’ve got to watch this,” she said.

Jenny peeked in glances as David emptied container after container of creamer into the glass of ice. Next, he ripped into the packets of Domino sugar, stirring it into the creamer until a

visible sugar sludge settled on the bottom of the glass. Then he stirred in a couple of ketchup packets until it had the pink color of strawberry milk.

Under her breath, Sarah said, “I can’t watch.” But her eyes remained transfixed on him.

David kicked the mixture back, taking large gulps.

“It’s so disgusting,” Sarah said, holding her hand to her mouth.

It didn’t faze Jenny though. She’d seen her students consume more disgusting concoctions on dares while she was on lunch duty. She asked, “Does he come in often?”

“Almost every night. He must really love that.”

Jenny didn’t think so based on the way that the liquid bubbled out of David’s mouth as he struggled to choke it down. David could barely stomach the sludge of condiments. After he finally slurped down the last of it, he immediately switched to the glass of water, taking slower pulls, swishing thoroughly before swallowing.

Sarah was more naïve than Jenny imagined. It was clear to Jenny that David drank this out of necessity—getting every calorie he could, finding free ways to fatten up so that his body didn’t wither away. Even his decision to only show up right before closing seemed like a calculated decision to have less of an audience. Jenny didn’t know anything about David, but she imagined different lives for him: discovering this drink as a boy in the depression, a tent in Constitution Park, laid off from the mines, dead wife, no kids.

Soon Jenny would hunt for calories like David was. Her friends who had been pregnant warned her of unusual cravings: pickle brine, hot dogs with mayonnaise, sauerkraut straight from the jar. Having seen David drink that concoction, would some part of her feel compelled to make one herself? Moms younger than her seemed to always offer her pregnancy advice as if they were disappointed she didn’t already have a kid or two.

Steve brought up children all the time, asking when it'd be his turn to "put a bun in the oven." To Jenny, a child wasn't just a life. If it was only that, she'd cave happily to the expectations of seemingly everyone she knew. The problem was that a child was also a set of handcuffs shared between Steve and her. How long could she be shackled to him before she bit through her own arm like a feral animal for freedom?

When David finished the glass of water, he gave an exaggerated sigh. "Do you work tomorrow?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"See you then." He stood up, piled one glass inside the other, and walked off.

Jenny said, "Are you going to charge him?"

"No. The others run him off when he comes in, but it doesn't bother me that he drinks fifty cents worth of freebies."

Sarah looked antsy, glancing at the clock every half minute. Jenny agonized over how much to tip before deciding on 20%. She didn't want to stand out. Yet even after leaving the money on the table, she remained seated. The glimpses of Sarah's personality were immature. Jenny felt like an adult and Sarah was still a kid. Sarah had more in common with Jenny's students than herself. But she couldn't bring herself to go home.

Jenny wasn't ready to go home. She wanted to be known, really known, by someone that wouldn't judge her. Even God judged and spoke in absolutes. Jenny couldn't imagine anyone more understanding than Sarah. On the back of a receipt in her purse, she wrote *I'd like to talk to you. I'll be waiting at the practice baseball field by campus.* She left it underneath the money.

It was only ten at night, but the street lights had already been set to blink. It may as well have been the dead of night. Jenny could hardly breathe or think. She drifted through deserted

streets, rolled through blinking red lights, and checked her mirrors often as if she were being followed. Her saliva felt thick and hard to swallow. It wasn't too late to just go home. Steve probably was waiting impatiently for her to be gone 24 hours so he could file a missing person's report. When she came home, his relief would bubble over into anger and a drawn out fight that would only end when they both pretended to be fine just to get some sleep. If she wanted to skip the fight entirely, she could just tell him about the tadpole growing inside her. Steve would explode with joy to have a child—another person obligated to adore him.

And would heading straight home be so bad? She'd have the sort of rustic life that eighteen year olds went to war for. She didn't want to give any of it up, and meeting Sarah at all risked everything. Even with tenure, she knew that it was fragile to scandal. The board of ed. wouldn't fire her, but she knew she couldn't bear the paranoia over every whisper, the smart aleck responses under breath from mouthy students, and the teachers' lounge conversations put on pause when she'd enter the room. She'd seen teachers resign because they couldn't handle the silent scandal of a pregnancy out of marriage. What would happen if word spread that Jenny had secret, midnight meetings with lesbians?

But she didn't think she could go home and pretend tonight never happened. This thing growing inside her felt like a life sentence of always feeling a slow-burn of loneliness. Before she always assumed that she and Steve were just buying time before one of them cried uncle and got the hell out. Sometimes his snores woke her, and in the glow of the alarm clock, she had a hard time believing Steve was even human. He was a thing. But like all things, he was only around for as long as he served his purpose. Jenny never told anyone that sometimes the thought of Steve dying granted her relief. It wasn't a fantasy. Just an easy escape.

She pulled onto the gravel parking lot behind the practice field. The rocks crunched under tires. It felt too loud, like she'd wake the entire forest in a panic, sending whitetail deer, skunks, copperheads, and a billion invertebrates careening from the woods onto campus. Jenny inched her car to a back corner where she killed the engine and lights. She told herself was acting paranoid. Sarah probably wouldn't even come anyways. If she did, then Jenny would muster up the courage to ask her all the questions she had that didn't come back at the diner—how did she know? Was it worth losing everything? Would she do it again? Those were the easy questions.

After her eyes adjusted to the lack of headlights, it dawned on her just how bright it was outside. The moon shone so bright that it hurt to look at it. For a second she wondered if maybe tonight the moon were brighter than the sun. The cold glow spotlighted everything in blue hues and shades of gray: the gravel, the woods, the grass, the pitch. Jenny got out of the car and sat on the trunk. Occasionally a car drove up the winding road, and, anticipating it might be Sarah, Jenny couldn't breathe until the car sped past the gravel parking lot.

Eventually, what Jenny first thought was a motorcycle but turned out to be a paddiddle turned onto the gravel path. What if it wasn't Sarah? Or perhaps worse, what if it *was* Sarah? She had the urge to run into the woods or duck beneath her car. Before she could make a decision, she was in the beam of the lone headlight. Jenny covered her eyes. The car pulled up beside her and fell silent.

Sarah exited the car and leaned against the trunk of her car. "So," Sarah said.

Jenny kept her eyes on the gravel. In a way, the blue rocks looked like the terrain of another planet. A blue Mars maybe. "I don't know why I asked you to come here," she lied. It was the sort of lie that gave her room to plead ignorance, maybe even back out if being alone with Sarah was too much to handle.

“I’ve got a guess.”

Jenny looked away. She always thought that when someone finally found out that the weight of her doubts would lift as if they now both shared the load. Instead it felt heavier. Something she guarded for so long was now entrusted to practically a stranger. Everything she built for herself could topple based on Sarah’s discretion.

“Come on,” Sarah said. She motioned for Jenny to follow her. She hopped the fence to the outfield with a clumsy sort of grace. Jenny followed.

They walked the perimeter of the outfield. Never before had Jenny been so aware of her proximity. Using her peripheral vision to keep a precise distance from Sarah regardless of Sarah’s movement, never drifting away or towards her, Jenny remained always at arm’s length. Jenny could smell the diner still on Sarah.

Following the foul line to the infield’s packed clay, Jenny cleared her throat over and over, searching for the right words, before giving up and just said, “When did you know that you were a lesbian?”

“That’s the million dollar question, isn’t it?” Sarah kicked at the clay in a puff of dust. “Honestly, I got tired of answering that question a long time ago. If you want my answer then you’re going to have to have to accept that I might make stuff up. Are you okay with that?”

“How much will be fake?”

“Somewhere between all and none.”

All her life Jenny felt as if people were playing games with her. But she had no bargaining chip. Nothing. The only thing she could do was decide how much was true. Jenny decided that afterwards she wouldn’t ask, no matter how outlandish Sarah’s story. It was the only agency she had. She’d find the lowercase truth in the words. “Okay.”

“Give me a second,” Sarah led Jenny to the away team’s dugout and motioned for her to sit down. She paced up and down across the concrete looking at the wooden crossbeams above them. Sarah was a silhouette against the moon. “Okay. I’m ready. So, I sort of suspected most of my life, but it was mostly the sort of thing that only makes sense in retrospect. Like I should have known just based solely on how shitty I was to my high school boyfriend—faking headaches on dates, canceling at the last minute. I never called him back, ever.”

It felt so familiar to Jenny. Part of her pitied Steve. At times, Jenny treated him like an adversary.

“But I didn’t know for sure until I went to church camp,” Sarah said. “Did you ever go to Camp Fellowship?”

“Yeah,” Jenny said. She remembered the cabins filled with bunk beds that squeaked with rust. When she went, it rained five days that week, so she mostly remembered being wet and cold.

“It was so hokey—all of those virgin boys playing Petra songs on acoustic guitars so they could feel up virgin girls in the woods. Over the clothes because of Jesus, of course. Like the pent-up sexual energy on that mountain is a million times more powerful than anywhere I’ve even been before or after. One of my bunkmates was this girl named Holly. We were fast friends because we both made fun of everything. We’d shoot glances when the Pentecostal kid spoke in tongues during the worship service. I had a huge crush on her, but I wouldn’t have put it in those words at the time. I still didn’t really see how I could be attracted to women. It just didn’t feel like an option given how I was raised. Like I remember telling a joke on the first day of camp about how I’d discovered the cure to AIDS—shoot all the queers.”

Jenny had heard the joke before. She'd heard it everywhere. She'd heard the punchline at one table or another during homeroom every year since she started teaching, and she always pretended she didn't hear anything.

“Holly and I made stuff up all the time, mostly to get out of things, like not being able to play capture the flag due to asthma or scoliosis. There was this one counselor—the kind of guy who still wanted to come after he turned 18, so he volunteered to be the lake's lifeguard for the summer. I think his name was Jake. He was this gangly pastor's kid that loved his modicum of authority even though all he could really do was tattle to the actual staff. At one point he singled Holly and me out as we sat out on a camp wide scavenger hunt, and he asked us why we refused to participate in anything. Holly said that it was because it was against our religion. ‘Which is?’ he asked, and Holly said, ‘Wicca.’”

Sarah stopped pacing and sat across from Jenny on the metal pipe that marked the end of the dugout and the beginning of the field. Jenny couldn't make out Sarah's features, but she imagined that her eyes were wide and unblinking.

Sarah said, “Of course Jake didn't believe her, so I joined in arguing that we were. Holly kept adding details about how we were sent by a coven of witches to corrupt all of the Christian girls to join a lesbian cult. He rolled his eyes but kept asking for more details, asking about our coven and about our converts. We kept adding to the lie, making up blood orgies with Christian virgins.”

Jenny couldn't stop from questioning whether this were the truth. She remembered how at church camp people pretended to be sinless. But the façade could only be sustained for so long, and eventually it ended in the entire bunk sharing blowjob techniques, regardless of whether anyone had given one.

“Finally Jake asked if there was any room for male converts. I couldn’t tell if he was playing along or if he was playing chicken—you know, seeing how far we’d take it until we cracked. Holly and I looked at each other, and then I said only if they sell their soul to the devil. Without batting an eye he said he was up for it if afterwards we’d prove that we were really gay. We were too deep into the lie to turn back now, so we agreed. He told us to follow him. He led us to the horse’s stable.”

Jenny had almost forgotten about the stable. She’d only been in it once. The counselors didn’t even let anyone ride the week she went because of the rain. Jenny imagined Sarah, Holly, and Jake in the stable with the door closed, sunlight filtering through the cracks in the boards, the horses in the pens, and hay particles floating around them.

“He told us to kiss, but I said first he had to sell his soul. I made him recite some made up pact—sort of something like *Oh dark lord Lucifer. I offer my eternal soul for your bidding. I will be the unholy knight, protecting homosexuals and witches everywhere.* It was a lot longer and more elaborate, but you can imagine. I don’t know where I came up with that shit, but I swear that as the counselor said those words that it got colder in that barn and when we finished with him saying *I’m yours, Lucifer,* that thunder exploded off in the distance. I remember wondering if the thunder was God or Satan’s response before deciding it didn’t matter.”

Jenny shivered. She felt as if she was being watched by the devil and God this very second, battling celestially.

“Then Jake told us again to kiss. Up until that point, Holly always loved escalating the lies until people gave up. But it was clear that she wasn’t having fun anymore. I told her it was just a kiss, and it sort of calmed her. I approached her and we pecked, our lips just grazing. Jake groaned and said, ‘Come on. I just sold my soul. A real kiss.’ We stared at each other for a long

time, and then I thought *fuck it*. I practically pounced on Holly. Our tongues slid in and out of each other's mouth, and our teeth clacked together. I couldn't stop my hands from probing her body. But Holly's arms were locked at her side, her hands balled into fists. When she tried to pull away, I hesitated to let her go for a moment.

Afterwards, we stared at each other, neither smiling. And then Holly looked over at Jake and screamed. The counselor had pulled his mostly flaccid cock out and was trying to stroke it hard. Holly and I ran out and kept running until we were surrounded with scavenger hunters. After that, none of the three of us talked. We couldn't even look at one another. So that was when I knew for sure. Between making out with Holly and seeing the Counselor stroking himself off, I knew for sure what I was."

Jenny tried to parse out fact and fiction. She'd thought she'd just accept it at face value and not wonder. But she couldn't resist. She didn't care if she was playing Sarah's game. She asked, "How much of it is true?"

"How much do you think?"

"I think you had a crush on a girl at camp."

"That's all?"

"I barely know you, but we sat through all of the same sermons growing up. You wouldn't joke around with witchcraft."

"It wasn't real."

"You don't know that. I doubt that the devil cares. I just don't think you're capable of making some kid sell his soul."

"You don't know what I'm capable of," Sarah said.

Sarah was right. Jenny didn't know her. The more time that Jenny spent with her, the more obvious that was. In her mind, she had created a version of Sarah that was worth giving up her life for.

Jenny swung underneath the pipe that Sarah sat on. Sarah swiveled around to face her. From Jenny's position, she had a pale glimpse down Sarah's button-down of her cleavage. Just a glimpse but it made the air feel heavy. It was all so biologically responsive. All her life she'd fought against that biological pull. She looked away. Jenny wished she felt nothing. Even pretending to be Wiccan in a story that was probably a lie was too much for Jenny. Sarah was the type of person that Jenny would have hated, so why did she want to undress her on the pitcher's mound in the moonlight?

Jenny thought she'd find someone who understood her, someone who would help her know what to do. But Jenny felt more confused than before.

"When did you know?" Sarah asked. "You can make something up if you want."

Jenny didn't say anything.

"Come on," Sarah said.

Jenny wondered if someday she would be like Sarah. Some part of her believed that risking everything she'd build for her life, in all its blandness, would feel clear cut. Neither option was desirable—her life with or without Steve. If Sarah was all there was in two counties, it wasn't worth it. To hell with desire.

"I know what you think, but I'm not a lesbian."

Sarah laughed. "Yeah. Sure, you aren't."

"I'm serious. I'm not." Jenny started to cut through the infield to get to her car.

"Jenny," Sarah said.

“I am not a dyke,” Jenny said, hitting each word hard like driving a nail. It came out even more spiteful than she intended.

After waiting for a moment, Sarah jogged to catch up with her. There wasn't a trace of the playful smile from early or even any anger. Her face looked devoid of emotion, like a death mask. Sarah said, “Then why are we here?” She motioned around them.

Jenny stopped. Looking at the ground, she said the first lie she could come up with, “Because your mother sent me to talk to you.”

Sarah licked her lips and shook her head. “You're lying.”

“She's worried about you.” Jenny had never felt like a convincing liar, but she looked Sarah in the eyes and said, “All of us at the church want you to come back.”

“So all of this was, what, some sort of ruse.”

Jenny nodded.

“If that's true, and I know it isn't, can you deliver a message to my mom for me—‘Fuck you.’ And whether it is true or not, fuck you, Jenny. Really, truly, fuck you.” Sarah started to walk off, but then turned around and said, “I hope to fucking God that you spend your whole life looking for someone who could understand you, and when you finally find that person, that it is taken from you.”

Jenny let Sarah walk away. She waited near the pitcher's mound until Sarah had driven off. She knew what happened next: she would live moment by moment, surviving on the bare minimum required for life like David did. She'd live hollow. She felt unprepared for motherhood, but maybe parental love would sustain her like nothing before had.

She still didn't feel fit to be a mother, but she thought about all the dysfunctional parents throughout time and thought it couldn't be that difficult. Things, Jenny thought, would work out because countless others had made due with less.

BLOOD MOON

I fought the urge to sit down as I made last call to the nearly empty bar. It was my first day wearing prosthetic legs without crutches. My physical therapist wanted me to at least use a cane, but if I was ever going to stop drawing sympathetic stares from strangers, I'd have to get over it. Sink or swim. All night I struggled to maintain balance while the nubs just below my knees rubbed raw. It took all I had to not take my meds early. The jukebox had broken years ago. No one bothered to fix it, so it was always quiet. I took the job for the silence.

In the bar there were only two people. This was normal. It was the sort of place that always smelled like wet lumber. I'd been taking my mind off the pain by talking to Mallory, a girl I went to high school with who was a couple years older than me. We never spoke back then, but since I'd gotten back from Afghanistan and started working here, she came in every night. A tall white guy I'd never seen before with a bunch of graying tattoos had been playing darts by himself for the past hour, having long since finished his PBR that he bought in change when he first came in. His skin looked slick with sweat and every couple of minutes he checked the time on his phone with shivering hands. I knew the symptoms because I'd had them: opiate withdrawal. He was too poor for Oxy, so probably heroin or Suboxone. If I were optimistic—and I'm not, there's a chance that he is on methadone maintenance and missed his daily dose.

Responding to my last call, Mallory said with a smirk, "If you're kicking me out, I'll take something that makes you work. Nothing straight. Like a mint julep or something."

I shrugged. I only knew how to make mint juleps because Mallory ordered the drink often, always as if the thought had just come to her.

The guy kept at his game.

As I muddled the sugar and mint, Mallory seemed on the verge of saying something but didn't. She drew spirals with her finger on the bar with the moisture from her other glass. Finally she said, "There's a blood moon tonight."

I had the sense that this wasn't what she wanted to talk about.

I'd never heard of a blood moon before. I said, "Is that like a blue moon?"

"I'm not really sure. Just something I read online, but they're supposed to be rare."

It was raining or else we might have peered outside.

The dull pain still there, I clenched my jaw and ground my molars. No matter how hard I tried not to think about them, my mind drifted to the prescriptions of different capsules and pills: each with a different color, shape, and stamped lettering. They jiggled in their orange plastic bottles. Trying to ignore them felt like pretending to not have an itch. The pain was bearable, and the meds relatively benign compared to what I used in the past. The worst part about the pain was that it reminded me of the pills. I'd been straight for the better part of three months. Sometimes I'd even take half a prescription of morphine to prove to myself that, at least in the abstract, I was still clean. No matter how much or little I took, I thought about the pills. I thought about them all the time. All day I fantasized swallowing fistfuls.

"Why don't you make yourself something on me?" Mallory said.

"I'm fine, but thanks."

She could hold her liquor. The first few days I worked, I didn't even think she could get drunk. Eventually, I realized that one of her few tells was that she offered to buy me more and more drinks. This was the third time tonight.

"Oh right," she said, hitting her forehead. "I forgot."

"It's fine," I said.

My sponsor in Narcotics Anonymous hated that I worked in a bar, but I never really was much of a drinker. Giving that up was as easy as switching from whole to skim milk. I just needed a job some place quiet.

“It’s depressing being the only one drinking,” Mallory said. “If I think about it too long, I’ll shoot myself.”

I winced and then forced a laugh. I tried to hide my wince by turning my back to her while pouring bourbon, but my movements were awkward and jarring. Would I ever adjust to these god damn prosthetics?

I liked the thought of blending in, walking the long aisles at the market like I was anyone. My hobbling probably drew more attention than any pair of crutches. Somehow I used to want to stand out. Not anymore. With my back still to Mallory I said, “You could always buy that guy a drink.”

She snorted. “Thanks, no thanks. I draw the line at junkies.”

I didn’t think she knew that I was an addict. Would she linger until closing if she had seen plum colored bruises in the crook of my arm, felt my fevered, slimy skin during a detox? I turned to look at the guy playing darts alone. His hands shook so bad as he lined up his throw that the dart looked like it might escape his grip. When he finally threw it, he missed the board entirely, another hole in the wood paneling. I’d been there more than a few times. Leave in Afghanistan to me meant a bender. For twenty bucks, I could get what would have been hundreds in the states. It was no hassle, no staking out back alleys or phone calls to strangers who ask, “You a cop?” I’d just walk into the bazaar and buy a few grams and a Pepsi. When I’d return to the barracks for duty, I’d spend the first few days throwing up detoxing in the barracks.

I said I had food poisoning, and even though everyone knew it was bullshit, they all played along. Everyone, even the lieutenant, had called me “Shivers” because of my shaking.

“I’m sure he’s a normal guy,” I said. I wanted him to be normal at least, the sort of guy who quoted from comedies and didn’t eat the strawberry in Neapolitan ice cream. Maybe he hadn’t lost himself in only living for the next fix, whether it was three hours or three months now. For a second, it felt like if I could imagine a vivid enough life without addiction for this guy that I could share some of that fake life.

Mallory said, “Have you ever met a smack head? Those fuckers are crazy.”

I put the drink down in front of her. My hand lingered as I steadied myself. She reached for the drink, and our hands touched. Her hand felt more soft than I expected. I pulled back erratically. It dawned on me that I couldn’t remember the last time anyone touched me besides doctors, nurses, and physical therapists. Mallory looked away. She was pretty with hair that looked as delicate as spider webs. If the lights were less dim, I think I would have seen her blush. Before the accident, just touching her hand would have been enough to make me fall in love with her. I used to fall in and out of love so fast. But I didn’t want her because I couldn’t make myself believe that anyone could ever want me.

As Mallory drank and I wiped down the bar, the other guy sat down and began texting frantically. Even after she finished the julep, Mallory lingered around making small talk as I prepared to close. When I was nearly finished, she leaned across the bar and said, “I bet when you tell that guy to leave that he jams one of those darts into your neck.”

She always said things just to get a reaction. Judging by her laugh, I must have made whatever face she wanted to see me make.

“Where do you come up with shit like that?”

She shrugged.

I checked my watch, and it was already a quarter past closing. In a way, I hoped that whoever dart guy was waiting for would show up. I knew how unpredictable someone needing a fix could be. Yet even with his height, his junkie frailty made me feel like no matter how desperate he was that he would skitter off. “Give me a sec, and I guess we’ll see if you need to give me a ride to the hospital.”

She laughed at my joke.

I steadied myself and walked towards him. My residual limbs felt rug-burned. I wouldn’t be surprised to find blood droplets dotting the gauze. Each step felt like a balancing act as I navigated my way across the bar by holding onto stools and tables. I hoped Mallory wasn’t watching me grip the pool table as I made my way towards the guy. I had enough practice that being afraid of tripping was irrational, but I took short, deliberate steps like someone walking on their hands—stilted and without the fluidity that people take for granted.

With one hand on the back of a stool, I said to him, “I’m trying to close up.”

His eyes were puffy, almost as if he hadn’t slept in days. He put his hands in his pocket and felt around for something, but apparently it wasn’t there. He said, “I’m supposed to meet someone.”

“You’ll have to meet him outside.”

The rain had picked up. In the distance, thunder.

He bit at his chapped lips, biting off an old scab and chewing it while a thin trail of blood filled the notch. “Look. Just give me a minute or two.”

I lowered my voice so that Mallory couldn’t hear and said, “I know what you’re going through. But I’m closing.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said, slamming a fistful of darts on the table.

Far from being intimidating, he looked pathetic. He reminded me of myself. The bruises were gone, I’d gained back my weight, but in my mind I still looked that frail. We were crushed by the same need, sometimes buried but always present.

“Your friend isn’t coming.”

“The fuck do you know?” he said, flapping his lips with such force that a little spit sprayed my face. He looked cornered.

I wiped it away. Slowly, enunciating each word with deliberation, I said while staring directly into his drooped, pinkened eyes, “I know that your friend isn’t coming. I know that you barely have enough money to buy enough to even sleep tonight. And I know that no matter what you do, you’re going to be a junkie for the rest of your life.”

Time seemed to slow down as he came at me. I’d been in a lot of fights with guys a lot more powerful than him. By his movements, I calculated how to avoid him, how to have him on the ground with a few deft movements that I committed to muscle memory, but despite not feeling afraid, I stood there doing nothing. I wanted the pain, hoping it’d make things feel normal. He pushed me hard, sending me toppling to the ground. One of my prosthetics dislodged and slid off. I waited for him to climb on top of me and throw punches, but he only stood there wide-eyed staring at the skinny metal pipe attached to a shoe.

“I didn’t know,” he said. “I’m sorry, just....” He never finished the sentence. Instead he ran with his eyes on the ground out into the storm.

Mallory rushed over and said, “Holy shit. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said. I slid the prosthetic on. She tried to help me up, but I waved her away.

“I feel so bad.”

“Don’t.” I didn’t think I could take any more pity.

“I told you to kick him out.”

“I had to anyway. Don’t worry about it.”

“But—”

“Nothing. Leave it. I don’t need you.” No matter how comfortable I grew with myself, I’d always be a wounded animal that strangers wanted to give a mercy killing. If I looked hard enough into their eyes, I could see them thinking about how they’d put a gun in their mouth if they were me.

We headed back to the bar. She stayed close to me, always within arm’s length, as if I were fragile, and she might have to step in to protect me.

When I got back behind the bar, she took a step back. She regained her composure almost immediately. I could imagine her telling herself, *He doesn’t mean it. Give him space, but he needs your help. He needs you.* She pulled out her wallet and put some bills next to the glass.

I considered apologizing, but I wasn’t sorry. Since the accident, I’d grown used to being alone. I didn’t need anybody. I used a rag to wipe down the already clean counter. She watched for a while, seemingly always on the cusp of saying something, before finally saying,

“Remember the moon tonight.”

I looked up at her. She smiled at me. I wondered if she would have treated me like this before the accident. I don’t think so. “Thanks.”

She left. When the door shut, I locked it and went to the bathroom. One by one I pulled out the medications and put them on the sink: Sertraline, Neurontin, Zofran, Meloxicam, Amitriptyline, Morphine Immediate Release, and Morphine Extended Release. With all but the

Extended, I washed them down with tap water from the sink. I held up the bottle of Morphine Extended. It shook in my hands, making the little blue pills rattle around like jumping beans. The pain I always felt was already easing. In that moment, I saw my own trajectory. I could see the relapse and the needles and the methadone clinics and the confession at NA and turning in my 90 day chip and starting all over again, and I didn't care. All of it was better than the alternative. I crushed up a double dose with my pocket knife and snorted it. I sat back on the toilet. A tingling started in my fingertips and drifted elegantly to my lips and then spread all over as I closed my eyes until I felt nothing except my always aching legs.

I left everything as it was, even Mallory's glass and money, for tomorrow and went home. Nothing felt important anymore. Outside, I looked up through the rain and saw the moon burning a bright crimson, not the color of blood, but the color of flames after a rocket explodes against a Humvee, toppling it onto its side. I leaned against a wall and once again felt my feet severed by shrapnel and armor plating and rock and dirt. I told myself it wasn't real, it was only phantom pain, but the phantoms kept haunting.

THE WATERS

Well past midnight, wide-awake, Noah paradiddled on a throw pillow resting on his lap, speeding up until the dull thuds sounded like a drum roll, building ferocity until he lost the syncopation and hit hard enough for the drumsticks tips to sting his thighs. He threw one stick on the floor, clipping a toe. It'd bruise.

Even though Eliot had been dead for six weeks, Noah still called his phone. At the beep Noah said, "Hey man. I don't know why I'm still doing this. I thought by now it'd be easier. I still can't decide how you'd react to me having this much time sober. Terrell says you'd be proud of me, but he never met you. You'd probably call me a life-coward." Noah gulped hard. "Jesus Christ, I've got to stop calling you. I don't know. Goodbye."

When he hung up, Noah didn't feel any better.

Noah called Terrell, his sponsor.

Terrell answered slow and groggy. Over the line Noah could almost hear Terrell's internal battle between genuine concern and wanting to tell Noah to fuck off.

"I'm sorry for calling," Noah said, "but I'm having a fucking horrendous time over here."

"Stinking thinking?"

Noah winced. Stinking thinking: it felt like a Kindergarten rhyme to encourage sharing, not the Narcotics Anonymous term for racing thoughts telling Noah to spend rent money on drugs or mug a delivery boy or hang himself with a bright orange extension cord. He felt stupid and childish acknowledging the cliché. Instead of stinking thinking, Noah thought of it like treading forever in an endless ocean until his skin became porous and slid off like snakeskin (no landmass, no life boat, no driftwood on the horizon), wave after wave trying to force him under

water; the water in all aspects was dope telling him to envelop himself in pure love—drowning in it, no escape, another wave hits, and another.

Noah had a little over five weeks sober, and it'd been that long since he felt anything close to happiness, satisfaction, or contentment. Every thought was heroin, and heroin was every thought. Most of the recovering addicts he knew wished they could time travel to some idealized future—the wife, the house, the job—but Noah would go to the past to be back in his old hardcore punk band's van touring New England, Eliot and him napping on the van's bench seats, waking up still high to snort more dope and nod back off. Back then, time was arbitrary and everything felt better.

“Yeah, stinking thinking mostly,” Noah said. “I called Eliot too.”

Terrell sighed. “What the fuck is with you, man?”

Was that a rhetorical question? Just in case, Noah didn't answer.

“What did I tell you? If this is going to work, then we're doing things my way. And the first thing you're going to do is stop calling Eliot and leaving god damn messages.”

At twenty-six, Terrell was two years younger than Noah, but he had three years sober and sponsored more addicts that made it through all twelve steps than anyone else. He was militant and didn't fuck around. Other sponsors were more forgiving, but Terrell dropped people for not attending any fewer than six meetings a week. Noah had chosen Terrell because Noah knew if he had any leeway he would relapse and never look back.

Noah said, “I know. I just wanted to be up front with you.” Honesty edged out obedience for Terrell. “But right now, I just want to do something terrible. Get overdose-high, you know? I deactivated my Facebook because I couldn't stop thinking about hitting some people up for fistfuls of Percocet. It's just,” he swallowed, “been a bad night.”

Terrell's voice softened: "You try cleaning?"

"Yeah. It isn't working like it used to."

"Drumming?"

"Yeah." He paced around his place, a former punk house that at one point housed five people in two bedrooms and was a prominent tour stop for DIY punk and hardcore bands passing through Western Maryland on their way to Pittsburgh or Baltimore or Philadelphia or Richmond or Morgantown. With money borrowed from his dad, Noah had bought the house while still in college rather than get evicted. He'd thought he'd always have friends and roommates to pay the mortgage. Eventually everyone else left until it was just him and Eliot. Foreclosure always loomed. Now, Noah didn't have anyone. This place used to look like a shit hole, but now on sleepless nights he cleaned with OCD meticulousness. Last week, underneath the pullout couch, he found dried blood, like a lot of it. The floor was stained in the shape of a puddle and was the color of rust. These days the floor shone.

"You need to find something else to do when you get like this, man."

"But what do I do tonight?" Noah examined a spider-web behind the refrigerator that he somehow missed. A fly, long since sucked dry, was cocooned in webbing. With a paper towel, Noah swiped away the web and carcass.

"Well..."

Noah knew what Terrell was going to say.

Together they said, "Do the next right thing."

"You're learning," Terrell said. "Fuck 'one day at a time.' Just do what's next. Read a *Just for Today* meditation. Make a sandwich. Do some push-ups. Watch some fucking *Flinstones*. Just do the next right thing."

Noah nodded his head but didn't say anything.

"So are you good? Can I get back to sleep?"

"Yeah," he lied.

"Good."

The phone went silent. The room was dark. Noah was alone.

#

Later, as he tried to sleep, Noah thought about how Hollywood didn't understand addiction: shooting dope didn't make him into some amoral husk. Family, friendship, and even jobs still meant everything to him, but dope just felt so good that they were worth risking. Stealing his grandmother's purse on Easter Sunday and then helping her look for it had devastated him, but shooting up felt so euphoric that it didn't matter. The joy of a heroin high, he thought, deserved its own adjective.

#

Before the meeting the addicts in varying degrees of recovery smoked outside or munched knockoff Oreos inside. The Methodist church's long fluorescent tubes of sterile, clinical lighting made the circled-up chairs at Friday afternoon NA look like group therapy in psych ward. There weren't shadowed corners. Light spilled over everything: the snack table of cookies and coffee, the metal folding chairs, the plaster statue of Mary, the wall-mounted crucifix, the bookcases of hymnals in the corners, the old-timers with more years clean than not, the knee-deep diseased quiet and fresh off a relapse, and the people like Noah—pale, gaunt bodies barely detoxed hoping that a few good weeks could purify hundreds of bad.

Noah, still a relative newcomer, slogged his way through constant hugs from the others to get a Styrofoam cup of Folger's. He poured packet after packet of sugar into the coffee until it

seemed almost viscous. No one had a stronger sweet tooth than an opioid addict. Before giving in and going to NA, Noah had tried to find some sort of recovery alternative, but there weren't any twelve-steps alternatives in an aging coal town like Cumberland.

Terrell took stilted steps towards Noah and the snack table—baggy jeans hid Terrell's prosthetic legs. Everyone at NA knew about how Terrell's legs were blown off in Afghanistan because, for him, addiction and that moment were inexorably intertwined. After greetings, keeping it light, Terrell asked, "Any gigs coming up?"

After Noah and Eliot's band broke up, Noah did what everyone with a PA and hard drives full of lossless WAV's did—started to DJ. At first, he just did house parties and hole-in-the-wall bar gigs, but those didn't really pay. Noah said, "I've got some weddings coming up. It's kind of picking up. Next Friday I somehow got hired for my first school dance. I'm ready to get that school dance money."

Terrell snorted.

"I'm serious. Wedding's pay, but they come in waves. Once you make it onto the school dance circuit then every Friday you have a gig."

"Well, don't fuck it up, man," Terrell said, smirking.

Any idiot could haul gear, hit play, and collect money. He couldn't even fuck it up if he wanted to, Noah thought.

As seats filled, Terrell said in a hushed voice, "I'm the leader tonight."

"Yeah?"

"I just wanted to see if you'd do me a favor and share this time."

Noah shook his head. "I don't know man. I'm still new to all of this."

“I know. But you need to start telling your story. Say what you’ve been struggling with. Even say the shit you said the other night. Just, think about it?”

Noah nodded, and they went over and sat down. Noah situated himself between a scrawny guy his own age who had a botched portrait tattoo on his forearm and an older woman who’d recently dyed her hair black and had patches of blue still staining her ears and neck. Although Noah had talked to and hugged both earlier, he didn’t know their names.

Everyone bowed their heads for the serenity prayer. Noah hated all the God shit, which was why he was stuck on step one. Noah prided himself on his *godless* tattoo that arched across his stomach. If some of the old-timers, maybe even Terrell, knew about that tattoo, or even the Void tattoos on his calves, Noah knew he’d never hear the end of it. The twelve steps, saturated with religion, defied logic. They shouldn’t work, and they barely did, but they worked better than anything else. Even after Terrell told him that it didn’t have to be God, that the “higher power” was up to interpretation, Noah still wanted to call bullshit. But Noah played along and figured that after he had some serious sober time under his belt, he could go back to giving God double middle-fingers. Noah bowed his head and mumbled with everyone else, “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things—”

The door slammed with a boom. Everyone else powered through the prayer, but Noah opened his eyes. A girl Noah didn’t recognize stood at the door. She must have been high. Otherwise, she would have quietly eased the door closed. Noah envied her in the way that he envied everyone who still used. She took loud clopping steps that echoed through the room and plopped into a seat.

“Will a friend read the twelve traditions?” Terrell asked.

One by one, others read the twelve traditions and a selection from the *Big Book*. Noah stared at the late girl. She had skeletal-thin features, predictable junkie blemishes, and a prominent mole, a little too big to be considered a beauty mark, on her cheekbone. She stared attentively at whoever read with unblinking, psychopathic focus.

“Does anyone have a burning desire to share?” Terrell asked.

The diseased shared, but Noah couldn't listen. Instead he thought about how all their words and problems would someday not matter. Regardless of sober years, they'd be dust someday. The graying man who mourned his eight years in lock-up as his wife remarried and moved west with his daughter would have his organs eaten away by bacteria and rot. Ever since Eliot, Noah thought a lot about death, particularly his own. Noah hoped he didn't die in an accident because it'd be a waste of a perfectly good suicide. After the man finished speaking, everyone said, “Thanks for sharing.”

Terrell's gaze pierced him, and Noah felt the urge to speak up, if just out of obligation, but fought it with the familiar pull to slink away. He couldn't even imagine what the right words would be. How could he tell a room full of acquaintances he'd watched his best friend die and didn't do anything?

The late girl half-raised her hand. She waited until everyone looked at her, and without saying a word, she then waved both of her hands. Noah wondered just how high she was as she continued moving her hands about. And then, as her hands gestured at break neck speeds, Noah saw deft purpose in her movements. It was sign language. She wasn't high; she was deaf.

#

With almost six weeks clean Noah felt like he had some serious sober time clocked in. He must've been sixteen when he last had a sober spree this long, not even touching anything

harmless like a drink or a bowl or a line. So when would he feel healed? He'd settle for the swells of water to dissolve into background noise, but instead, suited and DJing a wedding, right in the middle of the "Cha-Cha Slide," he could barely tread. He played more songs, announced the bouquet and garter, and pretended that he wasn't a junkie and cared about the bride. Just stay above water. Let the waves crash.

When he got like this he wanted to talk to Eliot. So much of his time spent with Eliot had been stoned. It was almost Pavlovian: Eliot made him salivate for drugs. Or it might have been the other way around: even just thinking about using sent grief pangs that crippled him.

Noah had promised Terrell he'd stop calling Eliot, but he'd never mentioned texting. He'd found the loophole. Underneath the table holding his sound mixer, he texted Eliot: *Even if you forgave me, I don't think I could forgive myself.* The words surprised him.

For some reason he actually felt as if he were waiting for a response as he finished up the wedding, as he packed up his gear, as he drove home, as he sat in his apartment. All the while, waves built.

Noah wanted nothing more than to hit up someone online, to buy a couple of balloons. Sometimes Noah toed the line. Nothing wrong with sitting down at his computer chair. Terrell wouldn't have a problem if he booted up his laptop. Bing. Just fire up a browser—fine. No harm if he reactivated Facebook. Searched up Mikey: a dealer but also a friend. He could even message him without crossing a line; it all depended on what he typed.

His phone buzzed. Terrell had texted him, *Coffee Friday. Noon.*

Noah almost retched. It felt like he'd been caught buying from an undercover cop. No matter how shitty Noah felt, he surprised himself with new depths. He closed the browser.

Of course, coffee in NA wasn't coffee; it was coffee and a pep talk, and he had a hunch about the topic. Why couldn't Noah convince himself to speak up in meetings? Even the deaf girl technically shared. He wished he could do the same, speak in sign language, letting his sentences fall into a void that no one at NA understood. But then she'd understand him.

He wondered what she'd said. Curiosity ate at him, and he imagined it was more precious than the hum-drum addict stories that all the others said. Those hand movements hid something, and the more he thought about, the more important it felt to decode her mysteries. Noah found himself watching "introduction to sign language" videos on YouTube, repeating the movements. In the video a plain woman wearing a plain baby pink long sleeve tee in front of a white wall, smiled into the camera. Words appeared on the bottom of the screen, and the woman signed back the word, never breaking eye contact with the camera or wavering in that faux-fun smile. A right hand moved from lips into the waiting left hand palm meant *good*. A right hand from the lips to the air palm down meant *bad*. It seemed easy. *Hello. Goodbye.*

But after learning video after video of words, Noah tried to repeat what he remembered: almost nothing sank in. For some reason, he had thought it'd be easier than his failed attempt at French in college. Yet, his mind felt full, and for a little while, he realized, the disease felt secondary.

At some point, learning sign language took precedent. The rote hand movements made it like the drumming, but the unfamiliarity required more focus. For almost an hour, he kept telling himself he'd just learn one more word.

He gave up learning new words and decided he wouldn't do anything else until he knew the alphabet and twenty-four other words that stuck. Fifty words a day and he'd be fluent in no-time.

Two hours later, away from the computer, he spelled out the alphabet twice forwards, once backwards, and then at random to make sure he knew the letters and not just a sequence:

WALL, REFRIGERATOR, COMPUTER, HEROIN.

#

Over the next few days, when he felt as if he were drowning, he'd watch videos and try to learn fifty words. Most of the time he'd forget half by the next morning, but sometimes words stuck. He'd remember *thank you* but forget *please* and have to look it up again. He imagined what the girl would say when he introduced himself in perfect sign. He wasn't sure if she'd be embarrassed or grateful, but he knew that she would feel less isolated. It wasn't an attraction but a kinship for Noah. In the circle, his words were absent and hers were meaningless.

He had a recurring nightmare every night that week: a medically sterile white room with a cloud-soft recliner and a table loaded with everything he needed—boiled water, cooker, a dry filter, alcohol swab, Zippo, bungee cord, fresh syringe, and a bag of pure white. He'd stir the water with the powder in the cooker, boil, stir again, drop in the filter, poke the filter with the syringe, pull out the liquid, push out the bubbles, swab the inner arm, tie-off, pump fist, inject the needle at a flat (almost parallel) angle, a beautiful trickle of blood swirling in the syringe, push the plunger, and then... awaken. Even in his dreams he couldn't get high; that was the nightmare.

#

On Friday, forgetting coffee with Terrell, Noah hit the snooze three times before turning it off and drifting back to sleep. At a quarter till noon, he woke up wide-eyed and sunken stomached. He'd never make it in time. He dressed on the run, hopping his pants on and fiddling to hook his belt with shaky hands. The drive blurred by.

Noah stumbled into the half-diner, half-antique store on the corner and prayed that Terrell hadn't check the time. It was a Cumberland remnant of a 1900's pharmacy, the old-school kind with fried foods and malts. After the pharmacy closed, the diner still somehow survived and leased out the store front over the years. For as long as Noah could remember they sold antiques that looked more like garbage.

In a booth in the center of the diner, Terrell stirred a mug of coffee. Manhandled sugar packets were piled into a pyramid in the center of the table. As Noah sat down, Terrell shook his head.

"Look, I'm sorry," Noah said. He thought about stretched truths and outright lies, but instead said, "I don't have an excuse."

Terrell breathed in sharp with lips pursed into a line.

A waitress came over, and Noah ordered oatmeal and coffee.

"What are you doing, man?" Terrell asked.

"What?"

"Are you using?"

Noah scoffed. "No."

"You're late. You stopped calling me. I only see you at meetings. You're—"

"I'm not using," Noah said. He felt people's stares, but ignored them. He wished that Terrell had chosen a table in the corner instead of a center booth. He suspected that Terrell had chosen the booth on purpose—a mild public shaming to shake Noah up.

"Good. I'm really starting to wonder whether this," Terrell paused and motioned between the two of them, "is working for either of us." Before, when Terrell had threatened to drop him, it always came from annoyance and anger. Now, Terrell said the words with resignation, even

exhaustion, and Noah knew that it was real—he had no more strikes. It might already be too late. There were other sponsors of course, but Noah knew that if he had a sponsor that let him skip meetings, he'd skip. If a slip was compassionately tolerated, he'd plunge.

“I'm going to meetings. I'll be there tonight,” Noah said. No matter what, he was going to that meeting. He wanted to talk to that girl. She hadn't been to any other meetings, and so he assumed she must be weekly at the Methodist church.

“You didn't share last week. It's for all of us. But it's mostly for you. If you're serious about staying sober, you need to fucking man-up and say your piece. I don't care if it's about the daily struggle or Eliot. Just something.”

Noah looked away. He wished he knew why it felt so hard to speak. It wasn't stage fright. In the band, he played drums in front of tons of kids, sometimes even sold out shows opening up for bigger hardcore bands. But it felt different, and he seized up and was racked with the memory of Eliot wearing a never worn, ill-fitted suit in his casket. “I'll share today at the three o'clock.”

“Good,” Terrell said. He took a sip and seemed to loosen up. “Still got stinking thinking?”

“A little.” He still felt it, but the sign language dampened it more than any of the alternatives.

“You haven't called. Is the drumming working?”

“I stopped that. I've been learning sign language to deal with it. It works better.”

“Really, man? You're trying to jump all the way to the thirteenth step?”

“Fuck you, man. It's not like that.” The unofficial and frowned upon thirteenth step: fucking a newcomer. As much as he thought about her, Noah never felt the familiar pull of lust.

“Sure, it isn't.”

“I’m serious. It’s just a way to keep my hands occupied.”

Terrell chuckled and nodded his head, clearly not buying it.

“I don’t know. I want to know what she’s saying. Not being able to talk to anyone. It seems lonely.”

“Yeah,” Terrell said. “Watch your dick.”

#

At NA Noah couldn’t concentrate on any of the speakers’ words. They were Cumberland mumbled, but mostly his mind was muddled. Thoughts ping-ponged, barely images, mostly words: where was she?, serenity prayer, she came back!, *how are you* in American Sign Language, middle school dance playlist, sweat seeping pits, step two, Eliot, eighth principle, clean needle, botched batch, *Big Book* reading, sharing, Terrell’s ultimatum, go towards the middle or end, like this ad nauseam.

And again, she raised her hand in the silence. Time stabilized. The addicts nodded at her. Noah, confident in his week of studying—at least five hours a day—assumed he would be able to understand, say, half of the motions.

Hello, she signed. *My name is*, she touched the mole on her cheek bone—her name sign. He’d read about name signs, how they are almost like Native American names that get assigned based on a trait or physical characteristic. *I am an addict*. At least he assumed that taking a hooked finger to the corner of her mouth and pulling like she was a hooked fish meant *addict*. Maybe *hooked* was the closest word. From there, he only caught random words, never a complete thought. She went too fast.

Noah had planned to say something to her after the meeting, to amaze her with casual phrases, but now he wondered if he should hold off for next week or the one after when he understood more.

After she finished, the speaker asked if anyone else wanted to share, and Noah opened his lips and tried to “yes” but less than a whisper escaped, unheard by anyone but himself.

Terrell cleared his throat. “Actually, Noah has something to share today.”

Noah felt it cut through his middle. Noah tried to force a word, a gasp, anything but came up short. He exhaled hard and sunk in his seat, shaking his head.

Then they stood in a circle and said the Lord’s Prayer.

“Keep coming back. It works if you work it,” they all said and dispersed. Usually, Noah fought eye-rolling at this, another one of NA’s clichés, but guilt made it impossible for him to feel superior.

Terrell gracelessly walked over to Noah, shaking his head. He looked too disappointed to be mad. He said, “I hope you work out what you’re going though. I wish you the best of luck man.”

“I couldn’t today. Next week I’ll—”

“Tell it to somebody else, man. Look, I feel bad for you. We all have sob stories, and you’ve got a real bad one. But sobriety isn’t punishment. You’ll never keep clean if you’re doing it for someone else, and you’re doing it for Eliot.”

Noah swallowed.

“Maybe I’m wrong. I hope so. Maybe your next sponsor will help get you through the steps.” Terrell left before Noah could respond.

Noah looked around and didn't see her anywhere. He hurried out the door to see if she was outside. It's only a matter of time now, Noah thought.

He jogged past the cigarette smokers to catch up to her. She strode away. He called out "Hey," when he neared her and immediately felt stupid.

She didn't know he was there. He could still turn back. He felt reckless and gave zero fucks. He didn't even have a sponsor keeping him in check anymore and doubted he'd even try to get another.

He knew that a regular wave worked fine as a greeting, but the official sign for "hello" was almost like mixing a salute with a wave: relaxed (no-military rigor) right hand at attention on the brow and then a casual move away. Noah circled ahead of her and signed, *Hello*.

Her eyes widened and then narrowed. She looked suspicious, as if maybe it had been a quirk and not a sign. *You know sign language?*

He'd anticipated this question, so he signed his prepared response: *I know a little bit*. Noah shrugged.

Her hands flurried—arched fingers, palms, and fists moving twice as fast as the plain woman on YouTube. As soon as he thought he recognized a sign, it had disappeared before he could mentally place the word to the sign. Noah only caught two words: *you* and *to meet*, but it wasn't an informal *nice to meet you*, like he'd anticipated. It was more like a sprawling monologue. When she finished, the way she'd cocked her head made him think she asked a question.

Too embarrassed to admit how little he actually knew, Noah signed, *Yes*.

She signed something different, this time slower, but he still didn't understand.

Again he signed, *Yes*. Why did he think it would be so easy?

Out of her purse she pulled out a pad of paper and wrote, *How long have you been learning?*

One week.

Interesting.

It's nothing. Noah wondered if she understood without inflection. Did she understand that as modesty or did she interpret it like a psycho responding with a robotic "IT IS NOTHING"?

She nodded.

Noah checked his watch. He had an hour to kill before he needed to set up for the dance. He motioned to her that he wanted to write something. She passed him the pen and paper, and he wrote, *Are you busy? Do you want to get coffee or something?*

She looked around, somewhat suspicious.

Noah motioned down the street and wrote, *McD.*

She, still hesitant, signed, *Okay.*

Noah led her towards the McDonald's. His phone felt heavy in his pocket. He should call Eliot. It dawned on him that without Terrell, he could go back to endlessly leaving messages never heard, apologizing until the word "sorry" lost all meaning.

He hummed to fill the uncomfortable silence, but he couldn't write or sign while walking. Eventually he stopped, and the quiet overwhelmed him, but then he heard the pads of his steps, the cars sputtering at a stop light, the whistling wind, a helicopter chopping over the mountains, some sort of bird calls from somewhere, and a million other unidentifiable sounds, and Noah realized he'd never known quiet.

#

At the McDonald's, after ordering coffee, she ripped out a couple pieces of paper from her notebook and pulled another pen from her purse and gave it to him.

What is your name? she asked.

He liked how instead of a dot in her lower case "I" she drew a circle, reminding him that addicts can still be girlish. Noah had prepared for this question. He spelled it out in sign.

My name is, she signed and again touched her mole. Then she wrote, *Samantha.*

Nice to meet you.

Do you have a name sign?

No.

Do you want one?

Yes. Ever since Noah had read about name signs, he wanted one. A new name: an escape from his past—it seemed heavenly.

How about this? She cupped her hands together to make a canoe and bobbed it up and down like it was in water. *It means "Boat."* She wrote, *Cause "Noah."*

No.

You know it's rude to reject a name sign, right?

Please no. It's too similar. I want something new.

It's either that or it's this. She made a fist and tapped the palm of her hand in the bend in her arm. From her smirk, he knew Samantha was joking. She didn't have to write it down because the sign looked like something he'd repeated so many times he lost count: it meant heroin and shooting up and junkie, all at once.

Yes, he said. This was supposed to be the worse of the two, but he honestly preferred it. If he could, he'd obliterate his past. Only heroin made the past good. Even if he never used again, it would always be his first love.

Noah sipped his coffee. He didn't know why he was here. Sure, he could justify that he was just trying to burn time before he headed over to the middle school to set up for the dance. But that'd only be half the story. Sort of like how if he bowled a game while waiting for a dealer to drop off some dope at the bowling alley, he could say he was there for bowling. Noah wished he could muster up the courage to ask if she felt as isolated as he did. But even if she was, it'd still be different. Hers was more circumstance, and his was manufactured—a lifetime spent keeping all but a few friends at a distance until those friends were gone.

What do you think of NA? he asked.

It's okay, she said.

It's not boring for you?

Why would it be any different for me? Because I can't hear?

Noah didn't know what to say. That was what he thought, but maybe acknowledging was insensitive or something. He said, *I think it's boring*.

She laughed. More like cackled. People even turned to look. She must have no idea how loud she was.

It is, she said. *I can sort of read lips if people speak slowly, but most of the time I only catch half*.

As they drank their coffee, they sort of talked—as best they could anyway. Noah felt frustrated by how slow writing was. When one of them signed, they often had to spell out words: he had the vocabulary of a pre-schooler. Either way, writing or signing, it took forever. What

should have been a five-minute conversation took up the full hour. He told her about the band. She told him about the Romney School for the Deaf and Blind.

Shit. I have to go to work, he said, checking his phone.

Okay.

Cut and run, he thought, but just being near someone felt good. Just talking. With Terrell, Noah couldn't escape the pressure of sobriety. But so far, Samantha didn't seem to care one way or the other about him. Her ambivalence calmed him. He got the impression that if he used tonight, it wouldn't affect her. He didn't want to leave her. *You could come. I DJ dances sometimes. It's at a middle school. It'll probably be funny. You'll like it,* he said not knowing if it was true. He braced for her to say no. It seemed cruel to invite her to a dance, but based on the playlist of pop music sans swear words and sexual innuendo, he kind of envied her.

She shrugged. *Okay.*

#

As lean as Samantha was, she still did a good job helping haul in the PA. At one point, someone, maybe the principal, looked as if he might ask about why Noah brought another person, but Noah cut that off by saying "my apprentice" and giving a nod toward Samantha. The principal looked Samantha up and down. Most of her bruises had disappeared, but she still had an addict's skeletal thinness. Samantha, unaware, continued carrying in gear, and eventually, the principal went off somewhere else.

They set up the gear in the cafeteria, which had the same metallic, bleach school smell that produced flashbacks to prime-cussing years in middle school lunch. He placed the mixer on a school-issued, prison-manufactured table, remembering Lunchables, casual-homophobia, and

impossible sex stories. He and Samantha sat on cold metal folding chairs waiting for the doors to open so kids could flood in.

The kids waited outside while chaperones and teachers poured generic soft drinks into Styrofoam cups across the cafeteria. After he set everything up, Noah asked Samantha about the thing he'd avoided so far. For a week, Noah had wondered how she got hooked, creating elaborate plotlines of innocence lost. One story Noah imagined was that a dealer, the made-for-TV type with mossy green teeth, snuck onto a deaf school property, realized Samantha was nonverbal, and forcibly shot her up to get her hooked. Never mind that Noah had never met a dealer who'd ever gave away expensive drugs. In some way, DARE still fucked with Noah.

But it turned out her story was the same one everyone had: a pill habit that moved to heroin because it was cheaper; smoking H but at least it wasn't snorting, snorting H but at least it wasn't shooting, shooting H but at least it wasn't sharing needles, on and on, until using a stranger's needle to skin pop because you can't hit a vein or even an artery.

And then, the overhead lights flicked off, Noah faded in the bubble gum pop, the intelligent lights flashed primary colors to the beat, as kids, some too short and others too tall—all of them self-conscious—flooded into the cafeteria to eat and drink sugar and segregate themselves by gender on the perimeter. Noah and Samantha looked at each other with wide eyes and laughed.

It wasn't like this at Romney, she wrote.

Noah laughed. It was exactly as he remembered middle-school dances, all the way down to his playlist filled with 90's boy bands and Will Smith. Back then, it was this sort of parent-friendly pop that drove him towards the Dead Kennedys and Black Flag. But he wasn't about to risk his chance as a school dance DJ by playing anything even close to parental advisory. Yet

there was still a power in knowing that he was mouse clicks away from ruining everyone's night with Converge.

After an hour, everyone's adrenaline wore down. The kids sometimes even spoke briefly to someone outside their clique. The chaperones stopped pouring sodas and watched the wall-clock like it was a lifeline. Noah and Samantha got bored people-watching and resumed passing notes in the relative darkness behind the ever-changing lights.

I have a question, she wrote. Both times at NA, you were one of the only people who didn't say anything. How come?

Despite the pressure from Terrell to share, Noah realized this was the first time he had been asked why he didn't. He held his pen to the paper, tapped it a few times to begin writing, leaving little blue dots on the page, and then stopped. He thought about hiding in the bathroom and calling Eliot. Finally he wrote, *I guess I don't even know if I'm ready to admit I'm a recovering addict because most of the time I still want to be fucked up. I don't even know what I would say.*

If you want, you could practice on me, Samantha wrote.

Noah winced.

We can have our own meeting, she wrote.

She couldn't be serious. *My name is Noah, and I'm an addict, he signed.*

Hello Noah. Salute inject.

Still joking he wrote, *It's been six weeks since I last used.*

She motioned for him to keep writing.

He stopped laughing. He felt childish. He felt as if he were actually at a meeting, complete with the expectation that publicly shaming himself would make him a better person. She kept pointing at the paper, not letting him escape.

With pen to paper, all of the half-formed phrases in his head flooded out into scratched, barely legible writing. *It was a new batch laced with Fentanyl. My dealer said not to go anywhere near my normal dose. People were dropping like flies from just shooting what they were used to. After I used a small dose, time kind of got wonky. I kept drifting in and out of sleep until I was sort of lucid and Eliot was in the room. I watched him set up a fix, and I wanted to say, "Take a small dose." But I couldn't make my mouth work right. I watched him take what I knew was a lethal dose and then nodded off. I woke up, and he was stiff with rigor mortis.*

Noah looked at Samantha, her face unresponsive. He couldn't read her.

No matter how much I wanted to, I couldn't force myself to flush the dope. I finished it off, everything I had, and called the ambulance only after the high was long gone.

Thank you for sharing. After a pause she wrote, *Does it feel any better?*

I don't know. Nothing had changed—the world hadn't ; he felt no angels—but in some way, knowing that his words, his thoughts were now hardwired into her brain made him feel less alone.

His eyes blurred for a second. *What about you? You have to share now.*

Hello. My name is Samantha, and I'm an addict.

Hello, Samantha.

This “meeting” wasn't fun anymore. In the circle he was able to space out, but committing the words to paper with the author writing, made it impossible to escape even a word. It felt more real than reality.

It's been ten days since I last used, she wrote. I was on a bender. Mostly speedballing. I sort of went in and out of blackouts for days. I'd be at home, then some house or other. Somehow I ended up in Constitution Park alone in the middle of the night. I "awoke," so to speak, to some guy, she paused, hurting me. I was too fucked up to even scream. I can't even remember what he looked like. I stayed still and thought "I hope he doesn't damage my face." While it was happening I decided then that I'd either get sober or finish off the stash and jump off the Clarysville Bridge. And here we are.

Noah tried to remain as unresponsive as she had.

Thank you for sharing, Noah said. But he wanted to say sorry. He wanted to try to console her, as much as he hoped she wanted to console him, but neither said anything. In the middle of the cafeteria, pre-teens did the chicken dance. Noah said, No wonder we're fucked.

Yeah.

At least you didn't use the rest of your stash. Why had he said that? Did he really need her sympathy that bad?

I still have it. It makes me feel safe. That the other option is always open.

How could she stand to have heaven hidden away in, say, her sock drawer on sleepless nights? Noah knew his boundaries: there was no such thing as leftover drugs. What he didn't tell her was that even after Eliot's death, he kept using right up to Eliot's funeral. And what made him quit—what he knew he'd never tell anyone—was that when he looked at his best friend's body, knowing he should mourn, he felt so good he drooled. Feeling angelic in dope's love at that moment had made him go to his first NA meeting.

The dance continued to wane. During a lull, the principal stopped by Noah's small station to tell him that he was doing a great job—appropriate volume, appropriate songs. He said that he

was prepared to recommend Noah to the other county schools if things continued running smoothly. They even shook on it.

Noah called out the final song, that Savage Garden song that was written specifically for school dances. Samantha put her hand on the speaker, caught the rhythm of the beat and swayed, not quite dancing. *It's too quiet*, she signed.

It really means a lot that you're learning ASL, she wrote.

Noah nodded.

If you want, you could come over sometime. I could be your tutor. You'll only get so far by yourself.

At the thought of going to her house, Noah felt magnetized to her stash: what all was it and how much? Eliot and Noah had ping-ponged their addictions, each adding to the other's intensity, and it started like this—with a choice that looked harmless on the outside. Noah could see the end. Somewhere in the hollowness of his lungs he hungered for it. His head drowned with every possible scenario: most starting with searching for her drugs, some even ending with endless exhaustive opiate sex.

She could ruin his life, but he'd be worse for her.

Noah said, *I think I'd like that.*

Samantha smiled.

He wanted to tell her everything, that she'd come out the other end treading, and he'd sink to the bottom of the infinite ocean and love every minute. He had so much he wanted to tell her about dissonance that he couldn't put into words. Noah put his hand on hers, holding it against the PA speaker, and with the other he slid the master volume knob from three to ten until every ear but hers was ringing and the speaker rumbled like a tremor. Pre-teens let go of their

partners and held their ears. Chaperones rushed at him, screaming unheard. Noah maxed the lows, mids, highs of all channels and monitors, every dial to ten, always looking into Samantha's sunken gray eyes—they had more life than he thought—grinning at her, forcing everything but her into the peripheral, praying that something would get through—that some vibration would tell her what he couldn't.

CALL OF THE VOID

“Hello. This is Lisa. Don’t hang up.

“I know it’s early over there.

“Uh-huh.

“Yeah.

“I know. I’m sorry. I’m...

“I’m sorry.

“Look, just give me a second. It’s about Noah.

“Do I sound all right? Ever since he vandalized the ark, nothing’s been all right.

“No, nothing happened to the church. Thank the Lord. The reproduction we’re building on Queen’s Point. You left before we started construction, right? Fifteen years. I can’t believe it’s been that long.

“I wish you could see the ark. It’s hard to find a place in Frostburg where you can’t see it, especially on that stretch of 68. If you hadn’t moved, you’d see it every day on your way to work. Even unfinished, it’s still overwhelming. All this time and it’s still just a third of the steel frame and a billboard reading ‘The Future Site of the Ark.’ I have this window in my office at the church with a perfect view. Sometimes I can’t help but take a break from working on Sunday’s sermon so I can stand by that window with closed eyes and imagine it completed—the fall trees bursting with color, the sound of the interstate, and right there in the clearing: the colossal ark built to God’s exact proportions looming over all of us.... I’m sorry. Forgive me. Fifteen years since I had that vision-dream, and I still tear up like I did when I woke up and told you about it.

“Yeah. You know. Noah. I should have suspected something was going on. At the time, he seemed like any teenage boy—withdrawn, mopey, you know, ordinary stuff. But in retrospect, he has changed so abruptly over the past week. I was just too focused on the ark. I’d had fundraisers planned to try to secure enough money to resume construction, and I assumed that whatever he was going through would pass.

“And then a phone call from one of the deacons woke me to say that someone spray painted the ark’s billboard. My billboard. I was still groggy, and then suddenly it seemed as if all the air in the world had vanished, and I found myself red-eyed awake and dizzy. I doubt you can imagine what it felt like since you never believed in the ark. I’m starting to think you were right—maybe it won’t ever be finished.

“And the deacon said someone needed to get up there with paint as soon as possible. Still disoriented, I asked what it looked like as I threw on some clothes. But he refused to repeat it.

“Jon was still in bed. He asked what happened, and I told him. He wanted to come, but I told him to stay home because I didn’t want Noah to wake up in a quiet home alone. I never imagined he’d grow up to be a vandal. Noah still seems so young to me, even though he just turned fifteen. But I guess you already knew that.

“But still, Jon went to the garage and filled a plastic Wal-Mart bag with every color of spray paint he could find. He had hoped I could salvage the sign.

“I sped towards the ark—and you know I never like to speed. I remember that you used to laugh at me for driving so slow. And when I turned the corner past the tree line, finally having a clear shot for the sign, I fought tears.

“No, I don’t want to repeat it.

“No, I can. Just give me a second.

“In huge, black blocky letters, taking up a third of the sign, it read, ‘BRING ON THE FLOOD YOU...blank’ I imagine you can fill in the blank yourself. Whatever word you’re thinking, it’s probably a worse word than that.

“I pulled up next to the ark. You should have seen it when the silver steel glowed. But the congregation hasn’t been giving to the building fund, so the frame is now oxidized with rust. They’re focused more on ‘missions,’ as if they didn’t see that Frostburg was our mission field and the ark our message.

“I know all the reasons that you had to leave, but part of me wondered if the unsaid reason was that you didn’t believe in my mission.

“The billboard couldn’t be salvaged.

“What do you think I did? I climbed up the ladder to the catwalk, the bag of paint cans in the crook of my arm, and used a half a can of black to blot out the sign... erasing my vision. Just a big black censor bar next to that incomplete rust-red steel frame.

“After I finished, I walked to the edge of the catwalk. It must have been four stories tall. I stared out at the houses, steeples, schools, and markets. Do you remember *l’appel du vide*? The call of the void. That urge we felt when we stood at the edge of the cliffs at Dan’s Rock. No matter how much we didn’t want to die, some part of our brains still tells us to jump, to push the other. Leave it to the French to have a term for that awful feeling. But even alone, that... that’s what I felt. Like all of Frostburg had turned on me. My momentum to build the ark was almost destroyed. I wondered what kind of person would—no, could—even write those words. Who could be so blasphemous? I could only imagine some figure, face obscured in shadows.

“When I got home, Jon and Noah were eating breakfast. I wish I remembered what Noah looked like in that moment. I bet he avoided eye contact, maybe sweated so hard that the

neckline of his shirt darkened. You know, acting guilty. Just like you, guilt tends to ooze out of him. Like that time Jon came home early—if he would have looked you directly in the eyes he would have known everything. I had never spoken so fast or told more lies in such a short amount of time. I felt like such a hypocrite—a feeling that never goes away, but still dissipates with time and a lot of prayer. Like a half-life. It’s always there, just less.

“Jon asked me about how bad the damage was, but my own rambling didn’t even make sense to me. In my mind, I had already started to craft a sermon in response. The congregation would expect something grand, so I excused myself to my study to revamp the original sermon, the one I gave on the flood that ended with my vision for the ark on the mountain. I know you were there for that one. I’ll always remember how unmoved you were.

“On Sunday, I gave the sermon, and the congregation seemed energized. The building fund collected an additional two hundred dollars over the average.

“But the next morning, with me in the passenger seat and Noah driving—he’d just gotten his learner’s permit. I saw the sign vandalized again. In neon orange, same blocky letters, the black billboard now read, ‘YOU WILL DROWN WITH THE REST OF US.’ I didn’t want to think that I was the sign’s ‘you,’ but a part of me knew I was. I felt all the blood in my face drain. But I still hadn’t made the connection to Noah. The bag of spray paint cans was still in the backseat, so I told him to drive to the ark.

“Noah said he had school. But I couldn’t stand all those school busses, early morning commuters, dog walkers, morning joggers, practically all of Frostburg seeing that sign. I told him it’d have to wait.

“Maybe I should have guessed he’d done it because he looked nervous, which I assumed was from the terrible back roads. I told him he was driving fine.

“At the ark, Noah stayed in the car, playing with the radio. As I walked past the ark to the sign, I fantasized catching whatever kids were doing this. I’d stake out each night in the woods, hiding out in a deer stand until I saw their flashlight. I’d climb down, barefoot and silent as a hunting tabby, I’d come up behind them, and then... I didn’t know. Call the cops? Their parents? Offer forgiveness, if they made a donation to the ark fund?

“At the billboard I eyed the neon paint, hoping to find a matching color. Guess what color rested on the very top of the pile? Neon flipping orange. And for a second I thought, well what a coincidence. But then slowly I put two and two together.

“I walked over to Noah’s door and knocked on the window. He didn’t turn, so I held up the paint can and knocked again. Nothing. So I opened the door and told him to get out.

“He followed me over to the sign, hiding his eyes behind his shaggy blonde hair. I made him climb the ladder to the catwalk, I followed him with the paint in tow. I asked him if he did this, giving him a chance to fess up, but he said nothing. I dropped the can at his feet. He goes yeah. I asked why. He said he didn’t know. I go, then why would you write ‘you will drown with the rest of us’? He didn’t say anything.

“No matter how mad I was, and I was furious—I had half a mind to spank him despite his age, in full view of all the commuters, just to embarrass him. If it weren’t for all the paperwork, I probably would have pressed charges. You see, I could forgive some atheist trying to get a rise out of the church. But Noah knew how much this would hurt me, so a part of me wanted to hurt him. I forced myself to steady my breathing because Noah always froze up when I raised my voice. I didn’t speak. Figured I’d let him stew until the words spilled out of him like flood waters.

“He shifted from foot to foot, brushed the hair out of his eyes, licked his lips. When he couldn’t take it anymore, just to break the silence he said, sorry. I glared but didn’t say a word. And Noah looked around, swallowed hard and said he’d done it because he was furious that Jon and I had lied to him his whole life, leaving him to discover by himself that he was adopted.

“Well we never really talked about this scenario, did we? If I would have been asked if I ever cheated on Jon, I still have memorized speeches. Maybe it was just that I was caught off guard. I assumed that by now our affair never come out.

“I’m not sure what you want for me to say? I was just so dizzy from shock. I wanted to tell him I felt his kicks inside me. That I had the scar from the cesarean when the umbilical wrapped around his neck. So I didn’t know what to tell him. I just asked him why would he think that.

“He talked about doing a worksheet in science class on genes. About how his brown eyes shouldn’t happen with my and Jon’s blue. How he waited until after class to tell the teacher he made a mistake on the worksheet, and how the teacher said it could happen, however unlikely, about dominant and recessive genes and anomalies. But Noah said he knew then, and the more he thought about it, the less he saw himself in us—Jon and me.

“And as Noah talked, I thought about our mornings together. The ones you ran from when you took that job out west, taking your wife and kids. About the last time we talked when you said that if you didn’t leave, we would have ruined both of our lives when this God damn town eventually found out.

“No—

“Listen—

“I didn’t—

“I—

“I told him he was adopted, okay.

“I tried to hug him, but he stepped away. And, if I’m going to be honest, I have to tell you this, but for a second—less than a second, I thought about how easy it’d be just give him a little push.

“I thought about it. The call of the void.

“I said he had no idea what I’d sacrificed for him. That he was as bad as the rest of Frostburg. Totally oblivious. I only ever wanted what was best for everyone. That he could either help me fix the billboard, or I’d keep coming up here every morning and do it myself. I said I wasn’t sorry for anything.

“He whispered an apology. And I handed him a spray paint can.

“Together we blotted out the orange with black. And afterwards I wrote, ‘The Future Site of God’s Ark’ in dove-white. The hypocrisy of it all felt stronger than any of the lies I told Jon. It was like having parasites eating away at my insides—just a host organism subconsciously fulfilling the desires of the unseen worms or mites.

“I was less myself each day after that, longing for the last time I felt in control of my own life. I hadn’t felt that since I was with you.

“Afterwards, I took Noah to school. I came home and called you. But any day, maybe tonight, Noah will ask Jon about the ‘adoption’ or find a picture in a photo album or home movie of me in a bulging floral maternity dress.

“And since I’ve dropped him off I’ve waited, feeling like I’m on death row. I can’t stop thinking.... A life away from Frostburg, somewhere else... where I wouldn’t be cannibalized by gossip. I’d go some place up river and stop offering forgiveness. Switch denominations—get

forgiven by some priest. I'd do something totally different, maybe be a reporter for the local newspaper, writing fluff pieces about dog shows and September snow. In the cellar, there'd be glass jars of Amish apple butter, a coal furnace, and a pinball machine.

“And maybe someday we'd somehow find ourselves together. You'd work contract and could have a woodshop. On the weekends, together, we'd build an ark, not full-size, many times smaller, but comfortable for two. And then one day, when the wood was sanded, stained, and waterproofed, we'd float down the Potomac River into the Chesapeake Bay past Cape Charles and Henry, drifting broken yet blemish-less together towards some vast and unfamiliar void.”

FURIOUS NOISE

On the last day of a three week tour, the Fourth of July, Megan stared expressionless out the window of the bronze Astro van, letting the minutes slide by with the southern oaks and hickories. She bit her cuticles: a habit she couldn't quit when anxious. A thin strip of white flesh hung from her finger. She tore it away, licked the pooling blood, and then wiped her finger on her pants.

Josh hit Noah in the arm to get him to take out his earbuds. Noah took one out and looked over.

"Where the fuck are we?" Josh said. "I thought we were playing Charleston." He motioned to look around at the surroundings.

The small back road cut straight through the Appalachian forest. They passed an old brick house, drainage pipes brown with rust, flying a muddy rebel flag. Most of the places they played were cities or college towns. Despite three weeks of sleeping on floors, eating dumpster dived bagels, and playing house venues and small DIY spaces, she hadn't been prepared for touring. Megan spent most of the time wishing she'd never agreed to fill in for Josh and Noah's hardcore band. She was used to playing small clubs around town with her mellow, indie band, where her stage presence was a controlled mope. But she'd never gone on tour before, and the guys expected her to thrash, to throw herself violently against sweating bodies, to bloody someone's lip with her bass's headstock. Even on stage at her most frantic, she felt like everyone could see through her. It was all an act to her.

Noah shrugged. "That show fell through before we even left home. Had to look in the boonies for a show because no one else would book on the Fourth."

“But, I thought it was in, like, the same general area.”

“I just set it up on some local message board. It was last minute, so it was either this or a straight drive from Florida to Maryland. The dude said it’d be a big house party. Like a barbecue or some shit.” Noah put his earbud back in.

Megan did what she always did when Josh and Noah argued about shows, about where to eat, about the cut from the door, about where to stay—she stayed silent. She spent more time quiet than she expected. It didn’t matter that the guys, particularly Josh, tried to involve her, this wasn’t her band, this wasn’t her scene, and she didn’t belong.

She knew Noah only asked her to fill in on bass out of desperation when their real bassist got busted selling pot and left him with a two-hundred-plus dollar fine that prevented him from taking the time off work. She wasn’t hardcore or punk, but Megan had a savings account, a bass guitar, and no job, meaning she was perfect.

Josh exaggerated a sigh.

“This show is going to suck, isn’t it?” Megan said to Josh just above a whisper.

“I don’t know. Sometimes these middle-of-nowhere shows have so little going on that literally everyone under thirty comes out for something to do. And other times...” Josh didn’t have to finish. Megan had heard Noah talk about times that they played to only the local bands’ members—each band taking turns playing a half-assed set, hoping that someone would buy a shirt and a record out of pity.

The entire tour had been a daze of smoking bowls, meeting people she’d never see again, playing shows in places that needed to be fumigated, and drinking cheap alcohol, mostly PBR and Mad Dog 20/20. Back home in Maryland, she knew that around now her mother would be marinating thick cuts of meat in sealed Tupperware while her father, always forgetful, made a

last minute trip across the boarder into Pennsylvania to buy bottle rockets and roman candles. Tonight, after her parents' backyard barbecue, they'd go with their church friends to Deep Creek Lake to watch exploding colors reflect in ripples. Before this tour, Megan had kept her upper-middle class idyllic home life a secret, always feeling a sense of shame when admitting that she went to private school and didn't have student loans. But night after night of treating her body like she was at war with it—eating one meal a day, avoiding sobriety at all costs, and acting like sleep was a suggestion—she found herself missing all of those comforts she had resented. Just imagining a return to normalcy, what Noah called “civilian life,” made her want to skip the last show entirely.

She wondered how much of her attraction to Noah had to do with his just being different. If anyone other than herself suggested that, she would have torn them to shreds.

This would probably be the last time she'd go on tour. Megan would be happy just playing a show every month or so around town, occasionally making a trip to Pittsburgh or Baltimore. The thought of the last show not being a packed house or VFW bummed her out more than she let on. If she wasn't surrounded by family or friends for the Fourth, she at least hoped she could get drunk or stoned enough in a sea of punks to construct the illusion that she was, which was easy most nights and hard most mornings.

Before all of this, she thought this tour would let her really know Noah. They'd only vaguely known each other when he asked her to fill in. Yet despite all the time together over the past three weeks, she never felt she had a chance to talk to him. As a band, they slept until they had to leave, listened to music on iPods in the van, talked to strangers at shows, and fell asleep drunk. Private moments felt as rare as auroras.

The GPS chimed in, telling them to turn.

“What the hell?” Josh said as he turned onto a road that was equal parts dirt and gravel into the woods and solitude.

Even Noah took out his earbuds and grimaced back at Megan.

She bit her cuticles and found the guys’ discomfort oddly comforting. At least she wasn’t alone.

After Megan lost sight of the main road, a double wide covered in illegible graffiti came into view. Two equally dinged up Festiva’s were out front: one that presumably ran and one on cinderblocks. Porcelain toilets decorated the unmowed yard like lawn gnomes.

“So this is how we die,” Noah said. It was an old inside joke between Josh and Noah. Megan never learned the origin.

“Definitely,” Josh said.

Noah shrugged and got out of the car. He lingered by the van instead of approaching the house, pretending to be nonchalant. The door opened and a large man wearing oversized, ill-fitting clothes stepped out onto the porch holding a Budweiser bottle. Every inch of exposed skin including his face was covered in faded stick and poke tattoos. She wondered if in ten years, all of Noah and Josh’s gray tattoos would fade and look like this guy’s muddy green splotches.

“You the band?” he asked.

Noah said, “Yeah.”

“Rick,” he said introducing himself. “You should load in before people get here.”

“Sure.”

Rick finished the beer in staggering gulps and lobbed the bottle into his yard. He said, “By the end of the night, it’ll be covered in beer cans. I’m just getting it started.”

Megan laughed out of obligation.

Megan carried the kick drum into a living room littered with cans and fast food wrappers. The walls were covered in graffiti, but there was no artistry, only big artless words—mostly names—and nothing more complicated than stickmen. The entire house had a general dampness, which seemed perfect for spiders and insects, and even though she didn't see any, she imagined tiny wispy legs tickling her neck. As she loaded in the rest of the gear, Megan daydreamed of her bedroom in her parents' house.

“Need help?” Rick asked as Megan struggled with the bulky guitar cab that almost weighed as much as she did.

“I'm fine. I'm just waiting for one of the others to help,” she said.

“Come on. I'm trying to help.”

Rick grabbed one of the handles, so Megan grabbed the other out of obligation. Rick was a big enough guy that he could have carried it alone easily. He probably could bench press the cab's awkward weight over his head. But instead they waddled their way towards the house.

“How's tour been?”

“Pretty good,” she said instinctually. She wanted to believe it was true. All of the shows had been pretty fun, but she felt spread too thin and more disconnected from Noah than when the tour started.

“Awesome. I miss it. I used to tour all the time with Scum—that was my old band—before we all started settling down.”

She didn't say anything. Something about the way that he name-dropped his own band, as if he hoped she'd heard of them before, made her wonder if Rick was hitting on her. Normally that sort of thing wouldn't bother her, but surrounded by nothing but woods, she felt too exposed. It wasn't that there was anything sinister in his actions, but the setting itself reminded

her of backwoods horror films. If Josh and Noah insisted on staying the night, she would sleep in the van with the doors locked and the windows all the way up.

“I think I might still have a shirt or a CD around here if you want it.”

“It’s fine.”

Rick said, “Oh. Okay.” He seemed unsure of what to say, as if he thought that bands and touring could bridge the gap in years and experience. They placed the cab against the wall, and he pulled out his phone and started texting. She wondered if he was telling people to come to the show or only occupying his hands.

After they loaded in, Noah lay on the van’s bench seat smoking a bowl. Megan came over and sat with her legs dangling from the open sliding door. Her goal was to avoid Rick at all costs. Rick paced in front of his house without looking up from his phone as he texted people about the show. One of Rick’s green tattoos, bold and centered on the back of his neck, caught Megan’s eye, and she blurted, “Is that a fucking iron cross?”

Noah strained his eyes to look. He sighed and nodded. “Maybe it’s not the Nazi kind.”

“There are other kinds?”

“I think there’s a metal kind. Bands like Motorhead and shit got away with using them.”

Megan could almost understand edgy bands using Nazi imagery loosely. But she didn’t believe someone would get a shitty homemade tattoo unless they at least flirted with white supremacy. A band could at least claim shock value.

“Can we just leave?”

Noah ran his hands through his hair, exhaled into the air, and said, “We already set up.” He didn’t elaborate, but she understood—to them, any gig was a gig.

He hit the bowl. She didn't think she'd ever get used to their silence. No matter how much she tried to talk with him beyond the superficial, it always dissipated. Before the tour, when they saw each other at shows around town, his silence had suggested so much. All tour she positioned her sleeping bag beside his, fantasizing that he'd roll over and whisper something with more substance than *I'm stoked for the next show*. She suspected that maybe there just wasn't anything there, that his silence suggested nothing, that Noah really had a singular focus of touring, playing shows, and getting stoned and that was enough. Yet it didn't matter. She wanted to breathe the smoke he exhaled and hold it in until it fused with her lungs. He passed her the bowl. Before tour, she'd never smoked pot before.

"Are you excited to go home?" she asked.

"No way. Civilian life sucks," he said too quickly to have thought about it. He held out his hand to take back the glass pipe. His mouth opened, and his lips tried to form words with no sound escaping. Instead he took another hit so deep that Megan wondered if he was ever a swimmer.

"What?" she asked. "You were about to say something."

He shook his head, still holding the smoke in. He looked uncomfortable, so she pressed him.

"Come on. What is it? You actually do want to go home?"

His ears started to pinken either from a lack of oxygen or embarrassment.

"No, that's not quite right." Noah often talked about how he didn't have anything worth home returning to. It'd been years since he'd spoken with his family—a point of pride for him. He'd told her earlier he was taking another semester off, his third in a row. The next thing he was

excited for was the next tour. “It isn’t something back home that you want. You’re just sick of this tour.”

Noah’s lips were pursed into a line, almost like he was clamping down with his teeth to tighten the seal. His whole face reddened.

“You’re sick of me,” Megan said. Part of her always thought that, but she intended the comment to be a self-deprecating joke, the kind that Noah would wave away. But as the words left her mouth, she knew it was true. She’d never before felt so aware of her face: she imagined all of her worst features—her crooked teeth, her big eyes, her hooked nose—exaggerated into a grotesque parody of what she actually looked like.

Noah let the smoke drift from his nostrils and mouth at once in an exhale that took seconds. “Quit fishing for compliments.”

“It’s true, isn’t it?”

“No.”

She swallowed hard and didn’t believe him.

“I don’t know what you want me to say,” Noah said.

She didn’t want for him to say anything. All she wanted was to put all of this behind her, preferably pretending that this tour never happened. She left the van.

She felt light-headed as she walked across the lawn drowning in dandelions towards where Josh sat on the porch playing his unplugged guitar. When she sat next to him, he looked at her, nodded, and kept playing. Megan was glad Josh didn’t try to talk to her. His rhythmic playing was only a little louder than inaudible, but the chunky strings could be felt and that distracted her from her thoughts just enough. She played on her phone. She had a friend request from Rick. Online, she didn’t even use her real name. How did he find her? Noah was their only

mutual friend, so Rick must've searched through all 1,100 of Noah's friends specifically for her. Megan accepted the request for today, intending to delete him the moment they were on the road home.

A little later Rick came outside and offered Josh and Megan beers. Josh took one, and even though Megan wanted one, she was too worried that she wouldn't be able to prevent herself from crying if she got even a little drunk. Megan said she was fine without even looking up from her phone. After a while, Rick did the same.

Josh asked, "When are people getting here?"

"Real soon. I invited a shit load of people," Rick said. He sounded distracted.

All at once, notification after notification started appearing at the top of her phone's screen—Rick was liking indiscriminately every photo that Megan had posted. Megan looked over at him. His fingers worked double time. She felt so small.

Without looking up, Rick said, "My ex said she's bringing my daughter. They've never seen my solo-project."

Megan tried to imagine Rick with a daughter. Would he dress her in pink and take her to gymnastics like her father did for her, or would he tattoo swastikas on her with a sewing needle and India ink?

The notifications kept coming, each one making her feel more uncomfortable than the last.

She said nothing, stood up, and walked inside to the bathroom with what she hoped looked like nonchalance. After locking the door, Megan sat on the toilet and ran fingers through her hair. She didn't want to commit suicide, but if existence could be flicked off like a switch, she would turn it off without looking back.

Her phone continued to vibrate with notifications, one after the other. She turned off her phone and picked at her nails, immune to all of her senses. Why'd she ever leave home? She tried to see some way out, but short of sneaking out the window, hot-wiring the van, and speeding off leaving the guys and the gear behind, she couldn't see any way out that didn't involve having to face Noah or Rick again. She sat on the toilet seat for too long, letting the sunlight gray.

A sudden knock on the bathroom door made her jump. She tried to say "Yeah," but her open mouth made no noise.

Josh said, "Megan. You alright?"

"No." The word echoed off stained porcelain tiles.

The door rattled. "Can I come in?"

"No."

"I can wait you out," he said. She heard a thud on the door, and the squeak of shoes. He must have slid down against the door and now sat on the floor propped against it.

"What am I doing?"

"Hiding in a bathroom."

"No, like, what am I doing here? We shouldn't even know that there is a skinhead named Rick living in the woods, let alone know that he uses soft soap for sensitive skin."

Josh laughed.

"I'm serious. Rick is probably going to kill us. When his Klan friends get here we're dead." She didn't really think she was going to be killed, but it seemed possible in the same way that anything was possible.

"So, this is how we die?" he said. "Not as bad as I expected."

She smiled, and even with a wall between her and Noah, she tried to force it away. Her fingers bled from picking. For the first time saying it out loud, she said, “I’m only here because of Noah.”

“I know.”

“And he doesn’t care.”

“I know.”

“I’m so stupid.”

“No, you’re not,” Josh said. “You don’t belong here. People like Noah, people like me, this is all we have.”

Megan wanted to argue. Even if it was true, it wasn’t like she’d chosen her life. All her life she’d felt disappointed. Life was underwhelming, and recognizing that she’d won life’s lottery at birth only made it worse.

“At least I haven’t locked myself in a skinhead’s bathroom.”

Megan stood up and opened the door. “I don’t know how to go out there. To see Noah and Rick.”

“I’ll be a buffer. If anyone gets weird, I’ll ask you to help me with something.”

Together they went out to where Rick and Noah sat on broken lawn furniture. Soon, after a few cheap beers, the stilted conversation between them all felt bearable. Even though they talked, they talked about nothing. They ate off-brand chips and waited for people to show up, which seemed unlikely. As each hour passed, Rick paced faster throughout his house, crickets screeching, slamming beers and sending text messages. When it got dark, they went inside. Megan, Noah and Josh sat on the couch—they had long ago stopped caring about its dampness,

its split seams revealing cushions—whispering to each other about packing up and getting on the road unless somebody came.

Another hour passed, and nobody came. Megan was unsurprised. Did he even have friends?

Rick stopped pacing, shrugged, and said, “Fuck it. Let’s just get started. I’m sure people will show up after a song or two.”

Megan looked at Noah and Josh. Noah said, “I don’t know, man. If no one’s here, I think we might just want to get on the road.”

“They’re on their way.”

“The show was supposed to start at seven, right? It’s almost ten now.”

“They said they’d come.” He paused. Almost to himself, he said, “They all said they would. My friends. Beth.”

Even though she’d spent all night wanting to leave, she pitied him. She thought about asking the guys to stick around just a few more minutes but decided against it.

Josh started packing up his gear.

A vein on Rick’s forehead danced. He took slow deliberate steps to his room. As soon as the door closed, dull thuds and metallic clanks echoed through the walls. Megan imagined Rick ramming his head against the wall and kicking a metal bed frame. Megan and the guys packed up the stuff quietly, every noise from the other room causing wide-eyed word-mouthing. On the many trips outside to the van, arms filled with pedal boards or drum stands or guitars or backup guitars or cymbals or cord bags, they spoke in hushed whispers. Megan said to Josh, “This is how we die.”

When Megan helped Noah with the bulky 4x12” cab he said, “Hey. I just wanted to say thanks for all of this.”

“Yeah.”

“You got really good.”

She nodded. She didn’t care about the compliment. Soon, around five in the morning, she’d be home sleeping in her own bed again, sleeping the entire day away, with a solid month before her to help her forget about all of this.

“I don’t know. Next summer, you should be our merch girl.”

Never mind the six hour drive, she knew what this was: a goodbye. They wouldn’t hangout after this, and if they did, they would talk about this like some murky past life. Even the invitation to tag along next year felt like an insulting consolation prize, and at this point, she’d never put herself in this position again.

“Sure. I’d love that,” she said.

When they went back inside to get the bass cab, the only piece of gear left inside, Rick lugged from his room a beat up refrigerator sized 8x10” bass cab of his own. He dragged it across the floor without casters and thrust it flush against the wall with a shove. He plugged in a series of pedals with exaggerated violence.

As she and Noah carried out the bass cab, she asked Noah in a hushed voice, “We heading out now?”

Still plugging in pedals, sitting on the floor Rick said, “They’ll be here soon, you know.” The lamplight cast dim light over him, and the green patterns on his face dissolved into shadow: the skin on his face seemed slack and weathered, tired and vacant.

No one said anything. Megan hoped that someone, anyone actually, would show up. For weeks, as the anxious feeling of isolation when surrounded by strangers and acquaintances gnawed away at her insides, she'd had a hard time thinking about anyone other than herself, but the thought of Rick endlessly waiting for no one hurt her more than Noah ever could. She imagined his was the kind that created suicides and Nyquil addiction and mass murders and fringe cults and men's rights messageboards and self-mutilation fetishists and stray cat torture.

Noah and Megan stood outside the van waiting for Josh to get out of the bathroom. Then the sound of what Megan thought was a bomb going off in the house erupted, but rather than an abrupt explosion, the noise never faded. There was no fire, lights, or smoke. Noah reached for her shoulder. His hand felt heavy like dead weight. She stepped away, letting his hand drop.

As the sound stretched out unending, Noah put his hand in his pocket and said, "I guess this is Rick's solo project."

"I'm getting Josh," Megan said.

Megan opened the front door. Rick was in the living room holding a microphone in one hand and a brick in the other. He screamed and beat a sheet metal with a brick. The microphone led into a series of distortion and delay pedals sequenced into an endless feedback loop. Josh strolled down the hall past Rick, unfazed.

Outside, Josh shook his head and said, "Fucking noise bands."

They climbed into the van. Furious noise pierced the van's glass and fiberglass, growing louder the farther they got from the source until they crossed some threshold, and all sound gradually died down into utter silence, leaving each of them alone.

A LIFETIME

The tumors strain against my skull, an overfilled balloon. Any second it'll burst, sending skin grenading through air like rubber wet with breath. I steady my breathing.

“How you feeling, Megan?” a nurse asks. He has long, wiry eyebrows. He swabs the IV port on my chest—a lump just beneath the skin that feeds into my veins, making injections easy and saving my veins from overuse. The ChloroPrep is cold and smells like rubbing alcohol.

“Fine,” I say.

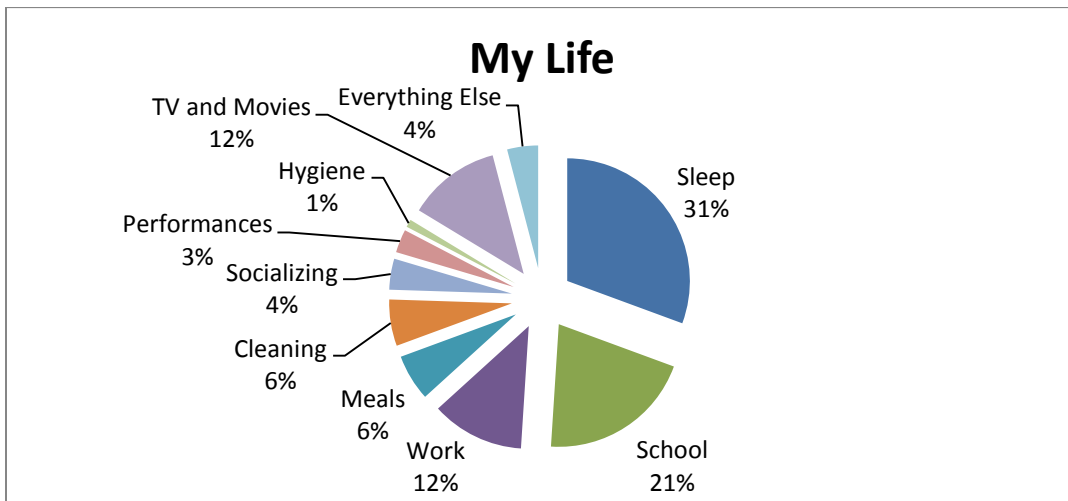
The other nurses double-check medicines and prepare the IV. Nurses always seem to have something in their hands. I'm an afterthought. Just another chemo-bald, skin-sagging, white-as-a-wedding-cake body. I try to make eye contact with Michael, my husband of three months. He doesn't notice. His eyes look vacant, staring unfocused and spaced out into the floor's woodgrain. Pink patches of razor burn are scattered across his neck. He barely bothers to shave anymore. Today he did for me.

“You seem calm. Real, I don't know....” The nurse pauses like there is something on his mind, but again says, “Calm.”

He didn't see me last night when I was crying and retching over the kitchen sink out of fear, not migraines. And he didn't see me this morning trying to hide my hyperventilating from Michael. I took a chalky Xanax that tasted like nickels because my taste buds are fucked from the chemo and cancer combo. Then, I said faux-cheerful goodbyes to my parents in the hospital's courtyard and headed to my room in the oncology ward. The Xanax calms me slightly, but I'm more lucid than I wish—my tolerance surprises me.

Today is the day: a medically induced coma to stall the swelling, a new long-shot experimental surgery on what was last week called inoperable, and something like a sixty percent chance I won't wake up. I'm only the sixth patient for the surgery. One is in remission, one is recovering and it's too early to tell, and three died on the operating table. But, without this operation, at best, I'll eke out six to eight more weeks until something ruptures, so I'm supposed to feel lucky.

Sixty percent chance of dying. There's just a forty percent that I'll outlive the day. Sixty fucking percent. Jesus Christ. That number hovers in my mind. I've thought a lot about percentages recently. If I don't wake up, my life sans coma effectively ends at twenty-five years, two months, three days, and six hours. After the surgery was scheduled, despite the migraines, I made some imperfect calculations to fragment my life of 220,518-ish hours—each hour roughly .0004%. I separated all my life's hours into digestible data.



Too much of my life was spent on stupid shit. I regret a lot of it—all those hours brushing teeth and texting through commercials. But, what I really hate is that over half my life was spent sleeping, spacing out in class, etching band names into desks, and tutoring rich kids on nights and weekends. Actually, even the things I loved at the time, I wish I could take back—those

weekends playing bass in bands, rewatching *Spice World* over and over as a kid, that winter I tried to be a snowboarder, selling Girl Scout cookies, sleeping in past noon. At the time, sweating myself into a dizzy dehydration on stage in my band felt so important, but with my body now eating away at itself and the band broken up, I can't remember the significance of those moments. If I had skipped breakfast, laundry day, and school more often, how much time would I have gained? What would I even do with those new hours? Probably nothing. Maybe finish *Ulysses* or something.

The room is crowded: three nurses, a resident, and a neurologist all simultaneously doing their tasks—checking off medications, preparing the IV, setting up the pump, checking monitors, and organizing instruments. Despite my four previous surgeries, I never really took the time to understand each of their roles in the cutting-out-cancer play. Each of them—nurses in blue, resident in gray, and neurologist in a white lab coat—looks as relaxed as if this were only a dress rehearsal.

Michael hasn't moved yet, so I say his name.

He looks up at me and sad-smiles.

I ask him what he's thinking.

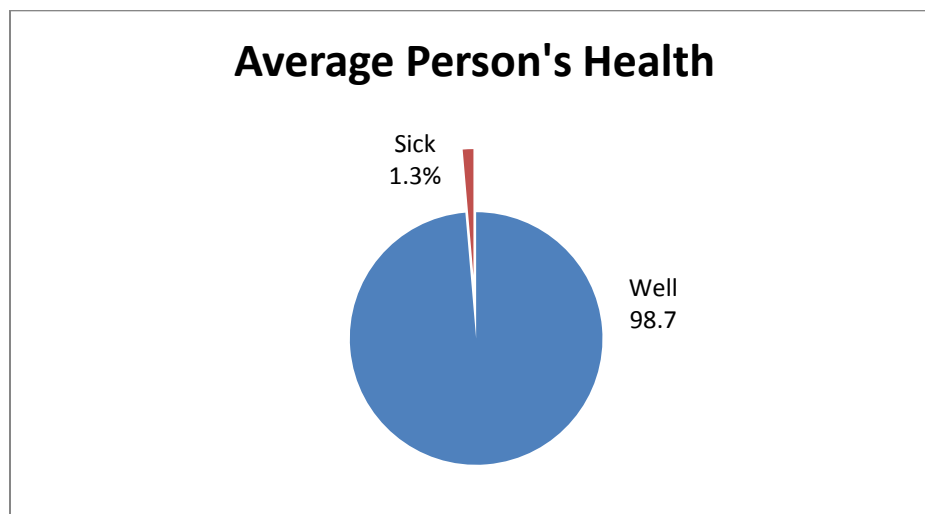
“Nothing,” he says.

That's the way he always is. His favorite sentence is *It's going to be fine*. Through everything, he's remained verbally optimistic even though his body language gives him away. Both of his legs jitter, and, even with his arms down, I can make out dark underarm sweat stains.

The fluorescent lights reflecting on the cream walls hurt my eyes. One of the bright rods flickers, and I empathize with it. Maybe it's like me, sputtering out. Maybe cleaning its dusty connection will let that light shine on. An amorphous blind spot floats in the center of my

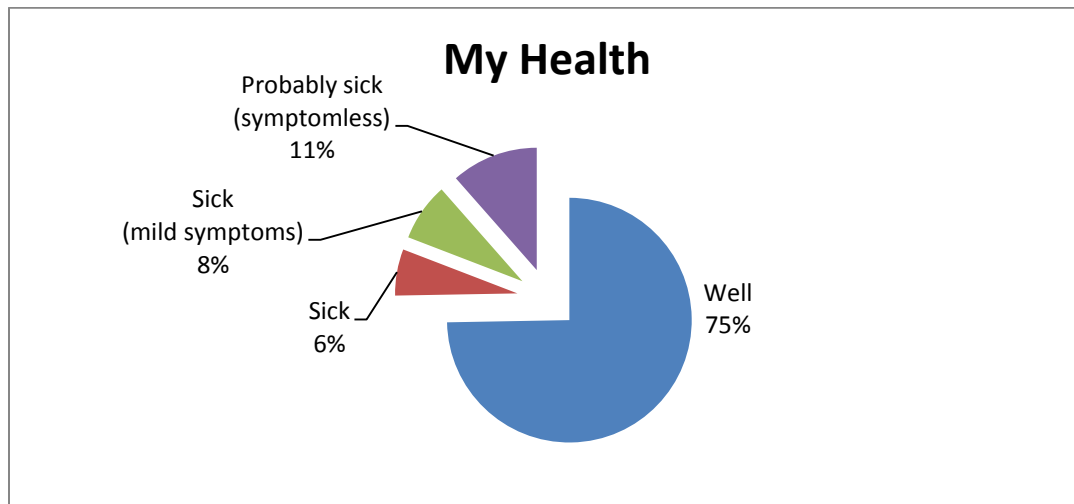
vision—sort of a white glare between my eyes. Give it twenty minutes, and I'll be light sensitive. I'll curl up in the bathroom (lights off) until I finally throw up, which usually makes things a little better. Sometimes I forget what it feels like to be well. It isn't just the migraines and seizures and symptoms. The nausea, fatigue, constipation, and overall exhaustion from the medicine has left me feeling more ill than the years I spent unaware of tumors bubbling in my brain matter.

Most people my age spend three or four days sick a year. Temperatures of ninety-nine, hangovers, and food poisoning make it seem more often, but those don't count. I'll be generous though and assume five sick days a year, which is almost nothing.



I'm not sure exactly how much time I spent cancerous and symptomless. Two or three years is the best guess. Then I spent at least a year, probably closer to two, feeling more or less okay. Sure, I had so many headaches that my friends called me a hypochondriac. For a while, an old boyfriend even thought I was faking to get out of sex. But it wasn't that bad until my first seizure. I spent half a year misdiagnosed as epileptic at John Hopkins before I got the diagnosis, started treatment, and transferred over to NIH Clinical Center for clinical trials when Hopkins thought I was too far gone. I want to blame them for wasting crucial time thinking I was

epileptic, but I was the one who spent years refusing to go to the hospital after the first time I passed out on stage because I didn't have health insurance. I can only make rough approximations about what my life's health thus far actually looks like.



One of the nurses, an Asian guy my age, maybe Filipino, finishes up preparing the Ambu bag. He has a hipster mustache that looks natural on him. To no one, or perhaps to everyone, he says, "Any plans this weekend?"

"Caps playing the Pens," the nurse with wiry eyebrows says without looking up.

A nurse with a ponytail pulled back too tight finishes some sort of note and says, "I'm hoping to not even get out of bed."

I almost say, *I don't plan on getting out of bed either*. It's the sort of joke that nurses would love but would probably bum Michael out.

Michael looks over at me, wrinkling his nose and raising his upper lip as if to say that their casual talk while preparing for this surgery is flippant. I don't care. Michael and I have stopped talking about the future—even if things turn out fine, he doesn't want to talk about anything beyond my surgery. He avoids all of my questions about the future: big questions like

“How much more time are you going to take off from work?” and small questions like, “Are you going to see the new Bond when it comes out?”

The nurse with the hipster mustache says, “I’m going to my brother’s punk rock concert.”

It’s clear he only asked everyone else about their weekend so he could announce his plans. By just saying “punk rock concert” instead of “show,” I know how out of place he’ll be. He’ll probably write “The Ramones” in sharpie on a jean jacket, cover it with safety pins, and find himself surrounded by gutter punks or crusties or hardcore bros—all of which will be unimpressed by his getup. Just imagining it, I pity him.

I say, “Where’s the show?”

He looks at me and smiles. “In Baltimore.”

“Where in Baltimore? Ram’s Head? Sidebar? Barclay?”

“Are you really doing this?” Michael says. “Talking about your old punk days?”

“What?”

“Shouldn’t you be, like, praying?”

Michael is the firm atheist, and I’m the agnostic. Our first month dating, we agreed to lend each other a book that captured our essence. I gave him Henry Rollins’s *Get in the Van*; he gave me Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*. I can’t determine if Michael is having some glimmer of faith, if he wants me to pray so that God can cover me while he stays ideologically pure, or if he just can’t stand the fact that I’m talking about punk. Michael was never in the scene. He’s the kind of dork that listens to NPR and buys singles on iTunes. I never thought we’d last because I couldn’t imagine being with someone who’s never scoured a used bin at a record store. If he wants to pout, let him.

I look at the nurse and say, “What venue?”

Michael sighs and puts his hands in the air like I'm ruining something.

The nurse clenches his teeth and fakes like he's thinking. He says without conviction, "The last one."

"That'll be fun." I hope, for his sake, it isn't at Barclay House—a house venue with bike racks, Marxist pamphlets, and pentagram graffiti. Every memory I have there is hazy from Natty Bo. The first time I ever saw a friend on heroin was at Barclay. No one would give the nurse any shit, but the culture shock would paralyze him. I wonder if Barclay still even does shows. I left the band and stopped going when the roar of distortion brought on searing migraines that left me puking in the bathroom. Yet, even after I left the scene, I wanted it to go on, wanted for basement shows and noise-not-music punks to outlive their self-destructive trajectories, to be there for other girls who moved from the sticks to the city for college, to exist for others to call home for a while until they vanished.

"You're a punk rocker, huh?"

I say, "Not anymore. I used to hang with that crowd." No one in the scene says *punk rocker*, let alone identifies as one. In the scene, you're just a person, and everyone else in the world who buys shirts from a store instead of from a touring band is an outsider. You're more likely to identify with some sub-sect as your tribe: a straightedge, vegan, post-hardcore kid for instance.

"Right on."

"I mostly played in indie bands, but once I filled in on bass for a hardcore punk band on an East Coast tour."

No one says anything. The room falls silent. Michael, without looking at me, walks out of the room, not quite slamming the door, but pretty close.

I shouldn't have mentioned Noah's band. The last show I went to was their farewell show. Michael drove me. He clung to me as I weaved my way through the house to talk with Noah and the guys. Michael didn't try to hide his discomfort. On the ride home, Michael asked if I ever had a thing for Noah. I said I didn't.

I never even told Michael about how a couple of weeks ago, while I was recovering from what we thought would be my last operation, Noah visited me in the hospital. Visitors showed up on schedules at this point: Michael in the evening after work and my parents in the early morning. Even friends texted and made appointments. No one just popped-in like Noah did. His black, band shirt, now faded gray—one that I remembered from years ago—hung from his lanky body. He'd always looked thin, but now his bones looked sharp as if they might burst through his bruised, papery skin. I'd never seen anyone so clearly a drug addict—probably heroin, because of geography.

Noah told me I looked like shit.

“Better than you,” I said.

Noah and I stared at each other, trying to determine which of us looked more ill: me with my hairless, staple ridden head, or him with his deep-eye sockets and black bruises. Noah walked around and bounced the half-inflated “Get Well” balloon that struggled to float against the weight of its ribbon. “How you feeling?” he asked.

“Fine.”

“Bullshit.”

“Like I haven't been outside in weeks. Like I had part of my skull sawed off, stuff cut out, and bottles of prescriptions pumped in me. It feels exactly like it is.”

“Story of my life.” He picked up the remote from near my nightstand and flicked the TV on—*Wheel of Fortune*—and turned the volume to a dull murmur. Hospital rooms have almost no sensory stimulation, and Noah seemed like he couldn’t stand the white clinical light and the sanitary organization without noise.

He leaned in to examine my IV port. “What’s that?”

I explained how it made injections easier.

Noah thought aloud about how he wished he had one.

A spasm of pain pierced my head. I winced until it passed.

“You all right?”

“Fine. I guess this is how we die,” I said—an inside joke from that tour, something we said all the time: when cops shut down a gig, when Noah drove twenty over the speed limit, when we ate mushrooms, when we pulled into ill-lit gas stations in the middle of the night.

“Holy shit. I forgot about that.”

It never occurred to me that our inside joke was a footnote from one of many tours replaced by other jokes. I didn’t know what to say, so I asked about Josh, the guitarist from his old band.

“The last time we talked, he told me he hoped he never saw me again. That was like three years ago.”

After Noah left, I wished that he hadn’t come. I had this illusion of him that seemed invincible. I knew the band had broken up, but I still imagined them all living in that punk house, partying every night with resilient bodies that shrugged off hangovers and bad trips. That summer I’d spent with them froze them in time. It was like grown-up peek-a-boo. If I didn’t see people, they stayed the same.

Now, the Xanax has dulled. Silence overwhelms me. All of the medical personnel's eyes are on me. Somewhere along the line, they finished their tasks. An IV is attached to my chest. Dr. Noori is in the room. Her fingers are long and thin, and I wonder if that helps surgeons. I only met Dr. Noori a few days before when she approached me to discuss the surgery, an operation she developed. If the surgeon is in the room, it's time. My mouth is as dry as the Southwest. I grip the plastic railing of the bed and involuntarily squeeze until my fingers feel like they could snap.

Dr. Noori again explains the procedure—clinical and professional.

Cutting her off, I say, "I'm sorry, but can I, like, have a moment?" I gulp. "And can someone get Michael?"

Dr. Noori motions for the others to clear out.

"I want to go to the window," I say.

One of the nurses looks annoyed as she gets the wheelchair. I feel fine standing, but I know better than to argue over this point. They want me seated for insurance reasons. The nurse pushes me and wheels the IV to the window. Old snow lies in muddy patches. Cars slog by on wet asphalt. Leafless tree branches look embarrassed at their nakedness. Winter has been warm this year.

"We'll be outside the door. I can't pretend to know what you're going through, but I promise you that this is the best shot," Dr. Noori says.

Michael slinks into the room. I try to calm my breathing, taking huge gulps of air and breathing out in seconds-long breaths. I thought I'd come to terms with all of this shit in the months since the diagnosis. But, rather than some looming date in the near distance, this is palpable.

I run my hands over my head. It feels unfamiliar. My fingers trace the ridges of my bone flap: the scar tissue hasn't fully scabbed over. I can't think with this blistering headache. Part of me wants the anesthetic just to sleep and escape the pain. It feels wrong to treat this procedure like an Ambien. There is an expected amount of solemnity that I should show myself.

Michael joins me at the window. The sun seems too bright, and a glare obscures a lot of the view from my angle.

"Are you all right?" I ask.

"Yeah. Just thinking a lot."

"About what?"

"What we're going to do when you wake up." Each word is stretched and monotone. He clearly doesn't buy what he is saying. "If I had more vacation time, I'd take you somewhere."

"If I don't wake up," I pick at my cuticles, "don't wait too long before dating."

"What are you talking about?"

"Like, within a week, you should have a one-night stand with some girl with thick hair."

He runs his hands down his face. "That's not funny."

"I'm serious."

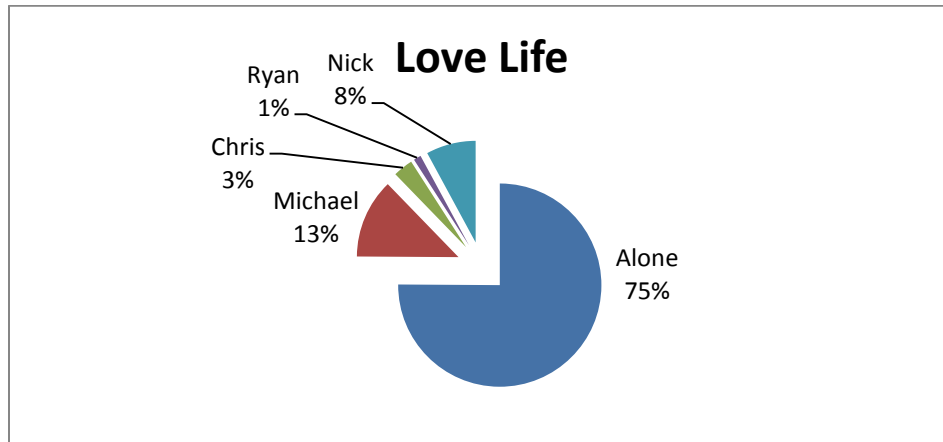
"Stop."

He touches the window, then lets his hand drop.

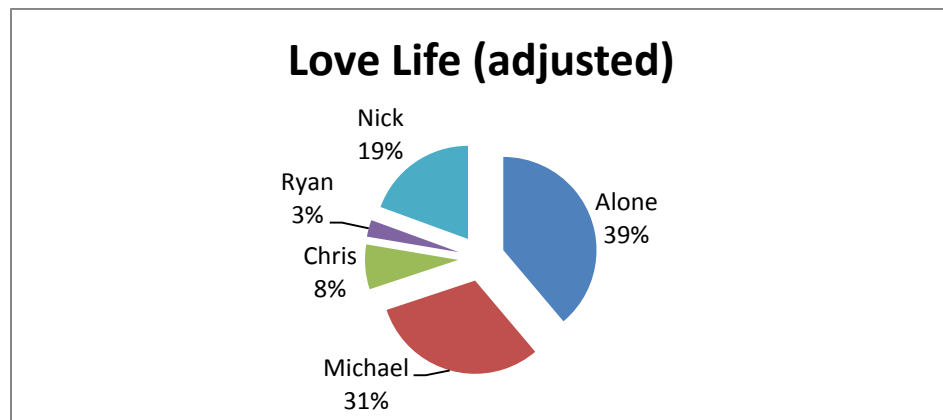
The migraine intensifies.

I used to ache for Noah in a way I never do for Michael. Back then, I'd tremble when Noah texted me. When my phone buzzed and I saw it was Michael, I put off responding for hours—everything lacked urgency. Is that just an age thing? My emotions felt deeper, almost cavernous then. I still wonder what would happen if I spent a whole day now with those

suppressed crushes. It's easy to predict how I'd feel with old boyfriends, the ones where feelings rose, peaked, and fell. With them, I had a full arc. I was confident in my feelings. Although, I really haven't had many boyfriends. Most of my time I've spent alone.

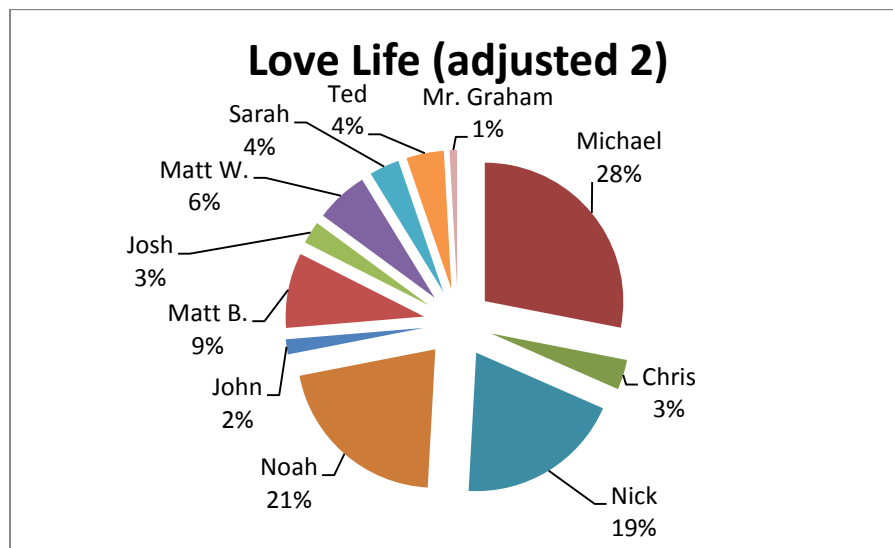


But, thinking about love this way exaggerates my aloneness, since singleness in elementary school (and to a lesser extent, middle school) is essentially the same as aloneness, with the exception of hand holding before morning announcements. If I lob off the ten years before I discovered real longing, it would look like this:



If I'm going to be honest with myself, that doesn't reflect how I actually felt, because, even though I felt alone, what I remember most is the crushing want—a nameless need to fuse myself with others. I won't call it love, but it felt like love then. I don't remember a moment when I was alone and not wanting. Even with eliminating all the stage actors, the waiters, the

strangers I fantasized about meeting and fucking—taking out all of them, and only leaving in those for whom I ached for, it still feels fragmented.



This doesn't even take into account overlap—want crashing want, sometimes sinking for months or years until one of them “liked” a picture of me, and my mind raced with what that could mean.

And that doesn't explain what I feel for Michael: a barely-boyfriend of a few months (I always believed we were both keeping an eye out for someone better) before the diagnosis. Michael didn't leave. He brought me chocolates and teddy bears until he discovered how much I hated the cliché, then brought me Nutella and Miyazaki DVDs. I relied on him as I trudged toward what felt like uncertain gallows. We married in a courthouse before what we thought was the final surgery, when it looked like nothing could get worse. When I came to after that surgery, deep down I knew it didn't work even though the doctors were optimistic. Michael thought I was only being pessimistic, but it felt more intuitive and profound. Sometimes I wonder if this vulnerability is a deeper love or just dependence. No one wants to be alone.

His lips quiver, opening and closing. Almost mute sounds pulse and then are cut off.

“Just say it, Michael.”

“Do you think we’ll make it?” he asks. He shivers.

He doesn’t have to explain. I know what he means. Taking the diagnosis out of the equation, if the deathbed were somewhere in a murky future, if it weren’t so palpable, would we have stood a chance?

“I don’t know.”

“That’s kind of what I figured.”

For a moment, the migraine lifts. Relief washes over me. Then it pulses back, magnified. I wince, squeezing my eyes shut as if I could force pain away with concentration.

Michael says, “After you first said no, I should have stopped proposing. I wanted to believe you just didn’t want to make me a widower.”

That is a part of it, but it is so much more. I said no because I didn’t want him to feel obligated to stay. But, I caved to make him happy, and I caved to experience a wedding (albeit rushed) and married life (albeit brief). I caved to feel a cold, gold ring on my finger.

After I finally said yes, while we were kissing, my first thought was: *So, I’ve decided to ruin my life.* I still don’t know what that means.

I say, “What about you? You probably only stuck around because I was sick. Before I told you about the tumors, every time you called, I thought you were going to break up with me.”

“Maybe.”

“You’re too fucking noble.”

He grips my hand. Outside, a car caked with salt sloshes through a puddle of slush. I pull him toward me and kiss him, a dry peck.

“I think I’m ready.”

We both say I love you, him first. Then he opens the door, letting in all the doctors and nurses. A nurse wheels me back over to the bed and helps me into it. Michael is back in his seat. Everyone is in place as if nothing has changed.

Dr. Noori again explains the procedure. The words float past me ethereally. She says, “We are ready to begin the procedure.”

I nod.

“Are you ready?”

I want to say I am, but suddenly I feel that it’s important to fill my mind with images and memories. All I see are medical personnel waiting to do their jobs in a white hospital room. “I think so.”

I want someone to tell me that it’ll be like taking a nap—I’ll wake up well. The nurse with the hipster mustache says, “This is just a mild anesthetic.”

My body relaxes from the medication. My vision blurs. The air tastes sweet. I take deep breaths.

The nurse says, “People always say this IV burns. Don’t be alarmed.”

He’s right. The medication sears for a second, and I have to fight the urge to pull out the IV or shake my arm. Shouldn’t I be used to pain? Everything unfocuses. Michael looks away.

“How you doing?” someone asks.

“I’m fine,” I say. “Thanks.” I have the sense that my mouth isn’t working. Blinking feels perfect. I fight the urge to close my eyes. I want to remember everything. My eyes slide closed.

I try to focus on memories, on everyone in the waiting room. I open my eyes, and everything is smeared. Time is fickle and elongated.

I'm cold. A shiver creeps down my spine, and my feet feel numb. I count synchronous beeps and moments of cold. I walk into a snowstorm. My bare feet crunch through ice into wet snow. I hold out my tongue and let the cold collapse me.

MILES MEASURED IN HOURS

Tour has been rough on you. For two months, night after night, you've played in dimly lit clubs and punk houses for donations, usually around \$40. You've slept only a couple of hours each night, then driven for more hours than that. Sometimes you tell yourself that this is exactly what you expected and always wanted, but you think you're lying to yourself.

Time leaves you estranged. You've mostly stopped calling and texting everyone back home in your Maryland college town. Your family. Your friends. Your girlfriend, Taylor—are you even still together? Sometimes she calls you, but usually while you're driving or during a show. Despite being around your bandmates nonstop, you spend most of your time listening to your iPod, pretending to read, or flat out ignoring them. Eliot's AM hangovers and Noah's midnight disappearances to tag every new city no longer seem like quirks. Instead, it's predictable and inconvenient and passé. Just three weeks left.

Bloomington, Indiana is about as plain as you thought it would be. Run-of-the-mill, flat, Midwest, college town. The punk house tonight is called Blank Haus. You show up early... real early because the promoter from the night before was a normie with two kids; he didn't even offer his floor. Morgan from Blank Haus, your contact that you've never met, said you can crash all morning.

When you get there, you're surprised that Morgan is a girl. Punk houses usually add up to a bunch of dudes. She lives with some guy though, some dude named Derrick, but they aren't dating. Morgan repeats this several times as she shows you and the guys around the house. Some reason, this relieves you. Falling for some girl you'll never see again is the last thing you need, but while the others claim the couches and sleep, you drink coffee with Morgan.

When was the last time you felt like this? You remember a dozen other crushes at shows, but you never talked to any of them because you're sort of shy. Maybe it was back when you met your girlfriend last year. Morgan has the same short bleach blonde with black roots that Taylor has. But unlike Taylor with her indie-emo obsession, Morgan even likes the same hardcore bands as you, no matter how dark or metallic or dissonant. Morgan seems to "get" you.

At some point, Derrick walks past, wheeling a bike down the hall. Seems like a pretty typical bike punk to you. Avoiding your gaze, he says, "Hey. I'm off to work." His messenger bag probably has a 40-ounce of Olde English or a six-pack of PBR in it on more days than not.

The lack of sleep hits you around noon. Morgan takes you to a burrito place. You start feeling silly and make puns about how black beans have a lot of "amigo" acids. She rolls her eyes. Eleven dollars for food isn't in your budget, especially when you have some bread and peanut butter in the van, but you do it anyway.

She asks if you want to go swimming in a quarry. At first, you think she is joking; when you realize she's serious, you agree. You don't like the idea of falling asleep and missing a chance to spend a little more time with her. Morgan drives you a little outside of town taking backroads. Eventually she turns onto a road that is slick with mud that goes into a patch of woods. She pulls off to the side of the road, and together you walk, sticks popping like bones, hop a fence, and come to a quarry. It reminds you of the lakes you swim in back home, except with concrete and right angles instead.

Later, you both jump in wearing only underwear. The water is so cold that you immediately tense up. The water is clearer than any river or stream you've seen back east. This is the closest thing to a shower you have gotten in the past few days. You imagine that you see the

icy water wash away the sweat from the previous few gigs. Through all of this, you can discern her form in the glassy, still water. What would she feel like pressed up against you?

On the way back to Blank Haus, your girlfriend back home texts you: *I heart you*. She literally spells out “heart.” You imagine her reaction if she knew that you were alone with a girl. You imagine the shift in the contours of her face if she realized that both your and Morgan’s underwear were drying in the back seat. You imagine how you’d explain that you changed on the opposite sides of the car and that you didn’t look, but your girlfriend wouldn’t buy it despite it being true. You don’t respond to the text. Maybe after some sleep. Maybe after a few hours of distance between you and Morgan.

When you get back to Morgan’s house, the other guys are awake. Morgan goes to her room. One of them says, “I can’t wait to hear what you’ve been up to.”

“Nothing happened,” you say. You look away and add, “Or will happen.”

Waiting around for the show seems to take forever. You can’t sleep for some reason.

When the show starts, things are pretty ordinary: no one shows up on time, it starts late, and Derrick sucks at collecting door money. At least the kids at the show seem excited.

As you load in what is left of the gear and the merch, the sleep deprivation hits you hard. The foldable chair beside the t-shirts and albums seems way more comfortable than it should.

The set blurs by as you stand motionless concentrating only on hitting the right notes and singing the right words. For forty some days in a row, you’ve played the same set. You could play these songs in your sleep. The mid-tempo opener from your new album that begins with a buildup, the heavier songs from your old albums, a new one that will go on a split after it’s recorded, and then closing with the song from the demo that has the sing-along at the end. Between songs you scan the basement for Morgan, but she is nowhere to be found.

As the closing band loads in, Morgan shows up and says she loves your band. You ask where she was. She says that she was right up front, which you know is a lie. After a hug—are you too sweaty from the set—she makes the rounds, giving nothing more than a handful of sentences per pack of friends.

You are at the merch table next to the guitarist of the local band that opened. At first you both talk about gear, but then you talk about Bloomington, then Blank Haus, and then Morgan. He tries to select his words carefully because he clearly doesn't want to offend anyone who sets up shows, but he tells you that every time there is a show she ends up taking ketamine and spending the bulk of the show in her room. He says she only really comes down between bands to hang out. You're not sure what to make of this.

Right before the last band starts, Morgan comes and gets you at the merch table. She grabs your hand and leads you to her room. Old show flyers cover the walls, and her bed lies on the floor without a frame. You follow her over to the bed. You sit beside each other, but you don't even feel quite there. You're more vacant than you'd ever been. She leans over and kisses you. You don't kiss back. It doesn't even feel like a kiss, just skin mashed together. It strikes you that she smells similar to your girlfriend: cucumber melon lotion and cigarettes. At least, it is how you remember Taylor smells. Having not seen her in months muddles her in your mind. More than anything, the physical distance, the miles measured in hours, parallels your memory of her. The farther away you went, the more of a memory she seemed, but with tour wrapping up in the next three weeks, she is more tangible. She seems more real than she did back when you were in California. Morgan puts her hand on your thigh. Her eyelids are puffy, and her pupils look swollen. You don't even bother coming up with an excuse. You just stand up and leave.

The next morning, Morgan says she is really “out of it.” She claims she doesn’t remember anything from last night. You can’t tell if she is telling the truth. However, you nod and don’t try to fill in any gaps. Today you play Chicago, and the other guys want deep dish pizza beforehand, so you all gather everything up, climb into the van, and head out early. You respond to your girlfriend’s text—“I heart you too.”

Over the next few days, Morgan and you send each other a few texts about the end of the tour and bands to check out, but within the week she is just another number under the “tour contacts” category in your phone.

Every day there is a new set of names that you forget mid-conversation. When everything is memorable, you have a hard time remembering anything. Was it Charlotte or Durham where the crust punk with the face tattoo traded a six-pack of warm beer and three loose cigarettes for a patch and an LP? But sometimes it takes Bloomington, Indiana, to make you remember just how much you wish you were home. You miss watching TV with your roommates and complaining about how nothing good is on. You miss sleeping through class. And you miss Taylor. You miss everything, and that stands out.

FOR LUCKY

When I was twelve, every Sunday my mother and I visited my grandfather. He lived on the other side of the mountain. I was his only grandchild. As often as I could, I put off homework until minutes before my mother came to get me, hoping that she'd let me stay home because school work trumped everything for her. My plan never worked. Those visits were a blur of pictures of golf courses, casual racism, and ginger ale.

The shag carpet at my grandfather's looked like moss. The air smelled stale and swirled with dust. He sat in his recliner. Whenever he left the chair, I stared at the cracked, stretched leather, imagining that some specter of him lingered seated. My mother sat in what was once my grandmother's chair—the blue fabric bunched where the cushions had worn down. They watched game shows. I brought over a Gameboy, hoping they'd ignore me so I could ignore them.

Once, during a commercial promoting a vacation to Las Vegas—the screen flickering with cash payouts in tall stacks of hundreds—my grandfather asked my mother, “Did I ever tell you about the time Lucky and I gunned down a fleet of Kamikaze? Not a single one hit their mark.”

“Yeah. You told us earlier,” she said. For most of his life he refused to talk about the war, but after my grandmother passed, he forced every memory onto us.

I wished she wouldn't have said anything. It seemed more humane to treat each repeated story as a dress rehearsal. That's what I would have wanted.

“Really?” he said.

“Yes.” There was the faintest up-turn in her lips, as if to say *forgetting is funny*. “But go on. We’d love to hear it again.”

He blinked hard, trying to conjure up the memory, but nothing came to the surface. “Well I guess this old gray horse ain’t what he used to be.”

“You can tell us.”

“No. No. The last thing I want to be is the old fart that tells the same stories over and over.”

I didn’t quite believe him. All my life I’d heard the same stories. Once, I had my mother in hysterics repeating word for word, the same comic timing, my grandfather’s story of the hiding he took for napping in the men’s room during church.

I felt his gaze land on me even though I never looked up from my small square screen. He said, “Josh, is there any fighting in that game?”

I said, “Yeah.” I was actually stacking *Tetris* blocks, but I knew where this was headed regardless. It seemed like every month we had this conversation. My only choice was whether I wanted to get to the point fast or slow.

“You like those games with all the killing, huh.”

“I guess.”

He turned to my mother and said, “And you allow this?”

“It’s just a game.”

“No it’s not. That’s what everyone forgets. Those games aren’t going to teach you how to respect life even when you have to take it.” I didn’t look up, but the chair creaked from his wild gestures. “You can say what you want about the Kamikaze, but they knew a thing or two about death and sacrifice, I’ll give them that. But that didn’t mean that me and Lucky could just let

them crash into our aircraft carriers. They fell like hail,” he said, bringing his hand down on his armrest with a thud. “Most of the time one or two would sneak past the defenses, but there was one time where Lucky and I managed to get each one. It was like—”

“Dad, you’ve already told us that story today.” She looked over at me with her eyebrows peaked. His memory lapses before this were over the course of weeks, but never before had he blanked before the end of a commercial break.

I let the blocks in my game pile off the screen. All three of us triangulated our gazes, but never quite looking anyone in the eye.

He blushed, his ears turning the color of tomato juice. “Really? You know this old gray horse ain’t what he used to be.”

Whenever he said that, I imagined a horse with droopy jowls, joints swollen with arthritis, moon-like cataracts swirling in bulging eyes—a near-death show horse now only good for glue. Yet, my grandfather still seemed young. At the driving range, he’d rocket golf balls further than I thought possible. He didn’t need reading glasses and still had a *Playboy* subscription. Age to me meant physical deterioration, and it seemed to barely touch him. How could he be on the decline?

That night, my parents called a family meeting. Around the kitchen table, with the lights turned low, I knew what was coming. Off and on, they’d talked about how someday my grandfather would move in with us. My mother was still shaken by his forgetfulness. She asked my father and me to vote whether to put my grandfather in a nursing home or in the guest room. Unanimously we chose to take him in, but even at that age I knew that my vote was symbolic—the decision had been made long ago, so why bother?

#

My grandfather's new room, previously a guest room that went years between uses, was separated from mine by a narrow hallway. Nothing felt normal anymore. He spent his time napping on the living room couch, inquiring about his next doctor's visit, sneaking handfuls of chocolate chip cookies between meals, watching *James Bond* movies he taped from cable—complete with commercials. Neither of us had grown more comfortable with the other. Every day felt like an expectation, as if an uncomfortable silence was waiting to be broken, but we lacked the words, as if we were trying to ignore a hanging scab.

Before, when the visits were weekly, I could get by just being in the same room. Now I felt like I was either going to enter a self-imposed exile into my room or we'd have to build some sort of grandson-grandfather relationship no matter how flimsy. When I couldn't handle it anymore, I went over to his room and knocked on the door. He answered wearing a yellowed undershirt, his belly bulging over his slacks. He gave me a hug as I just stood there. I never understood how his ballooned-out stomach felt so muscular.

"I'm bored," I lied, "Do you want to play checkers?" I hadn't played him in years because within our family he was a checkers legend. He'd never lost a match as far as my family was concerned. It sucked all the fun out of playing, but I knew he'd enjoy it.

He said, "You think you can take down your Pap?"

"Maybe. I think so."

By the time I had the board set up at the kitchen table, he was all smiles.

I took time assessing moves, picking the red plastic circle up and hovering it over a square before putting it back where it had been. All the while he whistled big band melodies. The second my finger left a piece, he'd make his own move, slamming it against the cardboard so hard that all of the pieces shifted millimeters. Then he'd go back to whistling.

He gloated after he won. I expected him to win by a landslide, but he barely beat me. I wondered if he was really as good as I remembered, if I was just better, or if the misfired neurons made his legendary gameplay more human.

Later, from the dinner table, when my grandfather noticed the checker board on the counter, he said, “Checkers. Now there’s a game I haven’t played in years.”

#

Over the next few months, my grandfather kept forgetting. Every time we played checkers he won by shrinking margins.

That autumn I spent a lot of time piecing together plastic model kits of different anime mechs. It helped distract me from wondering whether a moment could slide its way into his long-term memory.

Sure something would stick for a day or two, but in the end it was defragged in no-time. Repetition didn’t even work. I found myself wanting to make an impact that would stay. Something between us that he’d remember a week later. Was it too late?

“You like models?” my grandfather asked from the hallway. He peered in through my cracked door.

I said that I did.

He wandered off to the living room where he watched *Family Feud* until he fell asleep, drooling, on the couch.

When I got home from school the next day, I found a large model airplane kit in my room. My grandfather had recently had his driver’s license revoked. He must have had my mother pick it up for him. A P-51 Mustang, the type that really flew. The models I had built were pre-painted plastic bits; after an hour of connecting the pieces, it was just a few stickers and then

it was finished. The P-51, the fuselage was just a few pieces. Yet the instructions seemed too sparse to complete the electronics. I'd need a set of watch screwdrivers and a crescent wrench, and I didn't know what either was. The only piece that came intact was the remote control to pilot it. Before even trying, I gave up.

"What do you think?" my grandfather called from his room across the hall.

I stammered for a bit and said, "It's great. Thanks."

"When you finish it, we'll go out to a field and fly it."

"That may take a while."

"I got time."

That night, just to confirm it'd be as impossible as I thought to put together, I pulled out all the parts. Each piece was sealed in shrink wrap. Using a rusty X-acto knife, I made a pile of parts and useless plastic bags on my bed. Using the instructions, I pieced together some of the fuselage until I came to a step that required soldering. I put everything on my desk.

Later my grandfather asked, "What's that?"

"The P-51 you got me."

"How nice of me." He picked up the wing, "This isn't right. The silver, it's wrong. Too dark."

"It looks fine to me."

"You always say that, Lucky."

I didn't correct him. I didn't know if he was trying to be funny or had slipped into the past, merging me with his old partner.

"Whatever happened to me?" I asked.

His face twitched as if something had short-circuited.

“To Lucky?” I said.

My grandfather gulped a few times and said, “He died, didn’t he? Like everyone.”

“When?”

“Disappeared in a storm. We didn’t have visibility. His radio had been acting up, and then it went silent.”

“Maybe he landed on an island somewhere.”

“That sort of thing doesn’t happen in real life.”

I had my mom buy a couple of different shades of silver paint for him to compare, and I coated the plane.

After school, I worked on the model until I finished the final step of the instructions. I was too afraid to fly it though. Too many things could go wrong: electronic malfunctions, robin collisions, act of God lightning strikes. Even after the P-51 was finished, I spent days reading the manual trying to wrap my head around radio frequency, adjusting the high-speed needle, and how to nail a landing.

One Saturday, my grandfather said, “Are you going to fly that thing or what?”

I tried to determine if he even remembered that he bought it for me, but I couldn’t.

“The conditions aren’t right,” I said. It was too wet and foggy.

“It’s always going to be something. Come on.”

My mother drove us down far enough down the mountain that the fog that had blotted out the sky had become low hanging clouds. She pulled into the sparse driveway of a one-room church that’d been nothing more than a historical marker for as long as I could remember. She waited in the car listening to songs on the radio that were fuzzy with static in the valley. Before

liftoff, he picked up a blade of grass and dropped it. It drifted lazily without a single gust of wind pushing the blade off its downward course.

Now that we were out here, I had trouble trying to remain calm. Despite everything, I was still a child, and the uncertainty and recklessness of leaving the ground was like a shot of pure adrenaline jammed into my heart. I used the rough blacktop road as a runway. The sound of the model's engine sounded like an electric toothbrush, but it slid from the blacktop into the air as if flight was effortless.

He mussed up my hair and said, "Who would have thought you'd get that pile of parts to fly?"

I flew the plane in tight figure eights in the clear below the looming stratus clouds. Despite my excitement, I wanted to enjoy it more than I did. With all the theoretical freedom of the atmosphere, the blanket of fog ceilinged the tiny plane in. In minutes, I grew bored, like I was watching a fly trapped between a screen and a closed window—predictably flying from corner to corner without variation.

"Do you want to try?" I asked.

He chuckled without smiling. "Are you sure?"

"Sure."

With my eyes still to the fog cage, I gave a tutorial. A tutorial I repeated in full three times. If this didn't drive an icpick into his long term memory, I doubted anything would.

I passed the receiver off to him. It quivered in his hands, made more noticeable by the dancing of the two foot antennae. Overhead, the plane sputtered erratically like a cricket in a snake pit.

“What do I do?” he said, looking down at the controller as if he didn’t understand how the plastic with all its buttons and levers ever got into his hands. He thumbed the buttons and levers with increasing frustration.

And then the plane vanished with a puff into the fog. I pulled the controller from his hands and tried to steer it back into the clear, but all I heard was the buzz of the motor getting fainter. I wondered how I didn’t know this would happen. The back of my throat burned, and it felt impossible to swallow.

“Lucky,” he said. “Not again.” He took off his glasses and tried to wipe his eyes without me noticing.

When I couldn’t hear anything anymore, I said. “Let’s head home.”

“When are we going to fly that plane?”

“We already did.”

“Really?”

I nodded

“You know this old, gray horse just ain’t what he used to be.”

#

Within a year, he passed. Over that time, I couldn’t determine whether my grandfather’s decline came fast or slow, but still he declined. He slept more than he was awake and forgot who we were for long stretches, even forgetting he was ever a father. Bad days eventually outnumbered good ones. I never built another model; he never even mentioned it. Occasionally, we’d still play checkers. I beat him more and more often as he attempted more illegal moves. When I pointed them out, he’d grow so frustrated that he’d swipe the pieces off the board rather

than lose. The memory of the model plane already seemed distant and fuzzy, like something from a movie that I couldn't quite place.

Later, I was stuffing his clothes into garbage bags when I found in his closet a cardboard box labeled "For Lucky" in a black marker. Inside the box, wrapped in a bathrobe, was the P-51 covered in scratches, held together with big globs of super glue. It felt delicate and liable to fall apart. Underneath the model there was a picture yellowed with age: two uniformed pilots, young and smooth, smirking invincibly in front of their Mustangs, overcome with confidence that their lives were bound together for long years, unable to fathom the future, the fog.

GASPING FOR BREATH, EARS RINGING

On the night of my hardcore punk band's last show, I fought against the slight buzz from a warming forty. It was a house show in the basement of the punk house that I shared with the other guys in the band, Eliot and Noah. Seven years ago, we played our first show here to twenty kids. After more tours and songs than I could remember, there was something like sixty people there. I ditched the forty on a random stair. Even though I wanted to get blackout drunk, I wouldn't allow myself to have a hangover tomorrow. In the morning I'd pack up the rest of my things and drive ten hours to move from Western Maryland to Burlington, Vermont, a place I'd only visited once on tour four years ago. I was twenty-five, not nineteen anymore: a fact I'd struggled with for years. Two opening bands, then our last set, then life.

Upstairs, I stood outside of Eliot's door. I didn't want to see him—we'd begun avoiding each other long before I told him I was quitting the band—but I felt obligated. At one point, Eliot was my best friend. Maybe today we could at least pretend that things were okay. Out of a window, I watched clumsy, dark clouds topple over each other and prayed that somehow the storm would miss us.

I knocked on the door, but the dissonant strums and chaotic, unsyncopated drum fills of the opening band's sound check pummeling up from the basement, shaking floorboards, tickling feet through shoes, probably drowned it out. After waiting a few long seconds, without hearing a "come in," I let myself in.

Eliot sat on his mattress—twenty-seven years old and he still didn't have a frame or box spring. He looked a little high but mostly lucid. I hoped that Eliot only smoked pot until we played. After that, I didn't care if he used. On the water-damaged futon across the room, one of

the dudes Eliot worked with at the farm-to-table restaurant slept shirtless. For a second I wondered if Eliot and the guy were fucking, but mostly I wanted to know how that dude slept through the noise: passed out or narcoleptic?

“Just our luck—storm of the century the day of our last show,” I said. When Eliot didn’t respond, I added, “What are the chances?”

From the basement, the sound check ended, plunging the room into silence.

Without looking up, Eliot took a hit, held it, and released the smoke in the same breath as he said, “Don’t know.”

Ever since I mentioned the move, Eliot had barely looked in my eyes. Eliot took it harder than Noah, which made sense because Eliot wrote the songs and, even if he never said it out loud, clearly thought of it as *his* band.

I didn’t know what to say, so I asked, “Are you stoked to play the old songs?”

Eliot exaggerated an exhale and said, “I’m stoked to just be done with this shit.”

This didn’t sound like him. It sounded more like me. I hadn’t had fun in at least the past year, maybe more. At first the band was the only thing that mattered to me. I gave up jobs and girlfriends to tour often. Tour was my waking life and being home was like sleep—something I reluctantly had to do. But I wanted more. I imagined us bursting from the house show scene and playing clubs with green rooms, places that had riders and didn’t pay in one dollar bills, warm beers, and loose cigarettes. But Eliot refused to play any show that had tickets. I’d heard his *DIY or die* speech so many times that I’d hear it in my sleep. We stagnated for a while, and recently I noticed that our records weren’t getting repressed anymore, the crowds dwindled. Noah and Eliot didn’t either realize or care. I couldn’t stand watching all my old friend’s age out of the scene

while I hung around at house parties where teenagers snorted coke. If we weren't going to even try to reach that next tier, then I wanted out entirely.

The only reason that I held on so long was perseverance: after all the years of working minimum wage jobs and quitting them to play basements, DIY art spaces, and legion halls, I didn't know what came next. What did normies even do without some tour on the horizon?

It sounded miserable, but no less so than continuing: watching each other grow bitter, playing with bands that all sounded the same every night, becoming the "old guy at the show."

A band called Ex-Kids in the basement erupted. Our bands used to tour together all the time.

Ignoring Eliot's comment, I said, manufacturing excitement, "It's going to rule. I practiced like crazy today."

"It doesn't really matter."

Eliot's nonchalance made me bite the inside of my cheek in hopes of calming down—it didn't work. Fuck his passive aggression. This was all a mistake. I should have just played and left in the morning without saying goodbye. I stammered a bit and said, "I mean... I don't want to sound like shit. I don't even know if I'll ever play another show."

Still looking at the floor, he said, "Then why the fuck would you care?"

I couldn't come up with a good answer because I fantasized about how satisfying it would feel to break his nose.

"Exactly," Eliot said, shouting over the music. He leaned forward, forearms on his knees, eyes still averted. "It's just like how you don't know why you're leaving. Christ, I'd understand if you were going back to school or moving for a girl or something. It'd make sense if you even had a god damn job up there."

It sounded both rehearsed and off the cuff. He probably had a longer speech prepared, but he only said the highlights.

Eliot said, “We’ll sound fine. It’s whatever.”

Without even attempting to find an excuse, I walked out, slamming the door and punching the door frame for good measure, both of which probably went unnoticed because of the blaring music. My fist throbbed steadily with my heartbeat. For a moment I hoped I’d broken a finger so I’d have an excuse not to play. Yet the throbbing dwindled as my fingers swelled. I had broken enough fingers before to know it was only bruised, not even sprained.

To distract myself, I went to the basement to watch Ex-Kids. As I opened the door to the basement, a wave of heat hit me harder than I hit the door. More people came to the show than I expected. The last house show I booked here had like twenty-five people, which is realistically what our unventilated basement could comfortably hold. I pushed my way through the mass of sweating bodies on the stairs to get to the back, where I couldn’t even see Ex-Kids. I didn’t mind though. I’d seen them more times than I could remember (even roadied for them a few years ago).

The heat and the near-unbreathable air overwhelmed me. I couldn’t imagine playing down here later. As Ex-Kids played, I wanted to feel more emotional than I actually did. When I imagined this night, I thought I’d sob to the music in a wave of nostalgia. When the singer made a short speech about how much my band meant to him, I only thought about how after tonight I’d never have to see Eliot again. I wanted it over and done with. By the time they finished, my shirt was drenched in what I hoped was my own sweat but could have been anyone’s. I followed the crowd as they climbed the stairs out of the basement, gasping from breath, ears ringing.

While the first and second bands swapped out gear, without thinking, I walked past the roofed porch filled with smoking punks and into the rain. On the sidewalk plump rain drops, each one seeming to create its own small puddle, covered me and everything. At first, the rain brought relief from the heat, but now sopping wet, alone with an audience of smoking on-lookers, I felt stupid. I wanted to go somewhere to think, but my room was filled with boxes and gear and the rest of the house was filled with punks and art majors, anarchists and pseudo-goths, androgynous bloggers and crusties. I strolled through the rain to the van. Lightning illuminated the block, revealing the crevices between the cobblestones, silhouetting the distant churches, making them look alive and sinister. Instinctually I counted until I heard thunder: one and a half Mississippi.

In the van, I rhythmically bounced my head on the steering wheel like God damn Winnie the Pooh: think, think, think. If neither Eliot nor I cared about this last show, why was I even here? I could drive off around to wait out the show and storm, and return long after everyone left. I'd spent my whole life in this town, and if possible, I hoped to never return. The thing holding me back was a vague sense of obligation, but obligated to whom? The people who came out? Eliot and Noah? Maybe myself? Regardless, I considered this final show one last box on the pre-move checklist, right along with picking up the security deposit, renting a trailer, and filling out the forwarding address form. I took off my soaked shirt, put on a dry hoodie I found on the floor of the van, and ran back into the house.

The second band started. I found Noah hanging out in the living room talking to a girl who stopped coming to shows years ago. We used to be so close. At one point, she even went on tour with us, but I wanted to be alone so much that I could barely bring myself to look at her.

Noah said, “I got you a gift.” I followed him to the refrigerator in the empty kitchen. He pulled out a box of wine.

I laughed first and then groaned as Noah ripped the cardboard up and pulled out the clear bag full of pink liquid. I said, “I promised myself I’d never drink a fucking space bag again.”

“Come on,” Noah said. “One last time for, like, tradition or something.”

Tradition was an understatement. Back at those early practices and shows, between the two of us, we probably increased Franzia’s stock a few points. After a year or two, neither of us could stomach it anymore. I put the spout in my mouth and took a leery sip. It was both as bad and not as bad as I expected. It tasted syrupy and manufactured, like a memory of sophomore-year vomit.

“Are you all set for the move?” Noah asked.

I shrugged while I took another gulp. I passed him the bag. “Pretty much. I just need to load up the trailer in the morning. My room is wall-to-wall boxes.”

Nodding his head, he said, “Shit,” without emphasis or emotion. After thinking for a few seconds he added, “After the show, we should hang out. Tag the overpass or something.”

A couple of times I had come along when Noah tagged burned-out buildings and the backs of billboards in the middle of the night. I’d kept a lookout as Noah sprayed bloody handprint stencils and made sprawling almost illegible graffiti about the post-apocalypse: “save yourself” or “no way out” or “turn back” or “no survivors.” Despite knowing that by the time the show ended and everyone filtered out, it’d be two in the morning, and I’d have to sleep in order to pick up the trailer by eight and be on the road by noon—in short, it’d never happen—I still said, “We should definitely do that.”

Outside the window, the rain had turned full storm. Droplets bore down with intensity and wind whistled through un-cracked windows.

As the floor buzzed from the volume in the basement, we passed the bag back and forth without talking. The closer it got to today, the less I knew what to say, especially after Noah and Eliot had started practicing with a new band with an old metal head—complete with Slayer tattoos and a beer belly—on guitar. It hadn't even been a week after I told them I was leaving the band and moving. When their unnamed project practiced, I heard the parts I would write, and it had made me question why I was leaving. It was some of the best stuff Eliot and Noah had ever written, but the metal head noodled his way through half-assed solos and tried to gallop every riff. I doubted they'd ever play a show.

Without thinking, I asked, "Why did you guys start over again? Like, why didn't you just replace me with one of the Ex-Kids guys and keep the name?"

"Eliot," he said. "I didn't want to start from scratch, but Eliot said without you in the band, he wouldn't do it."

I hadn't expected this. Noah was the sentimental one. "That's pretty dramatic."

"He still thinks that you'll change your mind and stick around, that at most, you'll be back in a couple of months, and we'll just pick things up like you never left?"

I envied his denial. I'd always thought that Eliot had given up as much as I had on our friendship. Maybe, he was right though. It didn't seem like anyone ever escaped this area. They'd leave for college, maybe linger in their adoptive homes for a year or two afterwards, but in time they returned, grayer and heavier, content to never leave again.

Noah yawned and asked, "Are you excited for the move?"

For a second I almost fired off his stock answer of *I can't wait to get out of here*, yet for the first time in a long while, I actually thought about the question. I grimaced and forced a laugh, but couldn't force a lie. I said, "Have you read 'Shadow over Innsmouth?'"

"No."

"It's this Lovecraft story about a town where everyone has this same sort of look—flat noses, bulging eyes, that sort of thing. In the story it's because frog-men come up from the ocean to fuck humans to make hybrids. When I read that story, it reminded me of here—how everyone who sticks around too long ends up having this sort of look in their eyes. Not like they're like interbreeding or anything, but like the same look," I said. "Like they've given up."

Noah ran his hand down his face. "Fuck," he said

"Yeah. I mean, I could stay here forever. But then I'd end up like the rest of them, like Eliot, in line at the methadone clinic talking about the glory days of two years ago to anyone who would listen. I'd jump off the Clarysville Bridge first."

We hoisted ourselves up to sit on the kitchen counter and passed the wiggly bag of wine back and forth until, again, the music stopped and the flock of punks filtered from the basement to every available foot of space.

Eliot came down from his room for the first time all night. For the first time in months I saw the small changes that roommates don't see until changes compound in a mass unveiling: he looked skeletal and sunken, littered with bruises, condemned. And I, recognizing that Eliot had even less to cling to than I did, felt light-headed with pity.

I sad-smiled at him. Eliot seemed to have caught it from the corner of his eye yet still looked away.

"Let's do this," Noah said.

We hauled drums and amps into place, clicked open guitar cases, plugged in cords, adjusted knobs, kicked on pedals, tuned, raised and lowered stands. I turned on the amp and strummed a dissonant cord; everything sounded fine. I shrugged to no one in particular. Eliot and Noah finished within the minute, and I never noticed just how synced up we were before. Noah clicked off a sound check, and with the sound of the first hit, everyone clamored down the steps into the unbearable basement. So many people piled in that I was pushed up against my amp with barely enough room to turn around.

And then, while guitars split ears with feedback, Eliot thanked everyone for coming out, and the songs started, one flowing into the next, no stops to announce song titles, just bodies moving in concert (emanating heat that amplified and choked), muscle memory, and a wall of sound blanketed everyone and everything. Time lost logic. Every second, soaked in sweat and breathing moist oxygen-less breath, was unbearable; after each song, I checked the song off my mental set list—one step closer to the end—to just get out of this inferno, this basement. The collective movement of everyone surged in and out of the small space I had between them and the amp: kicking on and off pedals, pushing me against the drums, knocking over the microphone stand.

At first I thought someone just dropped a beer, but by the end of the song—the last one before the closer—the water expanded until it engulfed the floor.

“Is it fucking flooding?” Noah shouted.

Eliot nodded his head and groaned. He said, “Yeah.”

“Are we done then?” I asked.

Someone yelled, “Fuck the flood. Keep playing.”

Eliot ignored him, and for the first time in weeks, he looked me in the eyes. I couldn't remember when I last saw Eliot look at me without muted anger or blame. I imagined that the finality of this moment clicked and he saw the impending end, recognizing that even if I came back it would never be the same. He quietly asked me, "Should we even play the last song?"

In a few words, he offered the only thing I wanted all night. No one would blame me for walking away.

In the microphone I said, "We have one song left. I guess this is goodbye." Noah nodded. Eliot nodded.

Feedback drowned out any cheers that may have happened. Finally we started. A basement full of teenagers and twenty-somethings sang along and sloshed in the cool rainwater, first a thin film of water but growing ankle deep. Eliot's voice cracked when he sang backups. Noah played just as frantically as ever. And while I sang the words that came like instinct, I thought about how for months I wanted to get this over with. How this band had felt like a chore. How I needed to leave town. How I felt like one of the lost boys, unable to grow up, for as long as I kept playing the same house shows, sleeping on the same floors, and drinking the same beer.

But I didn't want it to end. And suddenly, as soon as I decided to memorize it, to take in everything, each second swept by with ferocity. Soon this would end. I tried to savor each moment, but I grasped ethereal nothing.

CICADAS

Starting at the north end of the Big Savage Mountain Trail and working their way southwest, Josh and Danielle hoofed over leaves damp with May rain and winter rot. The oaks, hickories, red maples, and black birch still held their green. The white pine and hemlock needles combined with the leaves filtered the sun into an overwhelming emerald hue, making both Josh and Danielle look a little sick to the other. She could identify a few of the trees and even if she was wrong, she called a birch a beech with such confidence that Josh took her guesses as fact. He couldn't name any. Within minutes of hiking into the woods' dense canopy, she stopped to put on a windbreaker. The shade chilled more than she expected.

“I can't believe you're not putting on something warmer,” she said.

He wore jeans and a band tee. Danielle was in Timberland hiking boots, but Josh wore the only pair of shoes he owned: black Chuck's sewn together with dental floss. He shrugged.

“Look at me. I'm Josh,” she said, dropping her voice an octave. “I'm so manly. I've never been cold in my life.”

Goose pimples peppered his arms. If she hadn't said anything, Josh would have slipped on his hoodie within ten minutes. Now, he was proving a point. He wasn't sure to whom—Danielle or himself or an abstraction like masculinity—but he was. He'd always been stubborn like that. As a kid, he once had to stand in the corner for fifteen minutes for refusing to eat green beans. When his mother said his punishment was over after seven minutes, without turning around he said, “I think I'll stay.” He stood there looking at the corner for over two hours.

Despite the thick padded straps of Danielle's hiking pack, she struggled with the weight. When packing she kept adding things and saying how important it was to “be prepared,” a phrase

she picked up from her friend Jeremy without realizing that it was the Boy Scout motto. Josh's book bag, the same one he used throughout college, wasn't even full: a thin throw blanket, a hoodie, a change of clothes, and a flashlight. Danielle wanted him to carry things she couldn't fit in her overfull hiking pack, but in his mind, the reward for minimalism was a lighter load, so he exaggerated his bag's fullness with pockets of air. In the end, Danielle managed to convince him to carry their food (sandwiches, trail mix, granola bars, fruit, potatoes, veggie dogs, and bottles of water), since he saw the value in hauling food, unlike multiple tarps, binoculars, and multiple pairs of sunglasses. In the car, they had a small argument, never moving beyond terse suggestions, but they both knew where they stood: she thought he should carry her bag—the heavier of the two. As a matter of principle, he refused.

Danielle checked GoogleMaps on her phone to make sure they were on track. Danielle hadn't told Josh about how the Big Savage Mountain Trail had fallen into disrepair years before. Hurricane Sandy had brought down huge swaths of the forest with ice storms, so the trail was mostly abandoned. Last year, Maryland Natural Resources Police had to rescue six amateur hikers who had gotten lost, called 911, and sat waiting to be found. Ever since she read about the rescue, the Big Savage Mountain Trail had become her local Everest.

When Josh asked her if she wanted to go hiking seemingly out of nowhere, she accepted immediately, knowing that any hesitation would let Josh talk himself out of his own idea. She didn't tell him about the lost party, uncountable toppled trees, black bears, and timber rattlesnakes.

Her hiking friend, Jeremy, refused to attempt the Big Savage Mountain Trail, instead keeping to paths and trails of concrete, gravel, or well-trodden earth that could no longer grow bluegrass or fescue. Knowing she'd never get another chance to hike the Big Savage Mountain

or ever convince Josh, who more-or-less shunned the outdoors, to hike again she decided to go for broke—a two-day hike, seventeen miles of solitude with her boyfriend. She constantly used her phone’s GPS even when the trail was clear to scroll to landmarks (I-40, Lonaconing, Winebrenner Run), unaware at how much battery life the GPS consumed.

Danielle heard a Civic careen into a median with a terrible thud. She wondered if it was possible to still escape humanity’s touch. It seemed to her impossible to find seclusion.

Josh wasn’t thinking about the forest. His great-grandmother’s heirloom wedding ring weighed down his pocket. The ring was a simple gold band, and a diamond that had yellowed to color of amber from 40 years of his great-grandmother’s smoking. Josh had taken the ring to a jeweler to be polished but was told the band had become brittle with age and would probably break on the buffing wheel. The jeweler asked if Josh wanted to replace it with a new gold band, but he said no.

Josh had carried the ring with him ever since he found out that Eliot, his old best friend, had died of an overdose. For years, Eliot and Josh had been in a hardcore band together until it all dissolved in fist fights and *fuck you*’s. Josh didn’t remember that the last time they had talked, after Josh found out that Eliot had sold Josh’s guitar after their last show for drug money, that Josh had said, “I hope you get in a car crash and die.” Josh’s grudge lifted when he heard the news. He never knew anyone who died young before, and suddenly life went from a stroll to a sprint.

He and Danielle had been in an open relationship for two years, and sometimes they talked about marriage like it was off somewhere on the horizon despite their shared aversion to heteronormativity. The ring was the only reason he asked her to hike—surrendering his weekend to her in order to endlessly trudge through some glade. Somewhere it would feel right to propose.

If it didn't come this weekend, he resigned himself to give the whole thing up. Stagnation was no longer an option to Josh.

After only the first couple of miles, blisters formed on Josh's feet. What made him think that this would be a good idea or maybe even fun? Everywhere he looked, despite all the life, he saw death. Instead of the millions of white oaks, the birds and squirrels, the worms and cicadas underfoot, the millions of microbial organisms in every square inch, he focused on the snapped pine blocking the path being eaten away by mushrooms and carpenter ants. A dead tree. Everything was dead or future dead. Eliot was dead.

Both of them ran out of things to say miles ago and stopped taking breaks to take pictures by streams. Even to Danielle, the distance seemed monumental. At first she insisted that a mile was an easy walk, so seventeen miles was just a bunch of easy walks. Except it wasn't like that. After a while, seventeen might as well be a hundred. Another hour passed and all they had done was trudge a path overgrown with thistles, ignoring the sort of flowers in bloom that gripped them earlier.

Josh, sweaty and wheezy, lit a Lucky Strike. The heat ruined the taste—like little more than burning paper. He took long drags to get it over with sooner. As soon as the nicotine hit, he couldn't stand the flavor, so he dropped the half-smoked cigarette and stamped on it.

She picked up the cigarette butt—not noticing the nearby bear print—and said, “Look at me. I'm Josh. I don't care if I burn down the entire forest.” She pocketed the butt with over exaggerated movements.

He rolled his eyes. “Look at me. I'm Danielle. Walking around with cigarette butts in my pocket and an oversized backpack is the best.”

She didn't respond. Mentioning the backpack seemed like a low-blow to her.

Danielle and Josh kept hiking southwest.

Josh acted like every step was torture. He said, "Can we take a break?"

"It's better to just push on, especially if we are going to reach the halfway mark. Ideally we'll make something like ten miles today and only have seven tomorrow."

"Jesus Christ. We could also just stop here and walk back tomorrow."

Josh kept trying to get her to turn back. He suggested it every half mile. For Danielle, the ordinary woods' sounds blotted out his pouting. The occasional snapped twig by a frightened fawn made it easy to ignore Josh. When he'd given up, she tried to talk to Josh just to get his mind off the hiking, but he gave only single word replies.

"Did you see that deer?" she asked.

"No."

"Can you believe we've already hiked six miles?"

"Yes."

"How do you feel?"

"Dead."

For her own sake, she had a one-sided conversation about other hikes with Jeremy: how she once rolled her ankle and Jeremy had to shoulder her back to the car, how Jeremy once ate wild mushrooms despite only being "eight-five percent sure" (his words) they weren't poisonous, how Jeremy couldn't pass a lake or river without skinny-dipping, how last October it was so cold that Jeremy and she had to share a sleeping bag.

Josh fingered the ring in his pocket. He wished she'd never say the name Jeremy again.

But Danielle kept talking about Jeremy. It never crossed her mind that Josh could be jealous of Jeremy because to her, Jeremy might as well have been furniture. Sexually, he was off

her radar, not even a love-him-like-a-brother situation—an asexual goofball that she pitied more than anything. Jeremy was a friend of convenience, both unable to find someone else to hike and camp with. The woods were all they had. If not for the outdoors, they'd never see each other.

The open relationship worked for Josh only intellectually. In the abstract, he could separate sex from emotions: an “exchange” and nothing more. Sex was something to enjoy like sharing a meal or playing a board game. Both Josh and Danielle wanted each other to be happy, so why deny the other pleasure, happiness, whatever you want to call it because of an antiquated notion of morality established by people who died in their thirties? But regardless of what he thought and wanted, he was doomed to be a monogamist. He couldn't detach.

In the first month of dating, he made piss-poor attempts to flirt with exes and baristas, but if they showed any interest, he felt smarmy and withdrew. So he stopped trying. And because he stopped trying, the lopsided-ness of their relationship started to fight with his intellectual acceptance of the whole thing. He wanted an open relationship, but it made him feel inadequate. Early on, they had ground rules: mostly about always staying honest, but Josh eventually pleaded for no more details. How was he supposed to brunch with some dude that went down on his girlfriend last night? He felt like something was wrong with him. He'd go on the internet and people less Bohemian, less liberal, less accepting, less everything than him made it work: a beer-bellied accountant swinging, a middle-aged hair dresser with multiple friends-with-benefits, an early balding young Republican in a ménage à trois. Drummed up by the non-stop Jeremy talk, Josh didn't know what was worse: actually knowing or assuming that she'd fucked everyone.

After crossing Pine Swamp Road, the last of the small back roads that occasionally intersected with the trail, they set up camp. To some extent, Danielle felt disappointed at how easy to navigate the trail had been. Her joints ached, but her local Everest seemed at that point

like a YMCA rock wall with plenty of safety ropes. Tomorrow, they'd have eight miles of pure forest, almost no landmarks. Somewhere deep down, she hoped they got a little lost—just lost enough that they second guessed for a mile or so until they found a neglected trail marker. Josh collected rocks for a fire pit while she set up the two-man tent over a plot of moss.

As he pried at a stone with muddy, sweat-stained hands (one he couldn't pull from the dirt—an iceberg in the dirt and clay), he promised himself to never be so stupid as to leave the house again. He gave up on the rock. Josh formed a fire circle that was smaller than he wanted and expected. Without knowing if it was true, he told Danielle he thought it was illegal to make campfires like this, so they'd have to keep it small. He said it with just enough confidence to make her doubt, so she didn't argue.

They ate tinfoil dinners: veggie dogs, baby carrots, and potatoes. As hungry as they were, anything would have tasted great. At the golden hour, Josh kept waiting to feel like the time was right. The soft light, the fire, if he were watching a movie, he knew that this would be the time to pull out the ring. His hands were grimy. Joints burned. Sleep beckoned. Everything felt hellish. Looking deep into the coals, he fingered the ring in his pocket.

“What's wrong with you?” she asked.

“I'm thinking about asking you to marry me.”

She snorted. “No. Really.”

“I'm serious,” he said. Before she even responded, he wished he could take it back.

Simultaneously, he felt hollow and heavy.

She laughed. “What's wrong with what we have now?”

“I don't know. Something more,” he paused, “conventional or whatever.”

She scoffed.

“Forget it. Forget I said anything.”

“Maybe someday,” she said.

“When?”

“Like when we’re sixty.”

Danielle emptied her pocketful of cigarette butts into the fire.

That night, they maneuvered into the tight tent all-but-wordless. Danielle lay snug in her sleeping bag; Josh cocooned in his blanket using his sweatshirt as a pillow. Each wanted more distance in the tent. So to clear space, they left their bags propped up against a tree outside. For a while, they both pretended to sleep until they actually slept.

Danielle, the lighter sleeper, awoke in darkness to the sound of deep, wet breaths and heavy steps. Her first thought was that a stockyard pig had wandered into their camp site. As she unzipped the screened window, Josh stirred but stayed still.

She used the flashlight on her phone, battery nearly drained, to catch flickering retinas of a large yet lean black bear. Too scared to gasp, her lungs seized. The black bear sniffed around the tent, putting its nose up to the mesh window.

Danielle shook Josh. She whispered, “Bear.”

Adrenaline hit him hard. He felt aware and like his vision was nocturnal. He had to fight to stay still.

The bear pawed at Josh’s bag by the tree.

“Scare him off,” she said, her voice lighter than wind.

“How?”

“Hold up your arms and try to look big. Make noise.”

“I’m not fucking going out there.” He huddled into the center of the tent. He imagined himself punching the bear’s nose if it tried to bite through the tent’s canvas, but he couldn’t make himself believe he could be mangled if they didn’t leave the tent. Based on nothing but a lifetime of avoiding true tragedy, he said with confidence, “It’ll get bored and leave soon.”

She watched it sniff the bag, clearly smelling the sandwiches and trail mix they packed for tomorrow. Danielle slowly unzipped the flap.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he whispered.

She took a slow step out into the air, while shouting guttural nothing. The moss and grass was wet with dew, and she stood on her tiptoes and held her arms out above her head, contorting her bony fingers into mock-claws. Josh crouched still in the tent, preparing in his mind to pounce if the bear moved to attack if it stepped toward Danielle.

The bear looked over, curious at the noise and irritated at the interruption. They looked at each other, neither in the eyes. Not looking for a fight, the bear snorted, took the bag into its jowls, and sauntered off into the dark. Twice it looked back to see if that strange creature would give chase.

Josh had the urge to trail the bear to get his back pack. He hadn’t brought much, but it had his phone tucked away in a zipped up pocket.

Danielle stood there quivering, almost convulsing, from fear and adrenaline until he reached out and touched her leg.

“Don’t touch me,” she said and recoiled.

She got back into the tent and zipped it erratically. She felt ridiculous trying to express emotion through a zip, which only made her angrier.

With a chasm between them, lying on the hard earth, Danielle quaked. When Josh again reached over to try to comfort her, she said, “Don’t you dare fucking touch me.”

“Okay.”

“I can’t believe you.”

“I was about to do something when it turned away.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying.”

After hours of arguing, Josh still thought they should have stayed still in the tent. Danielle still thought he was a coward. He still insisted he would have come to her rescue, and she never believed him. Back and forth until they each apologized, neither feeling sorry, only exhausted and tired of the argument.

Both had dreams—hers about flying and his about his about Eliot—that in the morning they analyzed ad nauseam despite the dreams meaning nothing.

With sleep still in their eyes, they poked around their small campsite. As they broke down the tent, hunger boiled over. Examining the dewy ground, he saw paw prints. Even though Josh regretted losing everything, mostly his phone, it was Danielle who suggested following the tracks. The bear wouldn’t have gone far. It would have only carried it someplace where it could eat the sandwiches undisturbed, right? Surely, they’d find the bag just a little off the trail, and with it they’d find his bag, phone, clothes, and (most importantly to her although she never said it) the granola bars and bottled water. Without his bag, he carried his blanket in his arms. Josh still had the ring in his front pocket.

In the morning light, it was clear that the southern stretch bore the brunt of Hurricane Sandy’s damage—cracked trees, splintered limbs, and other devastation already absorbed into

the nature through decay and growth. The tracks led them off-trail only a short while, roughly a quarter mile, before they lost them. Josh convinced her to give up. When they doubled back, they overshot the trail. Even if they had been paying close attention, the difference was almost negligible.

Danielle pulled out her phone. It was dead.

“Are we lost?” Josh asked.

“No,” she said because she hoped that she could project her way home. She scanned the woods for a remnant of the trail, maybe a mile marker or their campfire. Without any luck, she examined the sky, determined east, and then pointed towards a west-ish direction that felt right and said, “It’s this way.”

Her gut told her that they’d find the trail soon, but the feeling waned.

They trudged onward. In time, with all of yesterday’s aches and pains flooding back, Josh knew beyond doubt that they were lost. He didn’t say anything because it wouldn’t make anything better. Stomachs growled. Tongues swelled. Yesterday’s blisters popped. The air smelled like rain.

Danielle’s mind raced. She pulled out her phone and tried to eke out one minute of power to even just use a compass app. Her walking speed was erratic, sometimes almost a panicked jog, other times a nuanced pace. She talked to herself. She wondered if they should just stop where they were and wait for a rescue team.

At six o’clock that night, a friend was supposed to pick them up at the trail’s exit. The friend would wait around a few hours worrying, but would file a missing person’s report by night. In the morning a search party would look for them. But did they leave enough of a trail to be found out? Were they too far off-course? It wasn’t like a cave where there were only certain

tributaries. She wondered if Josh would have gone out instead of her, if the bear would have taken the bag. Why did he keep his phone in his bag instead of his pants pocket? More than anything, she hated herself for trying to walk this path. She imagined that Josh's every thought was a full of blame. But Josh was only concerned with two things: keeping an eye out for any signs of a trail and trying to be as invisible to Danielle as she panicked so as not to add her anxiety. He knew she got like this if he tried to soothe her with it-will-be-okay's or let's-keep-calm's that it would only push her further over the edge.

Although he'd never admit it to anyone or himself, some part of him was relieved to be lost because it offered a reprieve from his half-assed proposal. Instead he focused on the pit growing in his stomach and on the textures that pressed up through his Chuck Taylor's: the compacted earth hard as red wood, the soft buoyancy of the humus, the sticky mud perpetually slick from an underground river, the rounded half-submerged stones scattered like stars. He didn't feel the cicadas tunneling skyward.

It trickled and then picked up into a steady rain. Josh considered asking to setup the tent so they could wait out the storm, but he didn't want to disturb her.

"Do you see that?" she asked pointing into identical nothingness.

They maneuvered towards the small one room cabin. When he finally saw it, he said stating the obvious, "Looks like a cabin or something."

Part of the roof had caved in, and the wood had rotted away in one wall. There was only one square frame for a window and it only held a small, jagged piece of cloudy glass. It'd been decades since the cabin had been used, but as Danielle stepped onto the wet wood she still called out, "Hello?"

Josh guessed correctly that it must have once been a hunting cabin, not able to comprehend more than one person confined to such a small place, but in the Depression it once held two families living almost exclusively on rain water and salted deer. Inside the cabin, he fought the urge that someone would return any moment, even feeling his hairs prick up at the thought of what could haunt these walls. There wasn't much inside, just a mattress-less bed frame, empty cabinets, and beer bottles from the 80's. He plopped down onto the rusty springs when Danielle convinced herself that they should wait out the rain.

By the time the rainclouds dispersed, it was already getting dark. Empty bellied and faint, Danielle pitched the tent inside the cabin. Though neither would admit it, still rattled from the black bear, the extra wall of canvas made them feel more secure. Danielle sent Josh off to look for dry firewood. She knew he'd come back with nothing that'd catch, but she needed time to herself. She struggled to fit the poles into the fabric because the room swayed, and she felt dizzy from low blood sugar. She was certain they'd die out here lost and waiting. Josh's certainty that it would all work out frustrated her. Danielle needed this panic to run its course. She knew he understood that. She wondered if anyone knew her as well as Josh.

Why didn't she want to marry him? She loved him. She really did. But her identity was wrapped up in defying monogamous matrimony ever since her freshman year of college. Her boyfriend back then, a faux hippy—the type with dreadlocks from high-end products instead of hygiene, had cheated on her. Danielle wanted to kill herself, but instead drank that night until she had her stomach pumped. In order to make things right, to earn back her trust, Danielle and the faux hippy came to an agreement: Danielle could sleep with anyone she wanted forever, and he had to text her what he was doing every hour, had to ask permission to be alone with a girl, and wasn't allowed to even masturbate. She'd been a virgin before him and never thought she'd be

able to sleep with a stranger out of spite, but she did, again and again, until she stopped feeling guilty and felt satisfied. Danielle broke up with the faux hippy within the month, but decided she'd never let social norms dictate what she'd do with her body because deep-down no one else did either—others just kept it secret.

Did she love Josh enough to lose herself?

As expected, Josh returned when it started to get too dark. All of the twigs he found were damp and would never light, so Josh kicked in one of the cabinets and used the wood for a small fire. Stomachs shriveled. Although neither said it, they had both thought about how many millions don't eat every day, how they wouldn't die of starvation for a month, how people fast and go on cleanse diets. Other people's suffering, volunteered or otherwise, didn't make their own more bearable. Josh remembered learning about a tribe somewhere, perhaps in Africa, who ate clay, and for the first time in his life he understood the urge.

The sun set unremarkably.

“What are we going to do?” he asked.

She pushed the hair out of her eyes. “I can't remember the map, but eventually we should run into something.”

“You think we'll make the papers?”

She laughed. “By now, our social media is blowing up.”

Josh scooted next to her and took her hand.

Danielle said, “It might be smarter to wait. There's hopefully already missing persons' reports for us. The police or park rangers or whoever it is might have already sent rescuers in for us now.”

“I’d prefer that. If we had food, I could see just hanging out around here being almost okay.”

“Yeah right.”

“We got the cabin here. A little fire pit. The graveyard over there,” he said, nodding into darkness.

She didn’t believe him—clearly a start of a ghost story.

But the story never built up to some rumor of a family slaughtered. He just insisted it was out there. She kept denying until he was on his feet pulling her up.

Moonlight cast shadows, so Danielle used a flashlight to light the way. He led her off to the side of the cabin where a few limestone markers stood: no dates, only initials. Josh tried to gloat, but she didn’t care enough to respond.

Standing in the graveyard, she heard a sound like rain. She held out her hands to feel drops, but there was nothing. She shushed him and cast the light towards the noise at the ground—cicadas. A brood emerged around them, crawling one over another, fossorial legs sliding over slick exoskeletons. All these insects, hundreds of thousands, swarmed to an oak tree. He yelped, and she swatted them away.

After the shock dissipated, they watched, amazed with repulsion. On the tree milky white nymphets burst from their exoskeletons. They almost looked like shrimp. It’d been years since Danielle had eaten shellfish, but her mouth immediately filled with the taste—a buttery, garlic flavor. Her stomach ached. At the same time, she felt ravenous and unable to swallow anything: insect or otherwise.

She knew that unseasoned, raw, and crawling, even shrimp would trigger a gag reflex, but hunger drove her to pick up a nymphet. It wriggled between her fingers, big as a prune. Josh watched.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

She didn’t respond. The wiry legs tickled her fingers. In her mind, she promised she’d try to eat it on the count of three. When she reached three, she decided on ten.

Josh said, “Put it back.”

She popped it in her mouth and bit down, her teeth crunching through wings. She swallowed hard, fought through a gag, and tried to place the taste: perhaps pistachio.

Josh wouldn’t even look at her.

“You should eat. Who knows how long we will be here.”

“I can’t.”

Danielle chomped another. Juicy innards exploding with the first bite, and then it was nothing but crunch.

She said, “You have to. I’m not going to let you starve to death.”

“I’m not going to starve.”

“You don’t know.”

“I know.”

“If you try one, then I’ll consider saying yes if you asked me to marry you.” Even she didn’t know where it came from. Equal parts bribe, joke, and sincerity.

He pulled the ring out of his pocket. The yellowed diamond didn’t glimmer. Every squiggly vein in her neck stood out. She stuttered wordless noises. Her thoughts were fragmented

and vague. Somewhere deep in her subconscious a childish impulse to say yes was suppressed. She never thought he was serious enough to have a ring.

Josh took a cicada in his whole hand. He thought it would be easier if it was in his fist so that he'd never have to see the pomegranate red eyes. He tossed it back like a pill, trying to swallow the cicada alive, feeling the wriggling in the back of his throat. The cicada scraped its way onto Josh's tongue until Josh gave a few decisive grinds with his molars and swallowed it down.

Josh gave Danielle the ring, and then fell to his knees, crushing nymphs with his fall, and threw up.

Danielle put a hand on his back. "Sure. Why not? It couldn't get worse," she said.

He spit out a milky wing.

"Now eat another," she said.

It took four more days before they were discovered still at the cabin, their stomachs full of cicadas. Calls and visits from everyone they met flooded in and the engagement news flooded out while cicadas drowned the county in shrill song. They made wedding plans as the brood mated and died out. In the night, a new brood crawled into the earth. Years, careers, an affair, and a divorce filing passed. By the last time Josh and Danielle ever saw one another the cicadas had only spent a fraction of their time sucking on tree roots, waiting for seventeen blind years to burst from the dirt and live in the carnivorous world, defenseless and swarming, surviving only by numbers.

DEAD PHOENIX

I

I hadn't seen Josh, the guitarist and singer for our old hardcore band, in eight years. We were called *Dead Phoenix*. The last time we spoke Josh told me that he hoped I tripped down the stairs of Saint Broseph's Cathedral, paralyzed myself from the neck down, and starved to death as I called for help. I think it was because our bassist Eliot and I had sold off Josh's gear—a knockoff Gibson, Marshall half-stack, and a slew of pedals that he left in the practice space—to buy heroin. When I went through the twelve steps after Eliot died of an overdose, Josh wouldn't answer any of my "making amends" calls. I didn't blame him.

He stood in the doorway of Saint Broseph's. That was what we called the punk house the three of us used to share. I still lived there, but now it looked, inside and out, like a regular two bedroom house. I'd painted over the graffiti, spackled the holes in the drywall, recycled the ceiling tall beer can pyramid, and made hundreds of other improvements over the years. I could barely recognize him, except for the chipped incisor in his smile. He'd grown his hair and beard out. I ran my hand over my head, feeling thinning patches. Between the two of us, we'd probably gained a hundred pounds, but neither of us looked too heavy. A slowing metabolism and sobriety will do that. Katie, my girlfriend, tells me I look "healthy."

I didn't even question why he showed up unannounced after all that time. It felt inevitable. I opened the screen door, and we hugged like neither of us could remember all the shitty things we said and did back then. I invited him in.

"This doesn't even look like the same place," he said, running his fingertips across the walls.

I don't have many friends that remember my place as a punk house that was furnished entirely from the "free" forum of Craigslist. My girlfriend Katie had only agreed to move in with her daughter, Grace, if I patched the holes and replaced the carpets dotted with black mold. Since then, I'd gotten hooked on DIY projects: building custom shelving, laying new flooring, and endless painting.

Katie and Grace sat on the couch in the living room. Grace was watching *Kiki's Delivery Service*, an old animated movie. She was at the age where she only wanted to watch one movie over and over. Katie tuned it out and played on her phone.

I introduced to them Josh.

Grace eyed him with suspicion and turned back to the TV.

Katie gave Josh a hug and told him that she felt like she already knew him. If I didn't know better, I'd assume she intended it as a compliment instead of a warning. She hid how she felt from everyone but me with virtuoso skill. Katie was a normie—plain beyond belief. I used to think relationships only worked with an obsessive need, but Katie laid out her priorities when I first asked her out: Grace first, herself second, everything else third. Being with someone that consistent somehow helped sobriety stick. My tour stories, no matter how grimy—like playing a punk house with a brown recluse infestation—brought on waves of nostalgia for me: a time where student loans felt like Scrooge McDuck-sized money pits no one expected to be paid back. Life used to feel so long. But Katie acted like my band and the scene was a cult I'd escaped by mere chance.

We stood there, none of us knowing what to do, until Josh asked to see the basement.

The last time he was down here, the basement had been our practice and show space. Gear had lined the back wall. Exposed pink fiberglass rained particles with every blast beat and

open chord. Now my rusting drums still sat in the corner. I'd converted the basement into a home theater/man-cave sort of thing that I barely used. It was the only room with evidence of my past life. Old show flyers were thumb tacked into the walls. At one point, pictures of Eliot hung here, but Katie said it seemed like a shrine, so I collected the polaroids and print-outs and stuffed them in an end table's shelf.

I sat down and offered Josh a seat. Instead, he walked around examining everything as if expecting to find a specter of the old days lingering.

"So, what's going on?" I asked him.

"I would have sent you an email or text, but you kind of fell off the earth."

I nodded. All that had happened was that I had gotten a new number and deleted my social media accounts.

Josh reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of cash folded once over and bound with a binder clip. He tossed it to me. The wad had weight to it, like a pair of pliers. I guessed that it was over a grand in mostly twenties.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"Shirt money."

I didn't say anything.

"I figured you knew I reprinted shirts."

I didn't. It didn't seem possible that this many people even knew who we were. We always scraped by before. A successful tour was playing shows for two months and breaking even. When the band ended there wasn't even a band fund to split, just IOU's. We never did anything for money: no contracts, managers, barcodes, or copyrights. Every record label we worked with were short-lived, one-man operations funded by student loans and tax refund

checks. I never expected to see a dollar then, and I didn't need it now. A year after we broke up I'd googled *Dead Phoenix*, I got nothing but hits for mythology. "*Dead Phoenix band*" only came up with a sleazy bar rock band. I had to modify it to "*Dead Phoenix hardcore punk band Maryland*" before I got a few hits with old reviews, interviews, and pictures. I didn't feel that disconnected from the scene, but I guess I had let the years slide by without going to shows or record shops.

I made decent money installing solar panels and lived on next to nothing. I tossed the wad back to him and said, "You don't have to do this."

"Yeah, I do." He put the money on the coffee table. "I already feel weird not talking to you about printing more shirts."

"How did this happen?"

Josh said that a few years before he'd started to notice the posthumous hype, but he didn't realize just how much it'd grown until he put the leftover merch on eBay. He had been carting with him on every move for years cartons of shirts, patches, stickers, and records. When the bids on some of the items hit triple digits, he decided to do a small run of shirt reprints since he still had the old screens just to drive the price down. When they kept selling out no matter how many he made, he started digging around. The best that Josh could put together was that it was mostly because of *Living Hell*, a band barely out of high school that already headlined tours. Their singer and bassist, a guy named Tyler, had a single tattoo: the *Dead Phoenix* logo covering his whole chest. He was shirtless in every live picture. In every interview, when asked about their influence, *Living Hell* said something like "We just rip off *Dead Phoenix* riffs."

As he told me all of this, I kept glancing over at the drums. I tried to picture how we went from a middling DIY band to obscurity to a defunct hype band in less than a decade.

“Does that work?” Josh asked, pointing to a laptop connected to the projector.

I said it did.

“Check this out.”

He pulled up the only live video of *Dead Phoenix* on YouTube: a single song with a 244p resolution and almost a million views. Even with the video projected, I couldn't make out much of what was going on. With silent-era quality and lighting, faces shot in frame and vanished just as fast. The mix was mostly the tinny sound of cymbals and feedback. The camera landed on Eliot and held for a moment. He threw his lanky body against the crowd and treated his bass like an enemy. I'd forgotten what he looked like before his arms were covered in needle bruises and his face looked more like a skull. Eliot caught sight of the camera and, looking directly into the glass, shook his head and drew his finger across his throat. He always hated when people filmed shows instead of stage dived. The video ended. Josh scrolled through comments. Teenagers mourned being born too late, and aging punks bragged about seeing us by referencing shows that I didn't even remember.

I laughed. “Eliot would have hated all of this.”

“No way. People finally paying attention, that's what he always wanted.”

I didn't argue, even though I didn't think Josh remembered Eliot the way I did. Eliot would have called everyone commenting try-hards or herd-people or nostalgia-junkies or internet-cool-guys or trend-hoppers. Sure, Eliot had wanted admiration, but he always made sure that our music was weeding out tourists, which was anyone in the scene that wasn't all-in all-the-time or gave off a vibe to Eliot that someday they'd move on.

Josh and I hung out in the basement looking at pixelated pictures, listening to old records, and talking about our new lives, how things had changed. We went upstairs to my room, and as I

changed into my work clothes we kept talking through the door. Before we left, I tried to give him the money back, but he wouldn't touch it. I pressed the money to his chest, but his hands were raised. I let go. The wad fell to the floor. When he didn't reach for it, I finally conceded and put it in my pocket. He followed me out to my car.

“Real quick. Before you head out. Would you be down for a reunion show, if I can find a fill-in bassist?” He said it like it was an afterthought, but something about his posture looked rehearsed, like this was really why he came over and the money was a bribe.

“I don't know if it'd feel right without Eliot. Who would even play bass?”

“Tyler from *Living Hell* told me he knows all the songs already.”

Josh had spoken of them as if that band were characters behind a screen: unknowable and distant. I should have expected that Josh would have reached out to them. He always wanted the band to be huge.

I opened my mouth, but, before I could speak, Josh cut me off. “Just think about it. No pressure.”

We said goodbye. He left, and I felt young for the first time in a long time, like something uncontrollable might happen. On my drive to work, I listened to a playlist of *Dead Phoenix* songs and air-drummed at red lights.

#

II

Katie and I were in the bathroom, taping over the hardware and covering porcelain with plastic drop sheets so that we could paint the tiles. As we updated the other rooms out of the sixties, the faded olive green walls and salmon pink tiles in the bathroom only looked worse. The windows were open. It was pollen season.

She asked me something, but I wasn't paying attention.

Katie slapped my forearm with the paint stirrer. It didn't hurt. The pine felt like Styrofoam. She said, "What's going on with you?"

"Nothing," I said.

Since Josh had come over, I had withdrawn, lost in past memories and daydreams of the future. Our last show was downstairs in the flooding basement, which felt fitting at the time. Yet I still liked the idea that reviving the band to end it properly with a taste of the success we avoided—both purposefully and inadvertently. The *Dead Phoenix* era was both the best and worst time of my life. Those five years felt like lifetimes. That's what it was—too much life too fast. Tour was love. Friends were family. I claimed that I felt more alive, but I whispered "fuck" every time I awoke, wishing I'd died in my sleep. I had never planned on seeing thirty. In retrospect, I survived those years.

I hadn't answered any of Josh's calls because I didn't know what to do.

She hit me again, harder this time, but still only a brief sting.

"Knock it off," I said.

Another slap. "I will when you tell me what's going on." Then another.

I yanked it from her hand and threw it into the hall. I said, "Just thinking about the band."

She handed me a piece of 220-grit sandpaper and said, "Oh my God. Can I have your autograph?"

I didn't tell her that a die-hard fan would never ask for an autograph. It'd be more likely that they'd want a picture of us both flipping off the camera. However, I picked up a paint brush and, using the handle like a pen, pretended to sign the sand paper. When I handed it back, she started sanding the tiles down. I did the same.

“Are you going to do the reunion?” she asked.

I stopped sanding. “I don’t know.”

“Why not?”

“Any number of reasons.” I counted off on my fingers. “First off, who’d play bass? We had a fill-in for a tour once, and it felt like we were a cover band for our own songs. Second, Eliot hated reunions, so it feels disrespectful or something. Third, I haven’t touched the drums in years. I doubt I could even play like that again. Fourth, it seems like a cash grab.” I tried to think of a fifth, but couldn’t. I went back to sanding.

Katie followed the progress of my sanded tiles with a spray bottle of bleach and a sponge.

“What’s wrong with a cash grab?”

“It’s the opposite of everything we stood for.”

“You’re not twenty anymore.”

I thought about the shirt money, which I had briefly considered splurging on a new drum set because it felt fitting. Eventually I decided to go with the no-fun, too-adult decision: paying a lump sum towards my student and car loans. It wasn’t glitzy, but I liked seeing the principal claw a little closer to zero. I would have jumped at the opportunity to play the sort of show that Josh promised if I drummed for someone else’s band. If it were a job, I’d take it. But I’d spent so much of my life believing that making money off my own music was a cardinal sin, so I had a hard time admitting—even to myself—that I didn’t believe that anymore.

We worked in silence for a while, each of us struggling in the cramped space to not slip on plastic sheets or elbow one another.

Katie mixed the white paint and said, “I think you should.”

She wasn’t looking at me, keeping her eyes on the thick swirls.

“Why?”

“It’s the sort of thing you’ll regret not doing later.”

I poured the paint into a tray and dipped in the roller. I blotted out the Olive walls. We were making good time. By dark, the salmon tiles would be bone white.

#

III

I helped Josh carry his gear down the steep basement stairs. I never remembered amplifiers and cabinets being so heavy, oblong, and difficult to maneuver. I hoped it was just his new gear and not another signal of aging. After Josh’s divorce, he bought a vintage Sunn rig and an 85 Gibson SG, a guitar that cost more than all the equipment we used back then.

All I’d done to prepare for this jam session—I purposefully never said practice or committed to a show—was pick up a pair of sticks. The drums were flecked with rust, the drum heads sagged and dented.

We sat around waiting for Tyler, the bassist for *Living Hell*, to show up. He was driving in from Philadelphia to play with us. I drank cans of cream soda. Josh brought over a case of PBR, which he stored in the fridge. For a moment, I thought about telling him that I didn’t feel comfortable with alcohol in the house, but I didn’t say anything. So long as he took it home, I figured it would be fine. Josh and I came up with a set list made up of most of our discography. Eliot had always insisted on mostly playing new songs and never playing for more than fifteen minutes. He always said that if people didn’t “get it in fifteen” they wouldn’t no matter how many more songs we played. At a reunion show, everyone would expect us to play for at least an hour.

Upstairs, I heard Katie answer a knock on the door and direct what must have been Tyler to the basement. Tyler and a friend of his waddled down the stairs carrying bass gear. Josh handled stiff introductions. Tyler was a lanky kid with an under bite that barely looked twenty-one. Tyler's friend Leo had full sleeves of tattoos mostly lifted from band artwork: *Dead Phoenix*, *Converge*, *Pg.99*, *Jawbreaker*, and other logos and album covers that I couldn't place. Both of them wore all black just like Eliot used to.

"I hope you don't mind me hanging out," Leo said. "You guys were one of my favorite bands."

"No problem," I said even though I wished he would wait in the car for however many hours we played. I knew he'd be disappointed. I had thought I had plenty of time to perfect the songs later.

As Tyler hooked up his rig, Leo talked about how he learned to drum by playing along to *Dead Phoenix* records. He name dropped his own band, *Knife Massage*, gauging my reaction as if he expected me to know them. I lied and told him that I'd heard of them but hadn't heard them and promised I'd check them out later, knowing I wouldn't.

Leo settled onto the couch and cracked a beer. I plugged a mic into the PA that first was the *Dead Phoenix* sound system, then a DJ rig, then a speaker set for the home theater, and now back to square one.

We started with the opener that remained consistent for our live set from our last years—a short, punchy mid-tempo song with lots of rung out chords and busy drums. I stumbled through the song, simplifying everything, skipping drum fills, and accidentally hitting the rims. I couldn't look at any of them, least of all Leo. This was a waste of time. My ears grew hot. How long until they left?

After I ruined the first song, Josh said. “We should try it again.”

“It’s up to you.”

“Play it like this.” He queued up the song on his phone, plugged it into the PA and blasted it. I drummed along quietly, straining to hear the kick drum pattern that was quiet in the album’s shitty mix.

“It’s still not right,” Leo said. He leaned forward on the sofa. He air drummed and sang the part. I knew he was right, but even knowing how it went, I still struggled to play it. I wondered whether it was my chops or nerves that made it so difficult.

We didn’t move on to another song until I more or less mirrored the recording, after several attempts.

Even if Tyler and Leo weren’t here, the dynamics between Josh and me were different. Eliot had been the leader. If Eliot were here, he’d have said, “That fucking sucked. Let’s try it one more time, and if we don’t nail it, we’re never playing this song again.” Eliot didn’t have the patience to play the same simple song over and over. I remembered early on that Josh and Eliot fought for control until Josh resigned himself. I wondered how things would have turned out if Josh had won.

We quickly abandoned the set list and began to run through songs in no particular order, just whatever song one of us said next. It didn’t matter. They all sounded off. Josh’s tones were more polished than back then. He’d clearly spent a lot of time relearning songs, playing with more precision than I remember. Tyler knew the songs well enough, sometimes playing a part just a hair different, but no one but Josh and I would probably ever notice. I kept coming in too early and stopping songs midway to listen to recordings.

When we played and Tyler was in my peripheral vision, it was easy to pretend like he was Eliot. I kept expecting to look over and see Eliot's face scrunched up, the way it always was when he lost himself in noise. Instead, Tyler kept his eyes to the frets and stayed in the same rock stance for the entirety of each song.

The basement smelled sweet with sweat. Despite my fuck-ups, it felt familiar. When we all hit open chugs at the same time, it shook the ceiling tiles. I hit harder and harder, trying to knock a tile loose and fracture the house's foundation like I used to. Noise washed over everything, and it was like being young and overfilled with emotions again. Why had I stopped playing in the first place?

We took a smoke break outside. It was quiet except for the white noise hum of tube amps. I kept my eyes on a tree with copper leaves flanked by trees still spring green.

Before anyone could bring up my faults, I said, "We're starting to sound like a real band."

Josh took a long drag on a cigarette.

"After a few more practices," Tyler said, "We'll definitely be show-ready."

I knew that Tyler was really talking about me, but I didn't care.

Leo asked if he could play my drums. I didn't have any reason to say no. Inside, he hit each drum and cymbal a few times, never forming a beat—getting a feel for the setup. Then, without warning, he launched into one of the *Dead Phoenix* songs I could barely get through. He hit harder, faster, and tighter than I did. Maybe at my best, I had the same power and precision, but I doubted I'd ever get it back.

Josh smiled and said, "It'd still be a reunion with just one original member, right?"

I shoved him. "Fuck you."

“What? It could be like a Cro-Mags or Black Flag reunion.”

I knew he just wanted to make me squirm, but it rang true. Part of me felt like the only reason I was here was to add an additional original member to make a reunion feel more credible. If Leo ever even jammed with Josh and Tyler, I knew it'd only be a matter of time before I was asked to step down. Maybe some old punks would complain on message boards at first, but after hearing Leo, even they would come around. Instead of reacting, I pulled up weeds from the flower bed by the porch.

Leo came out, and I tried not to look at him. He seemed to want for me to say something, but I didn't. Eventually he just slouched against the wall.

“Do you mind if I smoke?” Leo asked. He pulled a bowl out of one pocket and patted another pocket that gave a slight puff.

Josh looked over at me with a grimace.

The beers were one thing, but I didn't trust myself. “Yeah, I do mind.”

Leo and Tyler looked back and forth at one another. “Are you serious?”

“You can smoke in your car.” I couldn't tell whether he was surprised because he wasn't used to not being turned down or if it was because I was turning him down. I'm sure they'd heard stories about me from back then. No matter how long I was sober, some people would probably always think of me as the kind of guy with veins so deadened that I had to shoot into arteries.

Tyler shrugged and said, “That's cool. Leo, let's go.”

They walked off.

Now that we were alone, Josh asked, “What do you really think?”

“It's weird.”

“I know.”

After he finished his cigarette, he lit a second, using the first like a match. He said, “I always liked our songs, but it’s so validating that people finally get what we were doing back then. I remember being so frustrated that Eliot kept making the songs more grating and booked us at illegal spaces. Like he was sabotaging us, you know? But now it’s like he just had a better long game.”

He was wrong about Eliot. Breaking even was too much for him.

“I liked those times, though,” I said. “I didn’t care if we were playing a garage to ten people and getting paid in beer. I just liked playing.”

“Just think about what it’d be like now. The *Living Hell* guys told me that a show in Pittsburgh would probably get us \$1,500 apiece. Tyler said he’d play just for fun and not even take a cut. If we played a show or two in New York, we’d get even more. They said they’d co-headline a tour out west if we wanted, and the numbers they were guessing were crazy. Like we could go full-time.”

Suddenly, I realize that we’d been a continuum: Josh wanting more, Eliot wanting less, and me wanting nothing.

“What do you think?” he said. “A short tour?”

I nodded. I’d have to practice. It still didn’t feel real to me. Just playing the songs in the basement together was enough for me.

Tyler and Leo returned with heavy eyes. They didn’t try to mask the familiar pot smell. I hadn’t smelled it in so long. I felt the desire to suck on the cloth of their shirts to taste the smoke.

Josh squeezed the tobacco out of his cigarette. We went back inside and played through the rest of the songs we could manage in the same way as before. *Dead Phoenix* had something like sixty songs, but today only a handful sounded decent to me.

After he left, I went into the living room. Katie and Gracie were playing *Mario Kart*. Katie fought for first and Gracie drove the opposite direction, colliding with AI players. The volume was turned up all the way.

“You sounded good,” Katie said.

“Thanks.” I didn’t believe her. “What did you think, Grace?”

She shook her head.

“You didn’t like it.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Just didn’t.”

I sat next to them, my ears ringing. Before Josh showed up, I would have called the next race. Instead I daydreamed I was playing in front of a dark, amorphous crowd shifting at the edge of stage lights.

#

IV

When I awoke, I couldn’t guess how long Grace had been in bed crying between Katie and me. Grace’s whimpering had become white noise. I’d learned to sleep through Grace worming her way between Katie and me anytime she had a nightmare or imagined a figure in the dark. She had big cry-eyes, pink and dewy. She’d had a cold, more of a cough really, but nothing that seemed too alarming.

“What’s the matter?” I asked

“It hurts.”

“What does?”

“Everything.” She motioned all over her stomach and legs with her pudgy hands.

I went to the bathroom and palmed a bottle of children’s Tylenol so that she wouldn’t see me walk past the bedroom with it. She refused to take anything that she knew was medicine. I mixed a dose with grape juice and snapped a sippy cup lid on it even though she had insisted she was too old for the past few weeks.

“Drink this. You’ll feel better soon. It’s my secret potion recipe.”

She took a suspicious sip, not complaining about the lid. “It’s nasty.”

“Magic ingredients are supposed to be nasty. Mashed-up newt eyes never taste good.”

She made a face. I wasn’t sure if she believed me. She had only recently started to catch on to how often I lied to make the world more interesting for her. But, even if she didn’t, the newt eyes grossed her out.

“Toss it back. It’ll stop the pain.”

She gulped. I couldn’t tell if her watering eyes were from the drink or the pain.

Later, I was on my way to Josh’s when Katie called me to ask when I’d be home. At that point, I spent more time at Josh’s place hanging out than my own house. She said that Gracie had been crying off and on all day and wouldn’t stop asking for another “potion.” I texted Josh that I couldn’t make it and returned home.

Grace lay on the couch watching movies, refusing to move a muscle. I made Grace another Tylenol cocktail. She guzzled it.

“How you feeling?”

“It still hurts sometimes.”

“When?”

“Like when I cough or move around.”

I didn't know what to say. Grace often leveraged pain for gifts, desserts, and a relaxed bedtime.

Even though Grace wasn't my daughter, I saw glimpses of myself in her. I wondered if it was because she was mature or I was stunted. I also leveraged pain. It was why it took me so long to make it through the twelve steps.

She started a coughing fit and then sobbed softly. Katie tried to bribe Grace with pancakes and board games, but, even if she stopped for a bit, she would cough and cry.

When she asked me for another potion, I looked around for something to try to take her mind off the pain.

I pointed at the ceiling fan. It was hot for November, and the house didn't have A/C. The fan circled gently. I said, “Have you ever noticed that, if you look hard, you can pick out one blade and follow it for a second?”

She looked up, her head lulling about in circles and her eyes bouncing about.

“I did it,” she said.

“If you try hard enough, you can watch a single blade go around and around.”

“Really?”

“My record is a hundred times.” A lie with a straight face.

The rest of the night she lay on the couch staring at the fan, blotting out the rest of the world, transfixed by breaking a circle for as long as possible.

The next day, Grace continued to writhe in pain. I again asked where it hurt, and she ran a finger over stomach. I traced it with my own finger and felt a bump. I had Grace lay back on the couch and lifted her shirt. I saw a small protrusion—a hernia. I tried to maneuver the intestine back into place, but it only wriggled beneath the surface. It felt like poking a snake through a plastic bag. Within the hour, Katie and I had her at the doctor’s office. Soon after, Katie was scheduling surgery.

The earliest day available was on the next Saturday, the same day that Tyler had convinced Josh and me to come up to Philly to the *Living Hell* show. We were going to play a short surprise set to send shockwaves over the internet before we announced the winter tour we had mapped out and booked.

“I have a show that day,” I said just above a whisper.

“You’re kidding?”

I didn’t say anything.

Katie told the receptionist to mark us down for the day of the show.

On the drive home, Gracie hummed along to the radio in the backseat. At every bump in the road, she winced.

For half of the ride, Katie and I didn’t talk. I kept clearing my throat, trying to figure out how I could calm her. The doctor had even said that the surgery was nothing to worry about. I didn’t understand why it mattered whether I was there or not.

“What?” she said just above a whisper. She gripped the steering wheel like it might ooze between her fingers like clay.

“The doctor said it was a routine surgery. She’d be discharged the same day.”

“You don’t get it. It’s not about the surgery. This is about not knowing where you’ll be next year. Every time you practice, the tour grows longer. What is it, a month now?”

She was right. I didn’t tell her that after the tour we were feeling out a stint in Europe in the spring. At our last practice, we even talked about the west coast in the summer. I said, “I thought you wanted this. You said I’d regret not reuniting.”

“I know,” she said. “It’s just that I try imagining how this works without you here, and no matter what it ends the same way.”

I didn’t ask her how it ends. It seemed obvious: I’d rarely be home, and I’d want to be on road when I wasn’t, so they’d box up and move out, and I’d barely notice.

“It’ll work out,” I said.

“Just tell me I’m wrong.”

I stayed quiet.

I dropped them off and headed to Josh’s apartment, saying we had a practice—we didn’t.

Josh invited me in. A joint smoldered in an ashtray by his amp. I couldn’t take my eyes off the joint. The smell made me salivate. Sobriety seemed so fragile and arbitrary. I told myself that I could smoke without ending up in the Suboxone program even though experience showed otherwise. I forced my eyes closed.

He picked up his guitar and said, “I’ve got some new riffs to show you.”

“Do you think people will even want new songs? Don’t they just want to hear us play what they missed?”

“Maybe for this tour, but, eventually, people will want some new material. A new record.”

He played a few half-structured songs. In my head, I could already hear my parts.

With every moment away from Katie and Gracie, I felt them slipping away.

It grew dark. When I got back, Katie was already in bed. I undressed in darkness and slid in beside her. I tried to put an arm over her, but she shrugged it off, sliding to the edge of the bed. We both pretended to sleep even though neither of us could. Resentment radiated from her like heat.

#

V

Outside the venue, hours before we were supposed to sound check, a line had formed—faces red and nostrils blowing steam. It was unseasonably cold. Large, wet snowflakes fell. I saw a few kids in *Dead Phoenix* hoodies, but no one recognized me as I walked past the line on my way to the back entrance.

Inside it was still cold. I'd never been in an empty venue like this. The room felt cavernous. The house lights were on, which made the emptiness feel even more like a void. The squeal of my shoe echoed just like in an empty school gym. The backline was setup and miked. In a way, I missed setting up gear. It was a ritual.

Josh, *Living Hell*, Leo, and some other guys I didn't know waited in the backroom drinking and smoking next to a space heater. We talked about nothing: *stoked for the show, can't wait to play, tour's going to be sick.*

I felt so bored—my head filled with Gracie. It was three o'clock. She'd be at the hospital by now, taking soft steps, almost limps to not put strain on her hernia. I wondered if Katie even told her what surgery meant. I think she would have, but that would only make Grace worry that her guts might spill out and not be easily replaced. I paced, chugged bottle waters, peed, and fantasized about getting fucked up to pass the time.

Finally, a sound guy asked us to do a sound check. *Dead Phoenix* was going to open and share gear with *Living Hell*. Josh, Tyler, and I went over. They each rang out for a bit and then were asked to stop while I tested each drum individually.

An endless thump, thump, thump until I was told to move onto a thud, thud, thud.

I felt my phone vibrate.

“Just the kick,” the sound guy said.

As I stomped the kick pedal over and over, I pulled out my phone. Katie was calling.

“I got to take this,” I said.

“Can it wait?” the sound guy asked.

“Yes,” Josh said.

“No. It can’t,” I said, already answering.

“Come on,” Josh said.

I pointed over at Leo and said, “Leo can do it. He knows all the songs already.”

Leo looked around as if he didn’t understand, and then shrugged. I handed off the sticks, and started jogging to the back entrance.

“Grace wants to talk to you,” Katie said.

“Thank you.” It was all I could make myself say.

“You shouldn’t thank me.”

“I’m sorry.”

The phone was quiet, but inside they played louder than I imagined possible.

“Hello?” Grace said.

“Hi, Gracie.”

“When are you going to be here?”

“I’m not. I have that big show, remember?”

“I thought maybe you were lying.” She paused. “You could still come.”

“It’s not that easy. But I really wish I could be there.”

“Me too. Bye.” She hung up with little kid abruptness.

I went inside and heard them playing one of the songs we scrapped from the set list because I couldn’t quite get it right. I walked over to the side stage and saw them playing hard, like it was a show and not a sound check. If I left now, how long until they noticed?

I walked outside and lit a cigarette. After I finished smoking, I looked at my car. If I maintained speed, I’d make it in time to be there when Grace awoke. I didn’t know if Katie would ever forgive me. It didn’t matter, though. My life barreled forward—a series of fuck-ups—amounting to endless endings. *Dead Phoenix* could go on without me, Eliot was dead, and I was no longer the person I’d been in the previous second. I would be more than a flicker of a past life. I would be less than breath on polished glass. My life began here.

APPENDIX: READING LIST

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