

TRAUMA

by

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ABSTRACT

This collection of stories explores the intersection of emotional and physical trauma. In the title story, a rookie EMT relives his brother's death while caring for a young patient who may be permanently paralyzed. "The Rounds at Blanding" follows a military policewoman at a National Guard training base who confronts a strangely determined trespasser as well as painful memories of her son's absentee father. Other stories, such as "Men My Mother Loved," "Watching Mr. Pete," and "Fighting for Faran," consider trauma-as-heritage by asking young protagonists to navigate the loss, wounds, and abuse of their parents. In the collection, pain is presented as both stalker and trapper—pursuing its prey while also creating the obstacles that threaten their escape.

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THE ROUNDS AT BLANDING

Selena parks the patrol car in a spoon-shaped alcove. The tires spit mud at the Military Police decal. She slides back her seat. There's no cage in the patrol car, an old SUV with cloth seats and sun-grayed interior plastic. Julian clambers over the elbow-worn center console to kiss her, untangle Velcro, lower the zipper, and part her camouflage blouse. A vine-netted stretch of Kingsley Lake creeps a dozen feet away. The lake water is morning-smooth. This is Camp Blanding, the largest military training facility in Florida.

There's not much activity for the MPs—Selena and Julian have already completed most of the day's work, blocked the main county road with their patrol car so an infantry convoy could depart to a shoot house. The radio crackles, a call from the Provost Marshal Office. "Fuck," Julian says. Selena's blouse drapes around her elbows, her shoulders exposed.

Julian responds over the radio. Apparently, some strange man is wandering the front gate's perimeter fence.

"Does he seem like a Sovereign Citizen?" Julian asks. These are hillbillies, if they can be called that in Florida, who don't believe laws apply to them. In the summer, near Georgia, a father and son pair gunned down two cops with assault rifles over a traffic stop. Some have made conspiracy theory videos about Camp Blanding.

Halderman, the MP running dispatch, says, "No, he just seemed crazy."

Selena buttons her cargo pants, weaves a canvas belt back into the loops, starts the car. She's fooled around with Julian for a couple months—almost immediately after being hired. If the MP job wasn't so boring, perhaps she'd be more professional. Still, this is a far cry from struggling to support her son as shift manager at a Jacksonville Wendy's.

Around a dozen soldiers manage shifts. All are National Guardsmen, but Blanding is their full-time work. Four shift at a time—two patrolling, two at the Provost Marshal Office. The entry gates are contracted to private security. Primarily, the MPs are a presence. The night shift watches Conan movies on repeat. Sometimes they take the MP Humvee for mud runs on land navigation trails. Once, an IED was called in. Someone had thrown away training supplies in a dumpster near the helipad; they left a Vietnam era combat vest with wires and old camera film canisters hot glued and duct taped—a simulated suicide vest. Selena had to evacuate the nearby fire station, call EOD. They had a good laugh.

The patrol car rambles over windfall on the muddy path before reaching paved road. Selena and Julian pass FLYCA, a school for troubled teens that focuses on pushups. They pass a gear-filled warehouse and weave alongside Kingsley Lake. A company of soldiers do jumping jacks in a rectangular formation near the water. Across the lake, on the north end, are big civilian houses and docks. Civilian Jet Skis slice the water.

Kingsley Lake is almost perfectly circular and the focal point of Camp Blanding's northern end. Selena has been told that the lake looks like a coin from the air. Silver dollar, pilots say. She's heard the lake formed from an asteroid strike. That the alien metals cause the extreme weather. It's not hard to believe because lightning has turned earth in the camp to glass. Somewhere by the south shooting ranges, there's a lightning-studying facility from the University of Florida.

Near the welcome center, Julian says, "Wouldn't sex be nice in a bed?"

"All the parts fit just as well in the car," Selena says. She makes a right, and the lake obscures behind a row of barracks.

“I won’t do this for much longer.” Julian pulls the coiled radio wire that attaches to the speaker on his chest like a suspender. He gets like this. “I want to be with someone I can see a movie with. Get a taco with.”

“I’m raising a son.”

Julian presses his head against the passenger window. “What toys does he like?”

“Scotch and cigars.”

“I want to get him something. You can say the gift is from you.” Julian makes this face where his eyes widen, scrunching his forehead like a French Bulldog’s—his pleading face, love-stricken face.

Close to the front gate, Selena thinks about her son. PJ is better off with no father than a broken one. Selena’s father was twice her mother’s age. Her strongest memory of him comes from her mother’s funeral. Selena was eleven. Her father showed up shaved, hair pulled into a ponytail, and fitted into an old suit a size too large. He looked like he’d done his best to be presentable to a jury.

PJ’s father is completely out of the picture. When Selena moved in with Russell, a poltergeist of love possessed them. They said fictions to each other: *I love you. I wonder if everyone has felt this way? No. No one has felt this. This is just for us.* The pregnancy was a mistake—Selena had been living with Russell for less than six months. Still, she thought they’d be a family. From Russell’s screenless porch, she’d look at a little jungle gym, a half-dome capping dead grass. An overgrown crepe myrtle drooped with rain, dripping flowers onto an old trampoline’s rusted springs and canvas, which had turned halfway to powder. Russell had said they were there when he moved in. Once, they fucked on the jungle gym. The bars, cold and

dewy, were less comfortable than the worst pull-out mattress. But Russell liked the sex. She was nineteen, Russell twenty-seven.

The man is a hundred yards from the gate, between the fence and the public museum that explains how many German POWs were housed on the camp in the forties. Selena and Julian approach on foot. The man lumbers away from them, looks like he's trying to pick flowers until he reaches the fence. He attempts to fit his head between fence bars. The man has long white hair with a deep widow's peak. A gray stubble covers a jaw that, without many teeth, looks infantile.

"Sir," Julian says.

The man doesn't react until Julian and Selena get close and nearly shout. He straightens, struggles to hold his balance, then lunges to hold Julian.

"Woah, man. Hold up," Julian says, taking a defensive stance, holding out his forearm. "Sit on the ground if you can't stand."

Selena palms her pistol grip.

"Sit," Julian says, leading the man down in a crouch.

He smells of body odor, but not alcohol. The man looks up and smiles with maybe three teeth. The right side of his face lags in expression.

"He's fucked up on something," Julian says.

"I haven't been fucked up since eighty-three," the man says.

"What are you doing here?" Selena asks.

"I haven't had a drink since eighty-three," he says, "you ask anyone," He slurs his words, stares in wrong directions.

“Sir, you’re going to go on your way in the other direction,” Selena says. “You can’t be on this property.” She points toward Starke, a town ten miles west with the only active execution chamber in Florida.

Julian shakes his head. “Sir, you have ID?”

The man flops onto his back. “This grass is itchy,” he says.

“Should we call the cops?” Selena asks.

Julian pats the pockets of the man’s stained jeans. “Sir, hand me that wallet.”

The man does. Julian finds a scuffed ID. He says, “The address is close.”

Selena fetches the patrol car, pulls onto the grass. They lift the man and pack him in the back.

The address on the ID is a little shack with a collapsed porch. The man has fallen asleep. Julian asks Selena to watch the man as he knocks on the door. A young, heavy woman answers. She nods and follows Julian to the patrol car. After Julian opens the back door, the woman shouts, “George. Get the fuck up.” She yanks George from the patrol car and drags him as he lurches to the shack. She thanks Julian and Selena with a wave.

On the way back to the camp, Julian says that it’s good they kept George from getting arrested. “Waste of time and taxes,” he says.

“You were good with him,” Selena says. “You handled that well.”

“He had some kind of disability.” Julian looks shaken, broken down.

Selena asks, “Like your brother?”

They pull the patrol car into the outer gate lane, avoiding cars in line to check in. Julian waves to the gate guard. He looks at Selena, his eyes glassy. “My brother is a quadriplegic.”

“He’s paralyzed?”

“Mostly. He can move his wheelchair with a joystick.”

She doesn't know what to say. What does his life entail? She pictures Julian lifting a man from a chair to lay him in a bed. She pictures Julian feeding him, taking him to the bathroom. Would Julian ever have time for her? Perhaps such baggage would turn most women away for other reasons.

She drives to the PX, a small store that's a gas station, gift shop, and liquor store rolled into one. Julian asks if Selena wants anything. She shakes her head and stays in the car.

When Selena was seven months pregnant, she left work early with a suspicion, found Russell entangled with some woman on the jungle gym. She was ugly. “I should fucking shoot you both,” Selena said. The women retrieved her yard-strung clothes. “I'm not touching you,” Selena said to Russell. “I'm not touching you ever again. Did you think about the baby's health?” Then she stayed in a shopping plaza parking lot for the night, too embarrassed to go to her grandmother's, unsure what to do about Russell.

Julian emerges with two Gatorades dangling in a plastic bag. He jogs to the patrol car. He doesn't at all resemble Russell. Julian is dark—tan, brown eyes, black hair. Russell was pale with green eyes like kiwi slices. He'd stand shirtless in the kitchen, his chest somehow whiter than the palest part of his arms, eating children's cereal from a big bowl.

Julian is good, but he lives in Middleburg, maybe fifteen minutes from Camp Blanding—the middle of nowhere. Men like that fall in love with anything that breathes.

As Julian hands Selena a fruit punch Gatorade, she asks, “Want to finish what we started?”

He opens the driver's door. “Why don't we do our job?”

Selena steps out and takes the passenger side. Julian drives south, to the first stretch of ranges, which are mostly dead. Only one range has a red flagged poll. There, soldiers lob nonexplosive 40mm grenades from M203 launchers through the windows of a plywood building that looks looted from a cheap movie set. On the adjacent range, little mounds concealing pop-up targets—plastic green men—extend in rows every hundred meters for a kilometer downslope. In the distance, there’s smoke; an infantry company must have set the .50 cal range on fire. Fires start from lightning or molten bullets.

“This isn’t what I thought when I joined,” Julian says. The commercials never show the boredom.

“Why’d you pick the Guard?” Selena asks.

“Family,” he says. “It’s important to me.”

Selena doesn’t ask him about his brother, on purpose.

“I thought I’d use the GI Bill to pay for school,” Selena says.

“Are you?”

“I’ve done a little.”

They finish the stretch of ranges and Julian takes them to a huge, old warehouse that used to store space shuttle parts. The parts arrived by train; the tracks lead through the center of the building. Julian takes the patrol car into a field alongside a tall fence, which goes around the warehouse. Long-stemmed, antennae-like flowers cover the field. Behind the patrol car, the flowers bow like a boat wake.

“A new spot?” Selena asks, smiling.

“Just check the fence.”

Julian gets like this: serious, driven. She likes him like that.

They finish the loop, return to the paved road. “Where’s our next patrol, commander?” Selena asks.

“I don’t know anything about your life,” Julian says. “I’ve seen one picture of your boy.”

“I’ll show you another.” Selena takes out her phone, scrolls to a picture of PJ from the previous Christmas. He’s wearing a little Santa hat and red pajamas, torn wrapping paper in hand. Selena’s grandmother had given PJ Avengers toys. After tearing the paper to reveal a Captain America, he danced with the box held to his chest, singing that Captain America is like his mommy.

#

At the Provost Marshal Office, Selena and Julian unload their pistols at the clearing barrel out back—the major in charge is big on rules. He stays secluded in his office. At the front desk, Halderman watches YouTube on his phone. He asks, “What happened with that guy?”

“Just a confused old man,” Julian says on the way to the break room.

Selena fetches a salad from the fridge as Julian heats pasta in the microwave. They sit across from each other with plastic forks in hand. It’s noon of their twelve-hour shift.

“Me and my grandmother took PJ to the zoo last weekend,” Selena says. “My son.” Selena’s grandmother raised her. Now, the poor woman pulls more than her weight helping raise PJ; though, she would never call PJ a burden. Still, Selena can’t help to think she is throwing PJ to her grandmother the way her mother did with her.

Selena scrolls through photos on her phone. PJ poses near giraffes, orangutans, and a leopard asleep on its back. She slides the phone across the table to Julian.

“My mom would take me and my brother, when we were kids. I always liked the lions,” Julian says, handling the phone. “Even though they’re always sleeping out of sight.”

Selena expects Julian to point out that they could go together. She imagines him tagging along with PJ and her. Would he say anything insightful, teach PJ about the animals?

When they finish eating, Julian tells Halderman that he'll take over the office. That Halderman can do patrols or traffic stops or whatever with Selena.

Halderman says, "Sure." He and Selena gas the patrol car, park in bushes, and watch Humvees and privately-owned vehicles drive along the lake. Halderman holds the radar gun like a kid pretending to shoot lasers.

The evening seems to come early because dark clouds move in. A breeze kicks up. The lake chops. Before they return to the office, the radio sounds with Julian's voice. He tells them that George is at the gate again.

"Christ," Halderman says. "What's the deal with this guy?" He moves the patrol car from the shade.

At the gate, George wanders the side of the road. The gate guards stare at him, no longer amused.

"What are you doing?" Halderman asks.

George looks around, surprised to see Selena and Halderman, as if they walked into his living room. "I'm trying to get to the beach."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Daytona," George says.

Halderman laughs. He unhooks a flashlight from his duty belt. "I'm going to need you to blow."

George stumbles forward and leans in, arching his spine. He labors to breathe onto the flashlight bulb. Halderman flicks the light on and off. “Oh, it looks like its picking something up,” he says. “Keep blowing.”

George leans closer, his mouth almost touching the flashlight. He sucks in like he’s about to dive deep below water, then he blows hard and long, his cheeks collapsing into his toothless mouth. The flashlight illuminates his neck like he’s sharing a ghost story, shadows his face making the weak-muscled side obvious. Halderman flicks the flashlight on and off, beeps his radio. “Keep going,” he cheers. “Go, go, go.” Halderman makes a look that Russel made—an angry smile. George stops, huffs for life—coughs, misting Halderman in spit, before plopping onto the asphalt.

Russell would play a game where he’d try to run down squirrels. They’d dart away at the last minute, and Selena thought that was part of the game—him aware of the impossibility of killing a squirrel. Then Russell crushed a turtle. She had shouted for him to watch out. After he claimed he didn’t see the creature. But he had that smile.

“Get up,” Halderman says.

George goes to all fours before wobbling to his feet.

“You walk in that direction, and you don’t come back,” Halderman says pointing west. The sun glares just below dark clouds. “If we see you again, you’ll be arrested.”

#

In the Provost Marshal Office, Julian, organizing electronic reports in the office, asks, “That guy okay?”

“I sent him back to where he came,” Halderman says. “If he comes back, we’ll call Clay County Sheriff.”

Selena and Halderman take to the break room for chow. Outside, the world gets dark. Thunder booms. A couple of the MPs for the night shift arrive early, shoot the shit with Halderman. They're rain-soaked. Selena takes herself to the office where Julian still fixes reports. She says, "You want to do dinner after shift?"

"I'll have to get back to you," Julian says.

Selena takes a seat. "We'll get a taco."

Julian looks up, then back at his computer. Selena worms frantic fingers below his ribs—his ticklish spot. Julian jumps like ice water doused him.

"Don't play hard to get," Selena says.

Julian says nothing, pretends to get back to work.

"I think you're a good man," she says.

"I am."

"I feel like I need to keep the world away from my son."

"There's a lot of good in the world," Julian says.

Lightning flares with a thunderclap on its heels that shakes the building as if a space shuttle landed close. The power cuts for a moment, juicing emergency generators, before everything flickers to normal.

Selena grabs Julian's hand, says, "I can see the good." Julian looks at Selena, furrowing his brow, Selena traces the folds of his forehead. "You're so cute!"

The phone rings. Julian answers. "Christ," he says, looking like someone died. When he hangs up, Julian explains that as the infantry convoy returned, they almost hit a pedestrian—an old man in the road. He tells Selena they need a report.

He retrieves the patrol car keys, tells Halderman to handle the office.

“Shift is almost over,” Halderman says.

Julian gives him a look that says, *I’ll flatten your face.*

Selena says, “I’ll go with you.” Her duty belt around her shoulder, she trails Julian as he slides into a Gore-Tex jacket.

In the patrol car, Julian asks, “What did you two do with that man?”

Selena hesitates, stumbles over words. “We made sure he was okay, then let him walk home.”

“He wasn’t okay.”

The infantry convoy slugs through the main gate. The vehicles are desert camouflaged: Humvees with poncho-covered turret gunners, LMTV’s with four-foot tires, an ASV.

Half a mile away, two Humvees are pulled over. The rear of the first Humvee is scuffed and dented. The front of the second bends in, a tire cants inward. Two soldiers connect a tow bar between the Humvees as a flashing ambulance loads a sheeted stretcher. The rain has died down, but water makes the side of the road a river.

Julian asks a paramedic to see the body. He climbs into the ambulance and one of the paramedics pulls the sheet back.

A lieutenant waves Selena and Julian over, says, “They’ve got that handled.” Then he explains that the Humvee in front smashed its breaks because the man lay in road, that the paramedics don’t know what happened to him—maybe hit by lightning? The lieutenant tells Selena and Julian they’re going to tow the Humvee to Blanding. He asks if they can complete the report there, to get out of the weather. Julian sights the damage, notepad in hand, and nods.

In the patrol car, following the damaged Humvees, the first pulling the second, Selena trembles.

“Why didn’t you take him home. Or call the police?” Julian asks. “You should have taken him home.”

“You should have stayed on patrol,” Selena says.

The setting sun is now visible, but rain occasional returns in bursts, obscures the world as if a water-balloon exploded on the windshield.

Even after Selena left Russell, she would have nightmares. She’d be trapped in the honeycombed space at the base of the jungle gym as Russell and the woman embraced—leaned on the multi colored bars until their flesh flattened around the jungle gym like a peel over fruit. Sometimes, she would dream she never got pregnant. Then she would wake, tiptoe to PJs room so as not to wake her grandmother. She would smooth PJ’s hair and kiss him in apology.

At the barracks Julian inspects the Humvees, annotates the damage on the accident report. Julian says he can get the rest of the report in the barracks.

As Selena steps into the barracks, a sergeant shouts, “Female on the floor.” Toweled privates scurry back into the latrine. There are probably fifty bunks in the hall, rucksacks at each one. Tattooed soldiers scrape carbon from rifle parts. The place smells like the sweet-alcohol of gun cleaner, AXE body spray, sour towels, and shit.

Julian sits on a bare bunk as the soldiers explain what happened. The stained mattress positions, without a box spring, on a metal frame that looks like a chain link fence. The mattress sinks with Julian’s weight. He finishes the report, frequently interrupting himself to teach Selena whatever he can about the form. Selena replays Halderman’s words when he threatened George with arrest. Why hadn’t she done anything? Julian would have.

When Selena was in labor, Russell came to the hospital. She didn’t want him near her, so he stayed in the waiting room. When PJ was born, Selena permitted Russell in, told him he could

hold the baby. He said he first needed to know when Selena was coming back. Selena said she wasn't coming back, and Russell got loud, called Selena crazy. He demanded to see the baby. Selena imagined her arms a bubble around PJ. Russell grasped her forearm. She screamed for the nurses.

The sun has set when they leave the barracks. The road shines in headlight glow.

"You would have saved that man's life," Selena says. "If you had been the one to respond."

"Maybe he had a heart attack or something," Julian says.

"No." Then, "It's my fault."

Pines close in outside the field of barracks. Ahead, frogs skitter along the road, thousands. "Holy shit," Julian says, slowing the patrol car. The frogs are tiny, like babies, and—bouncing independently—make the road look like a rain-pelted body of water. He lets off the gas entirely, afraid of killing them; still, as the patrol car crawls, its tires must squash dozens. Julian turns left to escape the frogs. Away from the swarm, hundreds still popcorn.

Julian parks near a netless volleyball pit. A hundred feet ahead, the lake glints in the headlights. "I'd catch frogs when I was little," he says. "Before my brother got really sick, we'd catch them together." He leans back and seems to get lost in nostalgia, says that he and his brother were resourceful little savages. He explains they'd make forts in the woods from anything, build whatever from anything. Once they made a bow. This sounds nice. PJ should learn these things, explore with a little brother.

"You've lived here your whole life?" Selena asks.

He nods, and she doesn't know what else to say. Julian grabs her hand. "His death isn't your fault."

Selena imagines Julian one day consoling PJ, Julian saying something wise, helping PJ grow into a good man. She tears up. “Are you loyal?”

“My life has been dedicated to caregiving.”

Selena kisses him and wonders how many people Julian can fit into his life.

MEN MY MOTHER LOVED

Between shifts, my mother raided thrift shops and scouted curbs on trash days seeking furniture to cycle through the house. Dings textured her car—rope always in the trunk. In her two storage units, wobbly towers of timber antiques stretched to the ceiling like something from Dr. Seuss. My mother also cycled through men. Eventually, she found Robert. She had often gone after money, but he was a mechanic. Young like my mother, perhaps younger, and handsome, he carried himself like a fifty's movie star—leaning on door frames like he was going to enjoy a smoke. I met him after he'd dated my mother a month.

Coming through the entryway with a six pack in hand, Robert paused, eyeing furniture stacked along the dining room wall like barricades. Coffee tables kissed and supported interlocking chairs. We lived north of Orlando, in a decently sized home in an old neighborhood, but the house became small and horrible from all the junk. Concerning the furniture, Robert said nothing, as if he had the power to accept the world as it was. He found the fridge and stashed his Rolling Rock. He had a comfort that bordered on disrespect.

With a roast before us, we sat in the kitchen, avoiding the dining room clutter. Robert ate slowly. My mother said, "Robert once spent a summer snake hunting in the everglades." Sometimes he'd glance up and squint. We had a light fixture that was too bright for the small kitchen. The bulb provided both heat and light.

"What grade are you in?" Robert asked.

"Eleventh," I said.

"Surprised she knows," my mother said.

"You don't do well?"

"No," I said.

“That’s alright. School isn’t a measure of success. I was too smart to graduate college.”

He brought forked meat to his face.

“I do fine,” I said.

“She fancies herself an artist,” my mother said.

“That’s something,” he said. “How so?”

“I like photography,” I said.

Robert downed his glass of wine, pushed the bottle to my mother. “The rest is yours.” He found the fridge, helped himself to the beer. After popping a can, he asked me if I wanted one.

Though a joke adults make to kids, I felt Robert was serious.

“Why not,” I said.

“Catch,” he said, tossing underhand. I fumbled the beer, the can punctured, and hissed around my feet.

“What are you doing?” my mother said, standing.

Laughing, Robert found a towel, blanketed the can, and blotted the floor around my feet. Beer spittle stickied my shins. He looked up at me. “Don’t bet on a softball scholarship.”

“She was never very good at sports,” my mother said.

Robert put the towel in the sink and opened the dented can. With a beer in each hand he said, “Can’t let it go to waste.” Beer leaked around his fingers as he chugged, then he crushed the damaged can in his hand before he returned to the table, pulled out his chair, and stepped on the cushion. “This light’s too damn bright and too damn hot.” The fixture shook as he unscrewed the bulb.

#

The second time I saw Robert, he brought my mother home from a night of drinking. I watched Teen Mom from the sofa as he set her on the adjacent loveseat. Her hair hung from the armrest in sweaty clumps. Robert sat at the end of the sofa, close to my mother and exhaled. I could smell the alcohol on them. We watched in silence as a teenage mother debated what last name her daughter would get. Dressers huddled on each side of the TV stand.

“I guess you’re not getting laid tonight,” I said.

He looked at me and smiled. Then he went into the kitchen and helped himself to a Rolling Rock. “What’s the deal with all the furniture?” he asked.

“My mom is a lunatic.”

“Better hope it’s not genetic.” He drank deeply. “Help me get her upstairs,” he said, putting the beer on a dresser.

Robert held my mother beneath the armpits, and I grabbed her calves. Halfway up the stairs her shoes came off, and I dropped her feet to keep from tripping. He said, “Alright,” and dragged her the rest of the way.

The next morning, a Saturday, my mother woke me early. Robert was gone. She sat at the kitchen table with wet hair and a bowl of Cheerios. She had a bowl out for me. I added milk and took a seat across from her. “Eat fast,” she said. “We have to get moving.”

My father was mentally handicapped, a result of a car accident that occurred while my mother was pregnant with me. All three of us were in that car—my survival a supposed miracle. After my birth, my grandmother took over my father’s caregiving. My parents never married.

My mother would visit my father and grandmother a couple times a week, usually on weekends. Wanting my company, she would say, “He’s your father. Don’t you love him?” I

didn't love my father, though, a strange sense of obligation sometimes coerced me to tag along. This was an endless source of argument between my mother and me.

My mother would help my grandmother with whatever she could, usually the stretches and exercises they learned during physical therapy. In his wheelchair, my father's skinny hands curled into his chest, the muscles tight and retracted. His head would stay cocked to the side as if his neck was broken, but he would smile, and when my mother took his hands to massage them and attempt to loosen the stiffness, he would speak, just above a whisper.

"Doesn't that feel good?" my mother would say. "A little bit more," she would say, working his hands.

"Yes," my father would say. "Yes."

When they worked his legs, he would scream.

A church hosted an event for mentally disabled adults, and my mother would take my father often. I never understood how that place could make anything better. All the suffering gathered in one room.

The day after her blackout, I attended with my mother. We picked up my grandmother and my father. My grandmother wheeled him to her driveway. I gave him a hug and said hello. I called him Dad because he knew I was his daughter. He always smelled like antiseptic, but with an underlying odor like unwashed blankets.

The people who attended the group were mostly born disabled. A couple were like my father: a man had left part of his brain in Iraq; a woman had suffered an infection.

We found seats as the group organized into a horseshoe for readings and games. One man began to moan. The entire time, my father strained to reach his crumpled hand to my mother. She rested her palm over his bent fingers. He often looked at me.

#

The following week, I had detention and missed the bus. My friend Curtis lived close to the school and agreed to take me home. I had a special affection for Curtis—I got my pot from him. Curtis wanted more from me, in terms of romance, but too kind or too stupid, he never used weed as leverage to try to screw.

In his beat-up nineties Mustang, Curtis asked, “Your mom still running a furniture factory?”

“She’s seeing this guy.”

We idled at a red-light.

“Does he suck?” he asked.

“I can’t tell.”

Robert’s truck was in the driveway, and my mother struggled to negotiate a bookcase from the truck bed. Robert jogged from the garage, climbed into the truck and pushed the bookcase to the edge of the bed.

Curtis parked on the street. “That him?”

“Yeah,” I said as Robert, stepping backward, led the bookcase into the garage. His muscles strained. I gave Curtis a high five and sent him away before Robert or my mother reappeared.

Our living room was part office, but I discovered that my mother had disconnected the computer, crammed the tower and monitor into a corner, and tipped the desk on its side. An armoire stood in the computer's place. My mother came into the house and dropped the bungee cords that had secured the bookcase.

“I can’t do my work,” I said.

She looked at me, then back to the truck, determining how to navigate the bookcase into the house. Awaiting instruction, Robert stood with his arms akimbo.

“Can’t you use the kitchen table?” My mother asked.

I groaned.

“I’ll help her with the computer,” Robert said.

He managed the bookcase through the doorway, then dragged the computer desk to the middle of the room to set upright. Snaking computer wires, he said, “A laptop might be helpful.” When we finished, the ethernet cord stretched like a tightrope to the wall.

I resumed a research paper about *Siddhartha*. With a chair from the top of a stack, he joined me. “I think my cousin became a Buddhist,” he said, flipping through the book. “Sold everything and lived out of his van.”

“I’d like to escape,” I said.

“Where would you go?”

“Austin. Or somewhere in California,” I said. “Somewhere artistic.”

“Good luck paying rent.” He lowered the book to his lap.

“I could work in restaurant.”

“You’d certainly find something.”

In the morning, my mother was in the garage staining wood. Robert combed the fridge. An egg carton was on the counter. With his head in the cold, he asked me if I wanted any food. I told him no. He followed me into my room and looked at a drawing of a loinclothed man tied to an altar. At the time, I only had a crude altar and the stomach muscles of the man with the knife. “Ripped,” Robert said before he sat on my bed, kicked off his shoes, and leaned back. “Have any thoughts last night?”

For a moment, blood heated my face.

“About the paper,” he said.

“No,” I said.

“That’s a nice camera.” On my dresser sat an old camera that took film which I had looted from my father’s old things.

“Not really.”

He looked at photos taped to my wall alongside sketches. “You know you can study photography. Just have to do well enough in the boring high school stuff.” He stood and traced his finger along the papers. He stopped at a photograph of a life-sized nativity. I’d put a cowboy hat on the baby Jesus. “This is good,” he said.

“My teacher told me to do something else. Religion is a sensitive subject.”

He laughed and inspected other photos.

#

About a week later, he knocked at the door. It was late. My mother was working a double. “I figured I’d surprise your mom tonight, but I wanted to surprise you first,” he said, presenting a box.

I let him in. He put the box on the counter, said, “Open it.”

I parted the cardboard flaps. Inside, crumpled balls of newspaper cushioned a Nikon digital camera and a Ziploc with a charger and extra memory card.

“Not the best one, but I got it for a good price off a customer,” he said.

I didn’t know what to say. I wanted to tell him no, but I just said, “Cool.”

“They have tripods and extra lenses for that model.” He cupped my hands to indicate the power button. “The camera should be charged.”

I pressed the zoom, the lens extended. “It’s like a microscope,” I said, looking at carpet fibers.

He retrieved a beer from the fridge and said, “Try the camera on me.”

I framed him. Stepping on the first rung of a stool, he stood relaxed, looked like the statue of David but with a beer bottle instead of a slingshot. The flash flared. He asked me how the photo turned out. The image was dark. I adjusted the aperture and snapped again. With his smile, the picture looked like a Yuengling ad.

“If you want to photograph, you either have to capture beautiful people, or the opposite,” he said.

“What about animals?”

He chuckled. “Let’s take a drive.”

I followed him to the front door, to the insect buzz on the driveway. I felt bound to him. He got in his truck and the engine rumbled to life. The headlights illuminated me.

“It’s a school night,” I said as the truck windows rolled down.

He reached across the cab and opened the passenger door. “This is more important.”

We drove into the city. As I watched passing lights, he asked me what I was afraid of.

I thought for a while. “Loneliness,” I said. “What about you?”

“Having to do the same things day after day.”

In the left highway lane, we gained on taillights that looked like red eyes in the dark. Robert flashed his brights, but the car didn’t change lanes. He punched his horn and cursed in an almost-shout. Finally, Robert gained entrance to pass on the right. He stared at the other driver with a ferocity that seemed foreign to him. When we returned to the left lane he said, “Loneliness. Photograph that.”

I stared out the window. Occasionally, I looked at him. Light from passing cars reflected in the rearview mirror and crept along his face.

“I’d like to know about your father.” He spoke so low and soft I could tell that he knew he entered a forbidden territory.

I thought my response over for a moment.

“I’m just trying to have a conversation,” he said.

“How do you know so much about art?” I asked.

“I know about life.”

We got off the highway and drove for a while before Robert parked. He said, “Don’t worry.” In silence, we walked past liquor stores with flashing strobes, cheap restaurants, and adult shops. After an intersection, a homeless man hunched beneath dripping graffiti in a puddled alleyway.

I didn’t know Robert’s plan until he said, “Take the picture.”

I framed the man in his dirty clothes and took a couple of shots.

We kept walking. Weeds broke through the concrete and graffiti continued to swirl on walls. Across the street, a woman in a short skirt was lit in yellow lamplight. “Prostitutes can be trouble,” Robert said.

I lifted the camera. “You think she’s high?”

#

A couple days after our trip into the city, I printed the pictures of the homeless man and the prostitute and brought them to school. I told Curtis I had something great to show him. We had art second period. I suspected Curtis enrolled to have another class with me.

The teacher displayed a dry paint bottle that had been left open and yelled that the supplies were a mess. While I worked on a picture, my own rendition of Saint Sebastian chained to a tree and with flowers sticking through his flesh instead of arrows, the most dim-witted kid in class, Joey Toomey, crashed into my table trying to be funny. Paint knocked over and covered my drawing.

“What the fuck, Joey?” I stood, toppling my chair. The crack of hard plastic against ground brought the room’s attention.

Joey looked at me with a clueless grin. I retrieved the paint bottle and smacked him across the face. The remaining paint coated his cheek and speckled his shirt.

“Jesus, bitch.”

Curtis charged from the other side of the room.

“You fat faggot,” Curtis said. “Are you going to apologize?” Curtis was real close to Joey’s face, and he grabbed Joey by the collar. Joey wound up and punched him so hard that Curtis ragdolled like my drunk mother and found a spot next to the overturned chair.

Our teacher came from the back-supply room, eyed the paint scattered across the table and floor and Joey’s face and Curtis sprawled out. I felt stupid—I hadn’t thought to photograph the aftermath.

I showed Curtis the pictures from the city after class. He had a bag of ice wrapped with mushy paper towels pressed to his cheek. I thought the photos might cheer him up, but Curtis asked, “Why did you go over there in the first place?”

I told him about Robert.

“That’s a little fucking crazy, don't you think?” he said.

“He was teaching me about life.”

“I could take you anywhere you want.”

“Just forget about the pictures.”

Around us, kids bustled through the hall like they were at an amusement park. “I don’t understand,” Curtis said. “You’re hanging out with your mom’s boyfriend?”

“Leave me alone,” I said.

#

That weekend, my mother and I visited my father. In the car, she asked me where I got the new camera. Surprised she wasn’t aware, I explained that Robert had given me the camera.

At my grandmother’s, FOX news played on a little box TV near the kitchen table which was surrounded by wheeled chairs. Pink towels protected the chairs’ cushions. My grandmother heated a piece of store-bought blueberry pie. She scooped sugar free vanilla ice cream and served me. My mother fed my father room temperature pie as I stabbed at my desert with a spoon. My grandmother asked me about school. I told her I was doing better, but that photography interested me most. I held up my camera. She draped her arms around my mother and father, told me to take a picture. My mother asked me to wait as she napkined my father’s mouth. Then I photographed them. My grandmother asked if I could set a timer, so we could all take one together. I shook my head.

In living room, my mother sat on a short stool to stretch my father. I snapped as she worked. The discomfort on his face from stretching matched the scars circling his head. Those scars that—even with hair a few inches long—carved lines of baldness and stayed obvious.

#

Later that day, when we got home, we dropped grocery bags on the kitchen table. Half the chairs were unusable, their paths blocked by a swarm of nightstands, chests, and cabinets. As

my mother finished packing groceries into the fridge, I cycled through photos on the camera screen.

“You’re in my way,” she said trying fit through the remaining kitchen path. “I need to organize some furniture.”

I flattened myself against the kitchen table, sucking in whatever stomach I had.

She rocked a dresser back and forth, pivoting side to side. “Let me help you,” I said, and she let me. Lifting the dresser over a ledge to the porch, my end slipped. The flat end of an exposed nail hooked and tore my mother's skin. As she toweled herself, I photographed the blood on the dresser.

“If you can’t help,” she said, “don’t offer.”

“Have Robert do it,” I said.

She left the dresser awkwardly positioned, blood still on the side. “Stop taking advantage of his kindness.”

Robert and my mother came home late that night. I had makeup on, but my mother was sober. I turned to retreat to my room.

“How’s the camera?” Robert asked, my back to him.

“Fine,” I said, entering my room.

The next morning, they sanded a coffee table. When my mother made a trip to Lowe’s for wood finish, Robert took a break and came to my room. He knocked but opened the door without an answer.

“I want to see what you’ve shot,” he said.

He browsed the pictures. There wasn't anything good: food smashed on a toilet seat in a cafeteria bathroom, a teacher struggling to nurse a hangover, kids sitting alone in the school courtyard. I could sense Robert's disappointment.

"This is interesting," he said.

"I'll get better."

"You're great already." He grabbed my shoulder. His grip was strong.

#

Curtis called, asked if I wanted to come over. His house was small and dark. I sat on his couch as he made sandwiches. Past smudged windows, the surface of a dirty pool glistened in dying sunlight. Discolored leaves floated without direction.

We ate the sandwiches, smoked, and I told Curtis I had a perfect idea for photographs—something to truly impress Robert. Curtis said he could drive me anywhere. He edged toward me. He gobbled his sandwich and stared at me. We shared a cushion.

"What do you want?" I asked.

He smiled, squishing his swollen, purple cheek to block his eye. His face grew serious, and he tried to kiss me. I pulled away, but he grabbed my hair, yanking a clump.

"Fuck, Curtis." I slapped his bruised cheek. He lifted his arms to defend, and I slapped him again and punched until his arms were red.

"Stop, stop," he said. "I'm sorry."

I stormed out.

Outside, in the darkness, I realized I didn't want to call my mother. Curtis didn't live far from my Grandmother, so I walked a couple miles along a busy road.

Three old men pedaled mountain bikes past me. They stopped at a gas station and greeted another man who sat on a pallet in a fenced corner, near dumpsters. They all stared at me as I passed. I thought they'd make a good photo, but I picked up my pace, considered crossing the street.

When I reached my grandmother's neighborhood, I was sweating. Boys played rollerblade hockey under a streetlight. I marched to my grandmother's front door with my camera in hand. My grandmother greeted me, asked if everything was okay. I told her that I had been at a friend's, that I wanted to stop by to see my father.

"You must not be sleeping well," she said as she let me in.

Blood swirled at the surface of my eyes. "Just the last couple days."

She led me to my father who watched TV in the living room. He didn't look at me until I took a seat next to him. He smiled. My grandmother joined us. On the TV, a preacher paced a stage. Next to the screen, on a shelf, was a photograph of Ronald Reagan and another of George Bush, the second one.

My grandmother asked me trivial questions, all the while I considered how I could get rid of her. The weed had made thinking difficult. Finally, the phone rang. She excused herself. I waited awhile until I heard her talking to a friend.

My father's socks were off. His feet were white and swollen with yellowed clumps of dry and dead skin. A deep dent circled above his ankle from the elastic band of his socks. Bare, his feet looked sewn on.

"Give me your leg," I whispered.

I cupped his heel and pulled his leg up. I had my camera ready around my neck, but he didn't scream; he smiled at me with his chin tucked in and his ear to his shoulder.

“Doesn’t that hurt?” I tried the other leg. Nothing.

I remembered how startled my father would get when given baths. Water near his eyes frightened him. I crept into the kitchen and retrieved a bowl of water. “Don’t smile,” I said with the water before me. I dipped my fingers and flicked drops at him. He flinched. I dipped again. He didn't scream.

My grandmother’s phone conversation wouldn’t last forever. I ripped a blanket from the couch, dipped a corner into the bowl, and wiped his forehead. He started to resist the soaked fabric immediately. Water dripped into his eyes, and he squirmed. I wrung the wet end to flush his eyes. He screamed, and his legs shot out. His knees knocked together as if nails pinned his. I framed the shot.

#

The next time I heard Robert open the door, I made sure to make myself visible with makeup done and a tight shirt.

“Hey Annie Leibovitz,” he said.

“Hey.”

My mother looked at me and said, “Goodnight,” before taking the stairs in a heavy sway. Robert pursued with her heels in hand.

In my room, I turned my bowl to charcoal. Then I heard Robert descend the stairs. I could hear him because he had been drinking too. I waited, hoping he would knock, or more, that he would just come in.

“Robert,” I called from my doorway, too eager to find out.

He approached with a cup of water clutched in his hand. “Only cure for a hangover.” He motioned with the cup.

“Come in,” I said. I grabbed his forearm.

He sat on my bed, and I handed him a photo of a fight on the cafeteria patio. A boy had a fist in his mouth, and blood erupted around the knuckles.

“You were lucky to get this,” he said.

I began to pack my bowl. “When’s the last time you smoked?”

“You’re going to get me in trouble,” he said.

“I’ll light it for you.”

With the bowl to his lips and his thumb over the hole, I leaned over—I didn’t have a bra on—and flicked the lighter. He took a big hit. A coughing fit overtook him, and I laughed. I grabbed his leg and kept laughing, and he kept coughing.

“Jesus,” he said lightly, almost wheezing. He leaned into my bed. “It’s strong.” My hand still rested on his leg, and he didn’t move it.

He took a deep breath and sat up. “Let’s look at the photo again. With my new perspective.”

I took my hand from his leg to retrieve the photo, and when I brought the paper to him, he edged close to me. I kept my face turned to him, uncertain where to rest my eyes.

Then he kissed me. His breath tasted like a cigarette-stained wall swabbed with alcohol. I sensed his hesitation and was aware of my own. But I pressed to him more, and soon his hands grabbed my ribs to pull me onto his lap.

“Do you want to see the photos?” I asked after I broke my lips from his.

He clawed at my shirt, the fabric slipped over my face before spilling around my thighs. I grabbed him around his shoulders. The muscles were thick.

“I’ve taken your advice,” I said.

“Good.”

I felt his jeans, his hard dick. He didn't want to see the photos, and I was okay with that, but then he was on top, and he was quick.

Working his ankles into his puddled jeans, he said, “Put your shirt on.”

“Just wait. Don't leave,” I said. I needed to show him the photo of my father. I wished that I had shown him before I tried anything.

With my shirt on, I extended the photo toward him. Robert stared at the picture, then at me, as if he was searching for a question or trying to decide which one to ask first. “This stays between us,” he finally said.

I nodded. “But do you think it's good?”

WATCHING MR. PETE

After his mother's funeral, Ronald moves across Florida to his father's two-bedroom house in Daytona. The first day at the new school, in sophomore biology, Ronald sits in a corner near a dry fish tank. Behind the glass, burrows a rabbit with black beads for eyes and a little pink nose that sniffs forever, animating the fluff. The whiskers seesaw. The class has named the rabbit Mr. Pete.

A pink-haired girl with matching, pink running shoes lifts Mr. Pete from his case and tucks him to her breast as she mounts a black-topped, chemical-resistant table. Her name is Emma Barrett. Ronald has seen her jog his neighborhood's streets. She presses the rabbit to her cheek. Ronald stares for too long. Emma asks, "You want to hold him, new kid?"

Ronald looks away. "Not now."

After school, a yellow Ford Ranger idles alongside Ronald as he walks from his bus stop. The window drops, and Emma emerges. "Hey, new kid," she says. Her hair spikes in the back, like she just woke, revealing natural brown strands buried in pink dye. An older kid is at the driver's seat. "Where you from?" Emma asks.

"Tampa."

"Sucks. This town blows." Her words seem sticky, clinging to each like tangled Christmas lights. She wears braces—the elastics alternate between pink and teal, and rubber bands stretch into triangles. "Later." The truck sputters off.

At home, Ronald's father speaks on the phone behind a closed bedroom door, but the conversation bleeds through. His father sounds the way people did at the funeral. Ronald listens. The conversation is with Sandra, his father's girlfriend. They argue about Ronald moving in. He hears his father say that he won't send Ronald to his grandparents.

After his mother died, Ronald went to his grandparents—ones related to his mother. His grandmother is a crazy woman with frizzy, gray hair dyed tangerine, and his step grandfather is a thin man who'd become tortoise-moving after a stroke. Ronald lived with them for a week until his father showed up. Together, they stuffed his father's Ford Taurus with Ronald's belongings.

Ronald was given the bedroom that Millie, Sandra's daughter, used during the weekends of Sandra's custody. While moving in, as he carried his belongings in and Millie's belongings out, Sandra remained as still as an insect and, from the bottom of the stairs leading to the bedroom, mumbled, "This will make everything difficult."

Ronald gets ready for dinner around relics of Millie: glow-in-the-dark stars on the ceiling fan that suspend arcs of phlegm-colored light when the blades spin at night, broken crayon bits in the groove where carpet meets wall, a hairpin. He changes his shirt, sits on the twin bed, and smooths his hair with his hand as his father cooks; pots and pans clatter. Eventually, Sandra arrives. His father calls, "Ronald, come eat."

The kitchen smells burnt. Ronald's father handles the oven with one hand, a Coors in his other. He wears a shirt advertising Daytona Bike Week. Sandra sits on a stool the style of a 1950's diner. The stool doesn't match the beige linoleum countertop but matches Sandra's bold, red lipstick. She is older than Ronald's mother had been, yet she is shaped young: small, skinny.

"Give me a hug," she says.

Ronald reluctantly embraces her; she smells like cigarettes. Sometimes Ronald's mother would smoke, if she had a long shift. He'd plead with her to quit.

His father tells him to get plates. Sandra uncorks a wine bottle near the liquor cabinet, the single polished piece of furniture in the house, and they settle at the table with dry barbecue-sauced chicken.

Ronald's father sips his beer, says, "Tell Sandra who you're named after."

Ronald was named after Ronald Reagan. His father calls him—the president—Ronnie. Through sauced lips, Ronald's father explains how Ronnie Reagan single-handedly beat the Soviets. It's his day off; he's been drinking. The smell, like window cleaner and potpourri, reminds Ronald of days his mother would strip the house and scrub everything. She said cleaning was her therapy. Ronald's father asks Sandra to describe Ronnie. She says that he was confident, a movie star.

"That's what you need, confidence," Ronald's father says, pointing a forked chicken chunk. Ronald's father has often urged him to go out, make friends, not play videogames all day becoming one of those kids who live in make-believe-land.

"Okay," Ronald says, then to Sandra, "Do you want me gone?"

"What?" Sandra asks.

"You wish I wasn't around—"

"Ronald," his father says.

"This is ridiculous," Sandra says. She fumbles in her purse, which hangs from the back of a chair, and finds a cigarette.

"Not in the fucking house," his father says. "I've told you."

"Can I play PlayStation now?" Ronald asks.

"Sure. Play your fucking games."

Ronald takes his plate to the counter as Sandra walks to the back porch, lighting her cigarette before she slides open the glass door. His father follows her.

In the living room, the television perches on a coffee table that is flush against the wall. Without a television in Ronald's room, he's set his PlayStation console—a present from his mother—on the carpet beneath the coffee table. The wires are visible like a nest of snakes.

Outside, on the porch, his father shouts, "The boy is grieving."

Sandra's cigarette burns like a fuse. She steps out the butt. Then his father grabs her, pulls her in, and kisses her cheek.

His father comes back inside. Sandra remains outside, her arms crossed. "I don't want to hear that nonsense again," his father says. Ronald sits, controller in hand. The PlayStation logo forms on screen. His father stands, stalks to the coffee table. "Don't ignore me." He snatches the PlayStation, sends cords slithering. The television distorts with static.

On Ronald's fifteenth birthday, his mother had made a leaning chocolate cake. She pretended she hadn't gotten him much. After he genuinely thanked her for socks and underwear, she told him there was one more thing. She carried the PlayStation, wrapped in paper with little party hats, from her room.

Ronald's father relaxes into the sofa, lets his head hang back. "Not everything is about you." Then, "Things are complicated."

#

With his PlayStation broken, Ronald stays in the upstairs bedroom after school, killing time with his mother's old laptop. The window blinds are always kept raised—Emma jogs most days around four. Often, he tabs to Emma's Instagram. The profile is private.

#

In biology class, Emma plays with Mr. Pete below a poster of a cartoon mitochondria that says, *Power House*.

Mr. Jones, says, "I will need a volunteer to watch Pete over spring break."

Ronald doesn't hesitate.

"Great. Very enthusiastic. Thank you, Ronald," Mr. Jones says.

The day before Spring Break, Mr. Jones sends Ronald home with Mr. Pete's cage, a bag of hay and pellet food, and the information Ronald needs to keep the rabbit alive.

Walking home with Mr. Pete at his side, the yellow Ford Ranger again slows with its window down and Emma's face protruding. "Mr. Pete," she calls.

Ronald holds the cage, so Mr. Pete is at eye level, as if the rabbit could respond.

"That's cool of you to watch him," Emma says. The elastics on her braces are purple and orange.

"Someone has to." Then, "Maybe you'd want to see him sometime?"

Emma turns to the older kid who drives. He is handsome with a crew cut. "Sure," he says.

"That's Travis," Emma says. Ronald's not sure if he's her brother or boyfriend. "You live on this street?"

Ronald points at his house, a duplex with a battered fence.

#

When Ronald's father comes home, he wears his security guard uniform, black boots, shiny and laced to his calves, and a duty belt with everything but a pistol. He has a box in a Walmart bag. Setting the bag on the table, he says, "What the fuck is that?"

Mr. Pete nests in Ronald's lap. "It was an emergency."

His father places a plastic badge on the kitchen counter. It's bronze, shaped like a shield, and etched with his name. "I don't want that thing running around the house, pissing and shitting."

"I'll keep him in the cage when I'm not playing with him," Ronald says.

Ronald's father gets close, rests his elbows on his duty belt and squats to get a good look. He glances at the cage. "It's cruel to keep that thing locked up," he says, leaning on his toes, his face a foot from Ronald's. "That's a strange goddamn rabbit. He's not scared. As a kid, my rabbit died at the sight of a fucking cat." He palms food pellets, offers them to Mr. Pete. "You can keep him in the upstairs bathroom." He stands, unbuckles and shoulds his duty belt, and pulls a boxed basketball from the Walmart bag. "I got you this."

Catching the box, Ronald asks, "Does Sandra still want me gone?"

"You're still at this?"

"She thinks I'm an inconvenience."

"There's a good hoop outside." Ronald's father tosses a butter knife for Ronald to slit plastic seals. "Occupy yourself."

#

The following day, the beginning of spring break, with Mr. Pete in the bathroom, Ronald bounces an-almost inflated basketball against the flaking backboard of a netless hoop. The needle in the garage was bent, so Ronald couldn't firm the ball. Drunk neighbors watch from lawn chairs. He misses, this time with a hard throw. The ball kicks off the rim, accelerates with the driveway slope, and takes to the street. When he reaches the ball, it's dead in a gutter.

Emma sprints with strides like she's putting the spin in the earth. Her ponytail swirls like an insane painter's pink-tipped brush. She jets past Ronald puffing and slows herself twenty feet

the other direction. She wears a tank top and pink leggings. She walks toward Ronald, hands held above her head, and checks her watch. “Your basketball is flat,” she pants.

Ronald holds the ball like he just caught a chest pass. “Yeah.”

“I think that only helps in football,” she says, circling Ronald.

“You want to see Mr. Pete?” Ronald asks.

Emma glances at her watch. After a moment she says, “Sure.” Jumping an imaginary rope, she asks, “How far is your house?”

“The next block.”

She steps into a lunge, then another, and keeps going. Her leggings become even more skin tight with every dip. “I’m lunging there,” she says, looking back at a stationary Ronald.

“You can walk beside me.”

Ronald wishes he had cleaned the house. The garbage smells. He ties the bag, chucks it into a can beyond the porch. He opens blinds to let in light.

“It’s just my dad and me,” Ronald explains. “His girlfriend stays a lot. She’s got a kid.”

Emma walks into the living room. “Where’s Mr. Pete?”

“I’ll bring him down. You can sit on the couch.” He fixes a blanket, straightens pillows.

“I’m okay.” She takes her ankle in hand to stretch. A little vein in her arm connects to a bulging thigh.

In the upstairs bathroom, Ronald corrals Mr. Pete in the cage and brings him down.

Emma has her feet spread and dips low to work her hamstrings. Half her ponytail relaxes on the carpet. She smells like heat, like sweat and sunned-skin. Ronald sets the cage in the center of the living room. Emma, inches from the stretch. She opens the cage and Mr. Pete hops out. His ears tuck back, and he smells the carpet.

“Do you have any snacks for him?”

Ronald gestures at some hay.

“No, like vegetables.” Emma walks to the kitchen. “Can I?” she asks with her hand on the fridge. She breaks the suction seal before Ronald nods.

“I don’t know what’s in there,” Ronald says.

She snaps wilted romaine and plops next to Mr. Pete with dry-tipped leaves in her lap. Mr. Pete nibbles. “Feed him some,” she says.

Ronald sits beside her, and she hands him a leaf.

“Rabbits don’t eat carrots,” she says. “Bugs Bunny is bullshit.”

“Mr. Jones said that he’ll eat his own poop.”

Emma kicks out her legs, hoists Mr. Pete to her lap. Holds him in the air for a moment and says, “You little shit breath,” in a baby voice. “Little shit breath.” The rubber bands of her braces stretch. With Mr. Pete in her lap, she says, “Sometimes mother rabbits eat their babies.”

“That’s crazy.”

“How would you feel if you got me pregnant and I ate the baby.”

“Got you pregnant?”

“Yeah.” Emma widens her eyes. “And ate the baby.”

Ronald laughs nervously without looking at Emma and says, “I’m sure he’d eat a carrot if we gave him one.”

“Maybe the top,” she says. “But Rabbits don’t dig up food.”

“Makes me wonder, what else are we being lied to about?” Ronald says.

“Like moon landing stuff or aliens or the government on 911?” Emma gets close to Ronald to speak, supports Mr. Pete so he doesn’t slide from her lap. Her face shines with miniature beads of sweat. Ronald has the urge to playfully tap her nose.

“Sure. But I mostly mean God and heaven.” Ronald recalls the priest at his mother’s service, the lecture about immortality. He’d never gone to church with his mother.

“Can I have some water?” Emma asks.

Ronald looks for a clean glass, and Emma leans onto the kitchen counter near a bowl of wrinkled apples. Mr. Pete hops around the living room, investigates beneath the liquor cabinet.

“Do you have a tinfoil hat?” Emma asks.

“No.”

“Maybe we can make you one.” She smiles. “I joke,” she says. “I don’t think I believe in God.”

“No one seems to,” Ronald says. “Otherwise death wouldn’t be so terrible.”

“I didn’t realize you’re smart.” Grasping an apple from the bowl, she asks, “Can I?”

Ronald nods. Emma fingers her mouth, unhooks the rubber bands from her braces.

“These are annoying,” she says, tossing the bands in the trash. “You ever make out with someone with braces?” Ronald has never kissed anyone. Emma bites the apple. “You can’t tell they have them.”

“I never had braces.” Ronald wishes he had. He keeps his lips over his teeth as he speaks. His teeth crowd.

Emma bites to the core. When she finishes the apple, she says she has to leave. She kisses Mr. Pete between his ears and hugs Ronald. Ronald’s father pulls into the driveway as Emma jogs away.

#

That evening, Ronald's father tells him to help fix dinner. He hands Ronald a vegetable peeler and a bag of potatoes. He goes to the liquor cabinet, retrieves a bottle of Evan Williams, pours a highball with Diet Pepsi. After a sip he asks about Emma. He calls her *that pretty girl*. Ronald says that she's just a friend who wanted to see the rabbit. Ice clacks as his father sips, and he says that he's proud of Ronald.

When Sandra and Millie arrive, the roast is almost done. Millie is small and fat, with too many freckles, and wears red lipstick like her mother. She nearly wobbles at Sandra's side—a tiny botched clone. Sandra says that the food smells good. She pinches Millie's shoulder. "Doesn't it smell good?"

At the table, Ronald's father cuts the pork loin and slides pieces from the knife onto each plate. The pork is dry. Ronald's mother always kept pork moist with sauerkraut. They'd joke the cabbage smelled like farts. They'd scoop horseradish into their mouths and wince in competition.

Sandra cuts Millie's pork into little chunks. With her fingers, Millie dips the meat into ketchup and giggles.

"Millie, you ever have a pet?" Ronald's father asks.

Millie smiles, shakes her head so that her hair whips. Smearred ketchup and lipstick make her look like a killer clown.

"Ronald, take Millie up to see that rabbit."

Ronald leads Millie to the stairs. She oozes between Ronald's hip and the wall, shoots ahead while shout-questioning if the rabbit is in her old room.

"He's in the bathroom," Ronald says, handing Millie hay. "Be gentle." He cracks the door, and Millie strains to peek as the opening widens. Mr. Pete backs into the crevice between

the bathtub and the toilet, taking cover from the blitzing child. “Hold on,” Ronald says, grabbing Millie around her upper arm. She yanks back, looks at Ronald, and—after a moment—cries.

“You’re fine,” Ronald says. “Look at the rabbit.”

She sniffles, stops crying, and pets Mr. Pete like she wants to flatten him.

Back downstairs, Ronald’s father asks Millie if she liked the rabbit.

She nods, then looks to her mother, says, “My arm hurts.”

“Your arm is all red,” Sandra says. “What happened?”

“Ronald hurt me.”

“I barely did,” he says. “She would have scared the rabbit to death.”

“Do not ever touch my daughter.”

“Goddamnit, Ronald,” his father says. “What’s the matter with you?”

“This is what I’m talking about,” Sandra shouts.

“Just send me away,” Ronald says. “No one wants me here.” He goes to his room as his father squats to eye Millie’s arm.

#

The following afternoon, Emma knocks on the door. “I don’t know your last name, so I couldn’t Insta you or anything,” she says, walking into the house. She’s been jogging, this time with lime-green leggings.

On the living room floor, with Mr. Pete hopping between them, Emma asks, “Why’d you move here?”

“My mom died,” Ronald says.

Emma looks at him like he’s joking. “Are you fucking around?”

“No”

“I’m sorry.” Then, “Is that why you were talking about God and stuff?”

“I guess.”

“You don’t think she’s watching you?”

“She only exists in memory.”

“Other boys don’t think like you,” Emma says. “Travis only talks about football.”

“Is he your brother?”

“Gross. Boyfriend.” She lifts Mr. Pete. “Did he eat his poop today?”

“I didn’t smell his breath,” Ronald says. Emma laughs.

In the kitchen, Ronald salvages romaine.

“That’s a lot of alcohol,” Emma says, spying the liquor cabinet. She opens the cabinet, pulls out the bottle of Evan Williams. “You ever drink any?”

“My dad told me if I ever wanted to drink, that I had to with him,” Ronald says.

“Have you?”

“No.” Ronald’s mother once let him have wine with dinner—kids drink wine in Europe.

“Take a shot with me,” Emma says.

“Really?”

“You don’t have to.”

Ronald gets two glasses. Emma pours a little into each. They clank glasses, shoot. Ronald coughs, but Emma scrunches her face and holds the expression for a while. “I’m pretty good at drinking,” she says. “Travis takes me to a lot of parties.”

They relax on the couch, watch Mr. Pete at their feet—he’s gone into his cage, burrowed into brown, corkscrewed paper.

“You ever have a girlfriend?” Emma asks.

“Why?”

“Just curious,” she says. “I bet you’d write her poems.”

“I’ve always been terrible in English.”

“That’s essays,” she says. “Make me a poem right now. Say it aloud.”

Ronald hesitates, says he doesn’t know how, but Emma tugs his shirt like an overzealous beggar. Ronald says okay, but before he starts Emma extends a finger as if to say, *hold on*. She positions Mr. Pete on her lap. “He wants to hear the poem too,” she says.

“Your teeth are like flowers,” Ronald says. “They put me in a spell, like magic powders. Orange and purple pedals—”

“Those are hard to rhyme with.”

“With orange and purple pedals. They take me on a trip like sea vessels,” he says then rhymes about going to a tropical island where the toucans sing like the best band. He rhymes he’d stick his feet in the sand, rhymes that there would be no need to stand. He could lay all day because he would be away. That he wouldn’t need a chair, just Emma’s pink hair.

Emma cheers and claps. “Wasn’t that good, Mr. Pete?” She taps the rabbit’s front paws together. “Travis would never do that. I don’t think he could,” she says as Ronald’s father pulls into the driveway.

“Hi,” Emma says as Ronald’s father opens the door. She puts Mr. Pete on the ground and stands.

Ronald’s father removes his duty belt, shakes Emma’s hand, says it’s nice to meet her.

“I’m sorry about your wife,” Emma says.

“We were divorced.” Then, “Stay for dinner. We’re having pizza.”

#

Before Sandra and Millie arrive, Ronald tells Emma that the two are horrible. Emma says they can't be that bad. "What's horrible," she says, "is only having Netflix to watch." She explores the cable guide.

After Sandra and Millie arrive, Ronald's father picks up the pizza, leaving the two to sit awkwardly with Ronald and Emma. The four group around Mr. Pete. Something from the Disney channel plays. Emma shows Millie how to feed Mr. Pete lettuce. Sandra says she loves Emma's hair, combs her fingers through the pink. She asks where Emma gets her hair done, and Emma says she does it herself. Then they're laughing while Ronald stays quiet and watches Mickey Mouse dance. Sandra leaves to smoke. Emma makes ropes of Millie's hair while she tells the girl how to pet Mr. Pete nicely.

After pizza, Travis arrives to pick up Emma, beeps his yellow truck from the driveway. Emma waves goodbye to Mr. Pete, squeezes Ronald, says she had fun. Then Sandra hugs Emma, and Ronald's father tells Emma she should come for dinner again.

Walking Emma to the door, Ronald whispers. "They didn't act how they really are."

"They didn't seem that bad," Emma says. "I think I'd know. My dad beat my mom. And my stepdad isn't much better." She steps outside, waves to Travis. "If they're so bad, get back at them. Throw a party."

#

Midway of spring break, in the morning, Ronald washes his face. Mr. Pete nibbles his shit on the bathroom floor. Ronald asks, "Would you eat rabbit babies too?"

He powers the laptop and opens Microsoft Word. Recent documents display—his mother's old work forms. He thinks of poetry, something about how Emma's pink hair is like a sunset or that she darts through the roads of his heart. His mother had poetry books, kept them on

a little shelf with recipe books and Nora Roberts novels. There was one written by a lord or something. If Ronald had the book now, he could copy lines, look like a genius.

After rhyming love with dove, he shuts the laptop, goes outside to shoot hoops. The previous day, his father had gotten him a new air pump like a big syringe. He also gave Ronald a talk. Suppressing a smile, his father talked about Emma, said having her for dinner was nice and that she can come anytime, but if they are going to be alone together, Ronald needs to be smart, use protection.

On the driveway, Ronald makes a couple of shots, but when he can't get into a groove and finds he's playing catch with himself more often than shooting, he wants to stab the ball. He punts it, badly. The ball launches sideways thirty feet before hitting a fire hydrant. As Ronald retrieves the basketball, Travis's yellow Ranger pulls into the driveway.

"Hey, bud," Travis says waving. "We still allowed to play with that rabbit?"

"Mr. Pete," Emma says, stepping from the passenger side. Her hair is in a bun.

Ronald nods, says, "You guys can come inside."

When Travis stands in the front doorway, it's clear that he wins football games. He's muscled. He sits on the couch with his arm around Emma. Ronald fetches Mr. Pete. When he returns, Travis searches the TV guide. A porn channel is highlighted. "You ever watch these?" Emma is laughing.

Ronald feels his face heat. "No."

Travis settles with a music channel, hip-hop. Ronald places the cage before them, like an offering. Emma squats, releases Mr. Pete.

"Emma said you two were drinking," Travis says.

"A little," Ronald says.

“Think you’ll share again?”

“You don’t have to,” Emma says.

Travis is already handling whiskey at the liquor cabinet. He says, “We’ll take a little from each bottle so it’s not noticeable.” He lines liquor bottles on the coffee table. “Get a few glasses.”

Mr. Pete runs in little circles near Emma’s feet. Emma says, “Travis, you’ve got to drive.”

Ronald brings the glasses. Travis mixes rum and whiskey and gin. He hands Ronald the first glass. “Drink up, bud.”

Emma sips as Mr. Pete shits on a blanket.

“That burns,” Travis says, clanking his empty glass on the coffee table. He flexes both biceps.

Ronald coughs after his first sip.

“Keep going,” Travis cheers. Ronald and Emma quicken their pace. Then, with their glasses empty, Emma worms along the carpet, pursuing Mr. Pete, and Ronald eyes Emma’s leggings, the outline of her underwear. Travis fills his glass again and explores the house, opens doors.

“Your dad a cop?” Travis asks, peering into the main bedroom.

“Yes,” Ronald lies.

“Cool.” Travis fills Emma’s glass before he relaxes on the couch.

“Sorry we’re drinking so much,” she says before she gulps and winces.

“You ever have sex in a car?” Travis asks Ronald.

“A couple times,” Ronald lies.

“It’s hard to get comfortable doing it,” Travis says.

Emma blushes, laughs so hard that only the rubber bands of her braces seem to keep her jaw attached.

Ronald finds the remaining rusty romaine in the fridge and hands the chunk to Emma as he joins her on the carpet. The floor comes at him fast as he sits cross legged. Together, he and Emma feed Mr. Pete. She continues pacing through her drink, and soon she places an empty glass on the coffee table. She lays with her back on the carpet and with Mr. Pete on her chest. Her hair fans like a pink halo.

Travis says, “Ronald, you mind if I show Emma your dad’s cop stuff?”

Ronald lays on his stomach, his forearm supported by Emma’s warm thigh, so Mr. Pete can gnaw lettuce from his hand. “I guess.”

Travis lifts Mr. Pete. The rabbit kicks its legs midair, and, once set down, scurries to the cage. Travis helps Emma to her feet and leads her to the main bedroom. He shuts the door behind them. Ronald closes his eyes, feels the world overturning.

He’s used to this, has felt his world truly overturn before. When his mother got home from doubles, she always cooked omelets—her dinner and Ronald’s breakfast. The night of her wreck, a door-knocking deputy, woke Ronald instead.

Without standing, Ronald pours the rum, spilling on the coffee table and carpet before his glass catches the stream.

#

Through the afternoon, Emma and Travis fuck in the bedroom again and again. A shirtless Travis often emerges to help himself to more alcohol. When the two tire, they leave the bedroom and join Ronald. He’s watching Discovery channel. “We’ll wash the sheets for you,” Emma says. Her eyes seem to say, *I’m sorry*.

“We don’t want to watch this crap,” Travis says and returns to the music channel, blares the volume.

Emma scales the couch. She’s wearing Travis’s shirt. She reaches to Ronald, “Dance with me.”

Ronald takes her hand and steps on the couch. Emma bounces next to him. Paper from Mr. Pete’s cage litters the living room. At some point, the bag of food pellets was kicked over.

Following the thud of his father’s car door, Ronald stays standing on the couch. He eyes the door until his father says, “What the fuck is going on.” Emma screams. The music pulses. Alcohol bottles are everywhere.

“Send me away,” Ronald slurs.

Travis stands from the recliner, still shirtless. Ronald’s father stomps forward, grabs Travis by the neck. Travis wriggles free, holds his fists in defense, and Ronald’s father yells, “Get the fuck out of here.” He looks at Emma who is braless, her breasts flat and low behind her shirt. She scrambles, retrieves her bra and leaves with Travis leading her.

“Send me away,” Ronald says, collapsing into the couch.

Ronald’s father mutes the television, surveys the house. He goes through his post-work ritual—lays his badge on the kitchen table, loops his duty belt on a chair. He pauses, breathes.

“I’m not sending you away,” he says.

“Sandra wants me gone.”

Ronald’s father squats by Ronald, cups Ronald’s head. “You don’t worry about what Sandra wants.” A little vein in his forehead pulses, and he clenches his teeth. “You’re my son.” He tops the liquor bottles and returns them to the cabinet. He squats to the rabbit cage. “You could have scared this guy to death,” he says, offering his hand to be smelled. Mr. Pete pokes his

head out of the cage; his nose wiggles. The white hunk of romaine rests against the bars. Ronald squats to pick food pellets from the carpet.

BILLY WALKER, HERO

1

At seventeen, Billy Walker drives in an Ocala storm. Through the wet, beyond the shoulder of the road, he sees a truck with mud-sunk tires. He pulls over, steps into rain. The truck tilts like a beached ship. A young blond girl sits in the cab.

Billy Walker shouts, “Hello,” but the girl can’t hear him because of the storm and her crying. He knocks on the window. This terrifies her, and she screams. With rain nearly blinding him, he smiles as best as he can. She smiles too.

2

On their one-month anniversary, Billy Walker tells the girlfriend that he loves her. He gives her a small toy truck.

3

When Billy Walker introduces the girlfriend to the mother, the mother tells her that it’s the prettiest white dress she’s ever seen. The mother gets emotional. She tells the girlfriend about when Billy’s father died. Billy was just five-years-old. The mother says, “He didn’t cry. He just kept hugging me.”

4

Billy Walker is eighteen and presented the opportunity to serve his country—he can’t imagine doing much else.

5

When he tells the girlfriend about his plans, they are alone for the night, and he has gotten his hands on some bourbon. While they kiss, he touches her more than he has before. Then the girlfriend is completely uncovered. Neither knows what to do. Eventually, they fall asleep.

6

The mother pleads with him not to sign the papers. “It’s only the reserves,” he says.

7

A month into Military Police School, a young private who wears his spandex to sleep has a wet dream. He runs with it during all five miles of the morning run.

8

Four months into Military Police School, the drill sergeants march Private Billy Walker and his company to driver’s training. Before getting into the patrol car, he adjusts his duty belt. Then he clutches the leather-wrapped wheel and relaxes into his platoon’s collective sweat dampening the seats.

9

A battle-buddy in his company cuts a hole in a life-sized princess doll.

10

When Private Second Class (PV2) Billy Walker reports to his unit. He shakes his commander’s hand with wet, nervous fingers, and a patch is placed against the Velcro on his arm. The mother is so proud.

11

On the night of his second drill, PV2 Billy Walker drives his platoon leadership to a strip club. He wakes at three in the morning as his drunk lieutenant barges into the van. With vodka-sterile breath, the lieutenant says, “The tits were glorious.”

12

The company's executive officer, First Lieutenant Kayla R. Gray, had a boyfriend who always demanded road head. On the way to the strip club she says, "I wonder what it's all about." Then she reaches over the gear shift and claws at a drunk private's neck.

13

After seven months at his unit, PV2 Billy Walker drinks alone in his hotel room. He misses the girlfriend. Across the hall, his platoon mates, Private John M. Campbell, Specialist Joe C. Clemmons, Specialist Gabriel M. Figueroa, and Sergeant Gerald M. Brown, wait giggling like boys. They watch the parking lot through a window stained with white outlines of old water. When they see the prostitute, they argue about who will talk to her first.

The prostitute has a bottle of red liquid. After she removes her sequin top to reveal stretch marks on her belly, she says, "I have one rule, don't drink my shit."

14

The mother cries when PV2 Billy Walker is sent to Afghanistan. The girlfriend is angry at him for the pornography she found on his computer, but she hugs him as he cries too.

15

When the IED explodes outside the forward operating base, it sounds like a fleet of space rockets gaining atmospheric reentry. Four bunks down, Private Allen T. Evans drops a taco—shredded lettuce, processed cheese, and ground beef confetti his gear. An alarm sounds. The barracks lights flicker on. Private Evans pulls on his pants and rushes outside.

In the bunker, he sits across from PV2 Billy Walker with lotion beading on his fingertips. A limp lettuce shred glues to his thumb.

16

Private First Class (PFC) Billy Walker writes a letter to the girlfriend describing their future. It includes a house. It includes a dog. It includes a brood of sons.

17

Specialist George T. Jones interrupts PFC Billy Walker. "I tried to write a letter once. Only thing that came out was a suicide note."

18

At a bar, following an end-of-deployment party for PFC Billy Walker's company, a fifty-year-old woman pulls two young soldiers together and says, "I want you both." None of them come, but the two soldiers gain an unexpected admiration for each other's bodies.

19

When PFC Billy Walker is back in the states and away for extended training, he listens as fellow soldiers, swiping on their phones, compare and critique women. He downloads the app. He gets his first match. He keeps swiping.

20

PFC Billy Walker's squad leader, Staff Sergeant Stephen C. Mason, flips over at a massage parlor.

21

The second time PFC Billy Walker goes to the strip club near the armory, he doesn't drive.

22

PFC Billy Walker poses in the mirror without pants. He flexes, and the veins in his neck protrude. He sends the picture to MaxQueenHottie02, not knowing she's in the tenth grade.

23

The girlfriend takes PFC Billy Walker's phone and locks herself in the bathroom. She exits the bathroom angry. "It wasn't for real," he says.

24

PFC Billy Walker's squadmate, Specialist Peter K. Blackburn, often masturbates in his car. The week after the girlfriend leaves PFC Billy Walker, Specialist Blackburn pulls into a parking spot in the deep corner of the armory lot where a huge oak pours shade onto asphalt.

25

Three years after enlisting, Specialist Billy Walker approaches three girls outside a bar. "Too young to drink here?" he asks. "I can help with that." They exchange numbers, and the girls text him inquiring which of them he wants most. He responds, "But you are all so beautiful." They tell him to meet at a motel. He waits in the parking lot and starts on a six-pack.

He receives a text: *Joke's on you, pig.*

BLOOD LIKE WATER

I'd been homesick, renting a room in a neighborhood with window bars, when my cousin Dorian called with details about Uncle Mike's funeral. Uncle Mike was his dad. I told Dorian I didn't have a license on account of my DUIs. In the morning, with the sun barely up, Dorian's two door Ford, scratched up but shiny with a fresh wax, was outside. With the window down, he eyed my bags and motioned to the truck bed.

"What if it rains?" I asked.

"Then your stuff will get wet." Dorian collected grudges like baseball cards.

I sat in the passenger seat, took in the smell of cigarettes and lemon air freshener.

"You want dip?" Dorian asked, holding the can toward me. Dorian bodybuilt. I hadn't seen him in four years, and he was massive.

"It's an expensive habit."

"It's not like you're going to reimburse me." He tucked a hunk into his lip.

I conceded and packed mine. He shifted into drive, toggled on the radio, and took us toward I-10. After a few minutes, as we turned onto the exit, he said, "Look, we're family. Right?"

I nodded and spit into an empty Gatorade bottle. "We're family."

Me and Dorian used to be close. Me not having a dad around, we grew up like brothers. When we were kids, we told one another, I love you. Before our falling out, we even worked together. Dorian had a bar in Houston. With dreams of building a franchise, I quit my job servicing A/C units in Gainesville to bartend. But Dorian ran the bar like a bank. He'd come in early after the gym, check the books, and make sure not an ounce of liquor had been given away.

If anything was out of place, or if I came in late, he'd stick out a chest that could crack walnuts and shout, "This is a goddamn business."

A year into the job, a woman came between us—he loved her as much as I was infatuated with her. But she didn't love him or me, so she slept around. Me and her only fucked once, but Dorian found out, went berserk, and tore up my room—flipped my mattress, hurled my TV over a balcony. When I came home, he threatened to crack my skull. I slept in my car for days. When I came back, Dorian had changed the locks.

I don't think we talked the entire drive through Louisiana. Maybe Mississippi too. I just picked at my hand's dead skin. A rash speckled my left from submersion in bleach and detergent all day. I worked as a dishwasher.

As we crossed the big bridge through Mobile, I said, "Remember when Uncle Mike took us fishing?"

"Maybe," Dorian said.

"We caught some big fish." Under I-10, the bay boiled—water lapped at little islands.

"The fish weren't big, just abundant."

I watched gulls glide over water and dive for fish. After a few minutes, I said, "I'm sorry about Uncle Mike."

"You loved him too," Dorian said.

"What happened to us?"

Dorian gripped the steering wheel tight.

The thing about Dorian is he's a romantic. Dorian knew a girl who was sleeping with some Mexican. The Mexican beat the shit out of her on a few occasions. When Dorian came into a pool hall to knock him around, no one was surprised. But then Dorian shoved a cracked pool

cue through the guy's eye socket. Dorian got off easy. All the witnesses said the killing was self-defense. It didn't hurt that Dorian was white.

We shut our mouths all the way through the panhandle. Then we got onto I-75 near Lake City.

"When we get into town, drop me off at Laura's," I said.

"Your mom hasn't seen you."

"I know."

Laura was my high school girlfriend. I dated her through a few semesters of college, even asked her to move to Houston with me, but I left alone. Holed up in my shit apartment, I always thought of her. Of our fights that meant nothing. Of a time in a rainstorm, my windshield melting, me yelling at her to get out of the car near the front of a restaurant to stay dry. Her refusal because she wanted to be near me. That's how I knew Laura was special—my mind always coming back to those moments. She wasn't a gasoline fire. She was a tall candle. That's what love should be.

"She's got a kid now," I said. "She wants to come to the funeral."

"You think you being around is good for a kid?" he said without a hint of sarcasm.

"I know about growing up without a dad."

"My father treated you right."

"He did," I said.

Dorian pulled to a rest stop. A fleet of backed up semis lined the woodline. He used the bathroom, and I bought two coffees and a few doughnuts. He took the coffee but refused a doughnut, grabbed himself beef jerky instead.

“When’s the last time you saw Laura?” he asked in the parking lot, stretching his legs and gnawing on jerky.

“Not since I left.” I popped the lid off my coffee and blew.

“She still wants to see you?”

I bit a doughnut in half. “I hope so.”

He laughed.

By early evening, we reached Gainesville. Laura’s neighborhood was like an oak forest. Spanish moss brushed cars and small houses with weeds growing from gutters. There were worn shingles and crooked blinds and faded paint and yards with sandy patches like snow. Outside Laura’s house, Dorian said again, “You should see your mom.”

“I’ll see her,” I said. I grabbed a clean shirt from my bag and changed before Laura opened her door. She stepped to the shade of a hundred-year-old oak, and we hugged. Laura helped me with a bag and led inside. She had put on weight, and there was an aura to her—her face prettier than I remembered. Maybe it was motherhood.

“You haven’t changed,” I said, stacking bags and kicking off my shoes.

“You’re skinny,” she said. “You want a beer?”

“I better not.”

I followed her into the kitchen. There was a yellowed backsplash, corner-peeling linoleum tile, and a stained sink set into a scarred laminate counter. But the space was clean and smelled good. “How was the drive?” she asked.

“Fine.” I lifted a picture frame from the counter. Laura’s arms wrapped around her son, a tiny, blue bow tie at his throat. “Cute,” I said.

“He’s in his room.”

“I want to meet him.”

She smiled and said, “Your cousin still seems like a prick.” She settled at a table with a mismatched metal folding chair.

“He just lost his dad.”

“Your dad too,” she said, “basically.”

She popped a beer with a twist. The bottle steamed as she called him. His name was AJ. He stood with puppy-eyes beside a magazined coffee table on the living room’s worn, vacuum-treaded carpet. I squatted next to him and introduced myself. I wasn’t sure what to do with a kid, so I rubbed his head and made his hair all crazy. I wondered what he would’ve looked like if Laura had made him with me.

“You want to see my toys?” he asked.

“Sure.”

In his room, he dug into a Fisher Price toy chest. The plastic hinges were broken, so he lifted the lid and placed it by a bunk bed with the top missing. He retrieved scuffed Ninja Turtles, half the weapons missing. I sat on the bed, and he handed me Leo. Laura leaned against the door frame with her beer in hand as me and AJ fought Shredder.

“Get your keys,” I said to Laura.

“Why?”

“I think AJ needs some new toys.” I grabbed AJ and picked him up to make him laugh.

She kept drinking her beer, looked at me like I told a riddle. I cupped my hands around his ears. “Get your goddamn keys,” I joked.

She laughed, downed her beer and said, “Okay. I’m ready.”

At Walmart, I told AJ to pick out whatever he wanted. I didn't have money, but I had a credit card. The kid liked dinosaurs and cars and animals. I wanted to get him Army figures, maybe a Nerf gun, but he shook his head. "He knows what he likes," Laura said. So, I bought him a pack of plastic dinosaurs, more Hot Wheels than he would know what to do with, and a track to go along.

At Laura's, I helped AJ build the track on the porch. Beyond a pollen-caked screen, big weeds pressed against the house. AJ was smart, knew where he wanted the tracks. After some Hot Wheels runs, it got late fast and Laura put him to bed. I waited for her on the porch.

Laura and I broke up on good terms. She understood that I wanted a different life, but she wouldn't leave family for it. After Dorian kicked me to the curb, I was too proud to go back home, but I spent a lot of time reflecting. I loved Laura, and I'd given her up for nothing.

Laura came back to the porch, and we had a couple cigarettes, she another beer. Smoke puffed around the track and the toys at our feet as we listened to insect love.

"I can't believe you're a mom," I said.

"AJ's awesome, isn't he?"

"I could play with him every day."

She took a long drag. "What have you been doing all these years?"

"I don't know." I ran a Hot Wheels van across the table. "You should've moved to Texas with me."

"If I did that, I wouldn't have AJ." She smiled. Then we went to bed together.

#

At the funeral, my mom cried more than anyone. Laura cried too. After, we joined the convoy to Aunt Jane's for the reception. Her house had a nice yard. There were crepe myrtles

with flowers like big cotton candy puffs and perfect round hedges and a carpet of tiny, yellow flowers. Uncle Mike had been good with plants. He had worked at the University of Florida as a groundskeeper with the intention of using the job to get Dorian and me a free ride. I couldn't get in. Dorian didn't try.

Inside, I greeted Aunt Jane. Laura told her how pretty the whole place was. Aunt Jane was Uncle Mike's second wife and Dorian's stepmom—a skinny old lady who wore tight clothes and too much makeup. When we were teenagers, she made a habit of comparing us to her sons from her first marriage. She was the reason Dorian left Florida.

Dorian sat at the dining room table with some of his step siblings. He wasn't saying a word. I waved at him as I fetched Laura a beer. Me and Laura went to the patio where Aunt Jane and my mom and uncles and aunts sat on chairs with plastic-threaded cushions. Beers covered the table, and Aunt Jane was laughing. One of my uncles shouted stories about Uncle Mike in the seventies. My mom was nice to Laura, held an entire conversation with her about nursing and AJ. Laura told my mom about the Hot Wheels, made my mom smile. I felt like a big swinging dick.

I could tell Aunt Jane was drunk because she got loud. Out of nowhere, she asked me, "What's wrong with you? Why have you abandoned your mother?"

I guess I didn't notice that the conversation had changed. "I'm sorry," I said. Then my mom was crying. I wanted to tell Aunt Jane that she didn't know a fucking thing, but I turned to my mom and pleaded, "Don't do this now."

"I'm worried about you," my mom said.

I could feel that Laura wished she wasn't there. I didn't want to make the reception about me. I stood, announced, "I love you." To Laura I said, "Let's go." Laura hugged my mom. My

mom kissed Laura's cheek and squeezed her arms. We found Dorian in the kitchen, feeding his bulk with sausage and perogies. Me and him were two outcasts.

"Me and Laura are getting drinks tonight," I said. "You should come with. Shoot the shit properly."

"Maybe," he said through a mouthful of meat.

He stuck out his hand, but I gave him a hug. As I barely got my arms around his shoulders, I thought maybe we'd be brothers again. That maybe the girl in Houston was behind us.

#

We didn't eat at the reception, so I told Laura I'd fix her dinner. She knew I worked in a restaurant and was eager to see what I could do. I left out that I washed dishes. I filled a basket at Publix: chicken and mushrooms and capers and lemons. I picked out a fancy looking bottle of white wine.

In the kitchen Laura helped me find pans. They were bent and so scuffed they probably would have made shrimp netted out of an oil spill stick. I said, "Don't you ever cook?"

"I don't have time for all that."

"You need help around here."

I dug a flowery apron out of a pantry, put it on. I curtsied to her and asked how I looked. She laughed and tried to take it off, wrestling her arms around my back and pressing her body to me. I said, "I can't let my good slacks get greasy." She fought for the bowed strings in back, and I kissed her.

She pushed off and said, “Get to work, hun,” slapping my butt. She started on the wine as I worked at garlic and parsley with a dull chef’s knife. Then I dredged the chicken and seared the breast in butter. I made two plates. They looked okay.

Laura was impressed. She said, “I could let you cook for me every day.”

“I bet AJ would like it.”

“He only eats chicken nuggets.” She held her knife toward me.

“I could get him eating real food.”

“I don’t think you’d win that bet.”

“How much you willing to wager?”

“How about this whole house?” Then, “What do you got?”

“I don’t want to take your home,” I said, thinking of all I didn’t have.

We finished the food and the wine. Laura seemed to have licked her plate clean. Then she fixed her makeup and we went for drinks.

The place we drank while we were young had vanished, but we found a bar away from the university, a corporate place with a thousand different taps. Pipes ran to the ceiling and upstairs to kegs lit with blue behind glass walls. Gator football shit was everywhere, and the place was full of youth. College kids are like roaches in Gainesville.

I bought myself a light beer and Laura a double vodka cranberry. She talked a lot about how happy I had made AJ.

I said, “Uncle Mike dying has given me a lot of perspective on fatherhood.”

“We did stupid things,” she said, “but I know you were good.”

“I think I’d like to stay,” I said. “Come back and stay.”

“Where would you live?” she asked.

I took a moment, put my glass to my lips. “Close.”

During our second round a guitarist plugged in at a little stage by the door. We struggled to talk over the noise, so I switched to Laura’s side of the booth. I told her, “I want you to forgive me.”

She said, “I don’t have ill will for you.”

Dorian showed up about then. He looked rough—tired, like Atlas about to buckle under the world. I was surprised to see him, almost forgot that I invited him.

“I needed to get out of that house,” he said.

Laura waved.

“Let me buy you a drink,” I said. The place had filled, and I shouldered between two couples sitting at the bar. When I returned with the beers, Dorian and Laura were small talking.

We toasted to Uncle Mike.

“My stepmother drives me crazy,” Dorian said.

“At least your dad is free from her now,” Laura said. We all laughed.

The guitarist started covering something modern that the kids around knew. Laura knew it too. She said, “Oh,” and grabbed my wrist, flowed her shoulders.

I said, “I don’t know this one.” Then to Dorian, “You’ve got to meet Laura’s boy.”

“How old is he?”

I looked at Laura.

“He’s four,” she said.

“This kid is going to be a city planner or an engineer or something.” I said. “I’ve got to get him some Legos.”

“He likes animals more,” Laura said. The guitarist finished the pop song and the place was all smacking palms.

The conversation went quiet, so I brought up some high school conversation, talked about an English teacher we all had. Laura recalled how we messed with him—stupid pranks like filling his desk with crinkled paper balls. Her story circled, and she couldn’t remember what her point had been. I guess she had drunk a lot by then.

“Great story,” I said, and she playfully slapped my arm before excusing herself to piss.

“Things going well with her?” Dorian asked.

“Real good.” I finished my beer, and my buzz must’ve gotten to me. I said, “I’m sorry for what happened between us.”

A little smile split Dorian’s lips. “You still won’t own up to it.” Dorian could be stubborn.

“It was one time.”

“She was barely conscious.”

“I was drunk too.”

“She couldn’t even leave the house after.”

“Christ, it wasn’t like that.” I couldn’t believe Dorian still fixated on the Houston girl. I went to the bar. This time I let the crowd block my path for a while.

I returned without a drink. Laura was back at the table with Dorian. He nodded to Laura, said, “Take care. It was nice seeing you.”

He parted the crowd like a fire truck through traffic. “What he say to you?” I asked.

“He said you’re the biggest piece of shit in the world.”

“That’s not true.”

“I believe you.” She sipped melted ice.

“You want another drink?”

“Yes.”

I got us another round. We sat on the same side of the booth without talking, just listening to the guitarist. When she finished she had her hand on my leg, said, “I’m ready to go home.”

With half my beer on the table, we left. I drove her car. With the cruise control on, I focused on the road lines, the dashes coming at me like edges of film from a reel. I said, “Don’t listen to Dorian’s nonsense.”

“I won’t,” she said. “I didn’t.”

“The guy’s a murderer. Whatever he said isn’t true.”

“I believe you.”

A police car pulled out behind me. I double checked my speed. “I’m moving back for you,” I said.

She looked out her window. The police car got in the left lane and passed well over the limit. “I don’t want you in my life.”

“Look, don’t believe that murderer.”

“I don’t. But it doesn’t matter.”

My hand was on the gear stick. I asked her what she was talking about. She told me that she knew I’d been arrested, said that she and AJ didn’t need complications. She covered my hand with hers, squeezed a little. I gripped the steering wheel with both hands and took her car into the driveway. “Goodnight,” I said.

“Where are you going?” she asked. “Stay the night.”

“Don’t worry,” I said.

I walked until the city became familiar. Me and Laura had a make out spot near a pizzeria. An old batting cage Uncle Mike dumped quarters in for me and Dorian. A park we smoked weed at.

It was late. I took a seat on a bus bench near a stop sign. The buses still ran, shipping drunk college kids and advertising Gator football. One pulled up, the doors parting with a pop. Mini-skirted girls got off. The bus driver shouted to me, “You getting on?”

FIGHTING FOR FARAN

Seventh period on the first day of middle school, Simon's teacher made all the kids introduce themselves. Simon had a lisp that twisted s's, making him sound like he wanted to spit out his tongue. "My name is Thymon," he said. "I like to run."

There was an expected chuckle from Evan, a boy who had laughed at Simon during other class's icebreakers.

"Diamond?" Mrs. Hartman asked.

"Thy-mon," Simon attempted to clarify but further botched the syllables.

Evan, and the boys around Evan, laughed.

"What's funny?" Mrs. Hartman demanded.

The boys went silent but remained red-faced and shaky with hysterics.

"His name is Simon," Faran said, his accent Urdu-tinged. Faran was Pakistani. Being the oldest kid in his family, Faran often translated for his parents; he was used to speaking for others. He'd transferred to Simon's tiny elementary school halfway through the fifth grade, just a year after moving to America.

After class, Simon told Faran, "Elementary school was better."

"The white people here think I'm just another Puerto Rican," Faran said, shaking his head. "It's much better."

On the bus home, there were more familiar faces from elementary school. Crude penises inked the vinyl bus bench. Someone had etched, "Fuck Mrs. Hartman," into a scuffed window. Evan sat diagonal to Simon and Faran. He flashed a gummy smile and asked Simon, "Do you like man thighs?" His voice was deep for a sixth grader.

"No," Simon said.

“Why’s your name Thighman?” Evan laughed like he’d come up with something smart.
“Thighman loves man thighs.”

Simon looked over to Faran, who kept his eyes out the window. Faran was always fearless when speaking against teachers, but bullies threatened physical hurt.

#

The start of the third week, they started dressing out in gym class. Evan strutted the locker room with his shirt off. He was big—bigger than most teachers, even the P.E. coaches.

Faran whispered that Evan was held back. “On top of that,” Faran said, “I heard Evan’s birthday falls late. He’s the only fourteen-year-old in the sixth grade.”

The class arranged on bleachers. Evan wore a sleeveless shirt with the school mascot, a coiled gator. He leaned with his elbows on an empty bleacher square. Proud of puberty, he twisted his armpit hair, looked at Simon, and said, “You don’t have none of this.”

The coach led the class to the track. For the first school quarter, the students were to train for the mile, to meet the presidential challenge. Simon was fast, had inherited speed from his father who had been a boxer with cheetah-hands. Simon took to the track, which was old—no rubber cushioning, just parking lot asphalt with faded chalk lines circling a field of brown grass. His Walmart running shoes dislodged gravel.

When Simon finished in seven minutes, he walked in circles until Faran finished. Faran came in just ahead of Evan.

“You’re fast, Thighman,” Evan said panting. “It from chasing all the man thighs?”

Simon didn’t respond, kept stretching his quadricep. Evan laughed, shouldered between Simon and Faran.

“Don’t leave me near that guy again,” Faran said, breathing hard. His stomach heaved up and down.

“Sorry.” Simon switched legs.

Faran said, “My mom’s going to give them a show tonight.” Open house was that night.

“What do you mean?”

“My religion,” Faran said. “She doesn’t hide it.” He had his hands on his hips and breathed easier.

Simon didn’t understand Faran’s point. Faran was a stranger to not just the teachers and students, but to most everything American. This was cool. Simon was amazed that Faran spoke another language, knew about other countries. For a month during the summer, his entire family only ate at night. Faran knew things, was probably smarter than teachers.

#

That night, parents wandered the school’s halls with their sixth graders who were eager to show their maturity, how they took themselves from class to class every day.

Simon led his father, Joe. Joe walked with a silver lion head handle cane—back in the day he’d strike like a cat. He also walked with a wobble, always stepping from the tips of his right foot toes. He retired from boxing at twenty-two following an injury in his third professional match.

Simon’s schedule aligned with Faran’s for the second half of the day. The two met in the hallway before fourth period, math. Faran was with his mom. She wore a purple hijab. His little sister held her mom’s hand, and she too wore a hijab, a pink one.

Joe had met Faran at the end of Simon’s fifth grade year. They lived in the same neighborhood. For a project, the boys made a human brain out of playdough, used separate

colors for each lobe. Joe moved the cane from his left hand and leaned his right forearm on the handle—his right hand didn't have much feeling. He extended his left to Faran's mom. "It's nice to meet you. Our sons are great friends."

After a moment, Faran's mother awkwardly shook with her left. "Thank you," she said in a heavy accent. She smiled and said something to Faran in Urdu.

In the classroom, Joe crammed into a student desk. Evan's mom wore a low-cut shirt that revealed too much cleavage and a scratchy shoulder tattoo of a heart. She stared at Faran's family. All the kids, and the parents, seemed to sneak constant glances at Faran's family. When the teacher finished, Joe struggled out of the desk. His right hand stayed crumpled, unable to grasp his cane as he used his left, his good hand, to push from the desk. Faran's mom held Joe's cane and linked her arm with his.

"Last time I'm stuffing myself into one of those," Joe said. Faran's mom smiled, and Joe smiled too.

Together, they went to gym, science, and finally, Mrs. Hartman's English. There, Joe supported his half-paralyzed body against a classroom wall with large laminated letters that said, *Word Wall*, and subsequent illustrations characterizing weekly vocabulary words. Mrs. Hartman droned about standardized essays and the semester project, in which students were to research their family heritage. During Mrs. Hartman's homework policy explanation, Joe, leaning like he was against the ropes, slipped and tore a dozen drawings from the word-wall.

Faran's mother jumped from her seat.

Evan laughed. His mother slapped the back of his head.

#

Walking to the parking lot, Simon asked his father, "Are you okay to drive?"

“I just slipped,” Joe said. Once, after a seizure, he lost driving privileges for six months.

They got into the car.

“Why does Faran’s mom dress like that?” Simon asked.

“The Muslims?” Then, “It’s their faith. There’s a discipline to it. Kind of like the way your mother doesn’t let us drink soda.”

“Is their religion bad?”

“I knew quite a few boxers who prayed with the Quran,” Joe said. “Makes no difference what you follow if it leads you to doing good.”

#

The next day, during gym, Evan followed Simon and Faran from the locker room.

“Thighman, you’ve got a retard for a dad and a terrorist friend.”

Simon and Faran quickened their pace to the basketball courts, to the coaches. Simon’s head heated and felt poorly attached. He was accustomed to the jokes about his speech, but ridicule about his father crushed him. Simon had always envisioned Joe the way a photo in the living room displayed him—lean and muscled, his hands wrapped, an amateur belt around his waist.

“He’ll blow you up, too,” Evan said.

“Boom,” Faran said.

Evan chested up. Then went to the bleachers.

Their coach finished roll call, told them to file to the track. There, Simon rocketed. His legs reached for length. The wind enveloped him. The only kids in front were those he was to lap.

Halfway around the track, Faran jogged ahead of Evan. Evan burst into a sprint and pushed Faran. Faran tumbled, fell with his hands out like he was feeling in the dark. He rolled after hitting the ground. Simon looked around for the coach. Where was he? Had he gone to get volleyballs and dodgeballs from the storage shed? Evan kicked Faran in the side. Faran tucked fetally—his arms covered his head like he was sheltering from an air raid.

Simon felt his strides lessening—he was slowing, not speeding to help. As Simon reached the curve of the track, Evan was back to running, leaving Faran balled. “Are you okay?” Simon asked, offering a hand. Faran lay wheezing. His palms were scrapped and embedded with little pebbles, and his forearms bled. He stained his shirt grabbing his side, holding his ribs like he’d been shot.

Together, the boys walked to the starting point. The coach returned, asked, “What happened?”

Simon wanted to tell the coach, wanted to scream and point at Evan, say, “That bastard.” But he was used to saying little.

“I fell,” Faran said. “Tripped.”

#

At home, Simon’s father was on the couch, a bowl of shelled peanuts on his belly. Peanut skin powdered his shirt. Deadliest Catch played on the television. A fisherman had gone over the boat along with a crab cage.

“I want to learn to fight,” Simon said.

Joe held up his dead hand. “You don’t want to be like this.” He paused the show. “And your mother won’t have it.”

“I need to know how,” Simon said.

“I couldn’t teach you anyhow. Look at me.”

Simon didn’t see his father for what he was—a defeated man with only one achievement to take pride in. When Joe was twenty, he knocked out a fighter in an amateur bout, who, eight years later, would earn a top middleweight belt. He never got another shot at him. Joe went on to take the blow that rendered him epileptic and sapped half his body’s strength. Too hurt to even help train young fighters, the injury had removed Joe from the boxing world completely. When Simon was young, Joe explained the injury simply; he said, “The sonofabitch broke my brain.” Since the injury, Joe’s muscle had wasted and given way to fat, and he’d putter around the house with a right knee bent inward, the attached foot dragging from a seemingly snapped ankle, ranting about how he would’ve been the greatest. He could only use his right hand, which stayed crumpled, to barely balance against counters and walls. A few times he had suffered seizures that came with the cruelty of a coked-up Mike Tyson, paralyzing his right side for days.

Joe asked, “Why do you want to learn so bad?”

“Faran’s getting bullied.”

“Are you getting bullied?” Joe asked.

“No,” Simon said. “Faran got beat up!”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with you.” Joe rewound his show thirty seconds and hit play. The man fell off the boat again.

Simon said, “I need to stand up for him.”

Joe cracked a peanut shell. Chewing, he looked at Simon for a while, this time without pausing the show. “We’ll ask your mother. She’s the breadwinner.”

Simon’s mother got home late. She worked like a mule at the hospital.

“Simon wants to box,” Joe said, handling leftover chicken parm from the microwave.

“That’s not a sport you’ll play,” she said to Simon who stood in the hallway, hoping to be unnoticed. “You’ll use your brain, not destroy it.”

#

At school, Mrs. Hartman lectured about hook-sentences before assigning the kids to write intro paragraphs. Faran’s forearms had scabbed. He wrote quickly, said, “I think I’ve got a hang of this.” Faran had aced the standardized math tests and done okay on science sections with charts, graphs, or pictures. But the writing portion he had flunked, fell into the twentieth percentile. The score held him back from higher level placement.

So, each week, Faran borrowed a book from Mrs. Hartman’s shelf near the bean bag chairs in the rugged corner of the room. He turned the essay intros to Mrs. Hartman’s box and brought his week’s finished book to Mrs. Harman’s shelf to exchange with a Narnia book.

“That’s not a Quran.” Evan said.

Simon turned around, had his mouth fixed to say something, but Faran gave Simon a look that said, *don’t worry about it*. “Good for him,” Faran said. “He learned something about Islam.”

Simon was still poised to say something to Evan.

“Thighman, you look as retarded as your dad,” Evan said.

Simon was astounded that Evan was accepted by the other students. How did no one else see Evan as despicable, as an idiotic menace?

The next day, during gym laps, Faran was pushed again.

“Why don’t you tell on him?” Simon asked as they crossed the finish line. Faran wiped blood from opened scabs.

“That could make things worse,” he said. “None of these teachers are going to stop it.”

When the day ended, they waited until the bus filled before taking any available seats at the front, away from Evan. Simon eyed dirt caking the metal grooves of the bus floor and the red emergency lever suspended above his head, ashamed he hadn't helped Faran, that he couldn't.

At home, Simon told his father he felt sick and went to his room. He spread his homework on his comforter and lay, belly down, staring at the assignments.

Joe knocked. "Can I come in?"

When Simon looked at his father, he couldn't help but cry. He saw Joe's physicality, the brokenness.

"What's the matter?"

"I hate the kids at school," he said. "They're terrible."

"You can't take on others' problems." Joe worked himself to sit, keeping his left side to Simon. The bed sunk with his weight.

"Good people don't let bad things happen."

"Life is more complicated than that."

"No, it's not," Simon nearly shouted.

Joe looked at his Simon surprised. "What do you know about good and bad?"

"I know it's bad to not help people."

Joe was quiet. He rubbed Simon's head with his good hand, pulled him close and kissed his crown. "I'll start running you through exercises while your mom's at work." Joe swayed his weight to his good side to stand. "She won't object to fitness."

#

The first training session, Joe made Simon jump rope for fifteen continuous minutes. Then Joe held a stress ball, a little globe, in his good hand and instructed Simon to do burpees.

Joe lobbed the stress ball for Simon to catch midair. Joe would say, “Dominate the world.” After Simon felt dead from the burpees, Joe made Simon sit against the wall with rattling knees.

They trained every day after school in the hours before Simon’s mother got home. Joe followed his normal routine. Preparing dinner, he’d bark orders from the kitchen. “Work,” he’d shout. “Up. Down. Up Down. Hold it!”

At the end of the week Joe had seemingly forgotten that he was at first against teaching Simon to fight. He ran Simon through drills, making him move his feet and throw shadow punches. At first, Simon had no coordination, and Joe had difficulty demonstrating anything with his bum right side. He’d punch air with a limp right wrist, his hand flopping. He couldn’t pivot and dance or get in a proper stance, so instead of modeling his body, he resorted to shouting that Simon did it all wrong. But they kept at the drills until Simon punched with ferocity.

#

In the gym class locker room, a shirtless Evan strode the aisle. He paused at Faran’s row. Faran stuffed his backpack into a locker. “Watch out, he might be putting a bomb in there,” Evan said.

“If I had a bomb, I’d be putting it into your locker,” Faran said.

“I could report you for that,” Evan said.

“Go ahead.”

Simon’s body had hurt from training. All week his legs seemed ready to buckle with each step, his arms were unable to fully extend. But he’d recovered and felt stronger. “Why don’t you fuck off,” Simon said to Evan, focusing on the syllables.

Evan looked at Simon, widened his eyes, stood straighter. Simon was aware that he may be in for too much. But he had his shoes on tight and knew could out sprint Evan if had to.

Evan took a step toward Simon just as the coach began walking through the locker room, calling out that everyone would be late in five minutes. Evan walked off.

“We don’t have to take his crap,” Simon said. “My dad can train us to fight.”

“I’m a lover not a fighter,” Faran said.

“Come on, man.”

In Mrs. Hartman’s class, Simon convinced Faran to come over and train. So, as Simon opened his front door, he called out, “Faran is here.”

Joe was on the couch. “Hey,” he said. “Punks still giving you trouble?”

“It’s not too bad,” Faran said.

“Faran wants to train with us,” Simon said.

“This isn’t a gym,” Joe said. “I’m not running some camp.”

They all looked at each other for a while. Then Joe stood. He seemed to stand straighter. His leg looked able to hold more weight. He said, “As long as he can keep up.” To Faran, “Can you keep up?”

Faran shrugged with wide eyes.

“Start with jumping jacks,” Joe barked.

Faran shuddered.

“Trust me,” Simon said, dropping his backpack. Faran followed. Simon jumped fast, his legs and arms in hummingbird, blurred synchronization. For a moment, Faran stared at him like he was crazy. Then he too made his body into Xs, baby fat jiggling around him. His breath escaped quickly.

“Stop,” Joe said.

“Damn.” Faran grabbed his knees.

“This is going to take a hot minute,” Joe said.

“What is?” Simon asked.

“Turning your lump of a friend into something mean.”

“I don’t need this,” Faran said.

Simon grabbed his arm. “Give it a day.”

Joe retrieved the stress-ball. Lounging in his recliner, he said, “Burpees.” Then, as he tossed the ball to Simon, “Show him how.”

Simon jumped, caught and tossed the ball back as he fell into a squat, and hit the ground with a pushup. He did the movement again. “Like this,” Simon said.

Faran watched like Simon did a magic trick.

“You got the idea, kid?” Joe asked.

Faran nodded.

“Go!” Joe shouted.

Faran clumsily worked to the ground, did a sagging pushup, then clambered to his feet and hopped.

“Good enough,” Joe said nodding. “Now, toss the ball between each other.”

#

They kept at the sessions. Joe offered Faran rides, but Faran would jog the half mile home. Simon paced him. They’d jog to Faran’s driveway and walk in circles for a few minutes before Simon returned home.

One of the days, as they cooled down on Faran’s driveway, Faran said, “I pray when I get home.” Then, “It’s kind of like training. For the mind.”

They stretched.

“Do you want to see?” Faran asked.

“Okay.”

Faran’s house was like any other. Simon had expected something else, something unfamiliar, maybe colorful. They removed their shoes at the entryway. Faran’s sister watched the Disney channel in the living room. Without her hijab, her hair fell to her shoulders.

In a small room near the entryway, there were rugs, the size of mats, with gold trim and geometric designs. No other furnishings were in the room. The walls were bare. Faran stood on a rug with blue designs. “When you pray, you have to face Mecca,” Faran said. “It’s where Muhammad was born.” He went through the motion and brought himself to the rug.

“You can try it,” Faran said.

“I don’t know if I should.”

“That’s okay.” Faran went quiet with prayer, and Simon watched.

#

In the following weeks of training, both Simon and Faran hit growth spurts. Their bodies narrowed and lengthened like they were yanked at both ends. Simon became faster and Faran’s doughy belly flattened leaving a wide frame. He also got fast. During laps in gym, the two would run together, keeping distance on Evan.

A few weeks before Halloween, Joe looked healthier—even his right hand seemed to open wider. He explained that Simon and Faran would start boxing each other. But first, he would throw punches for the boys to block and dodge.

He started with Simon. To Faran he said, “Try to learn from watching.” Joe’s left hand was still quick; he could pop and retract jabs like a cat playing whack-a-mole. Simon kept his arms up, and Joe struck below Simon’s wrists. Joe shouted, “Move your body.” But Simon acted

like a turtle, couldn't make a proper defense, and not because of clumsiness or lack of conditioning, but because he was afraid.

Joe landed body shots. He started with strikes that would barely connect to show that he could've pummeled Simon. Then he tapped a little harder. When Simon finally guarded his body, Joe brushed his knuckles across Simon's jaw, sometimes too hard. "Come on!" he said. "Move!" But Simon failed to defend, so Joe told him to put his hands down and act like a mannequin. Joe said, "Besides thick legs to pump power into hands like a hydraulic machine, what makes a boxer is fearlessness. You can't be afraid of getting hit." Joe threw punches an inch from Simon's nose until Simon's instinct to flinch was gone. Then Joe went hard on Simon's arms and shoulders, jabbing him until he recoiled and found ways to dodge. "Good," Joe said after Simon effectively evaded. "Move your feet!"

Joe looked at Faran. "Your turn," he said. "Let's get the fear out of you." But when Joe punched at Faran, Faran didn't flinch. Then Faran dodged immediately, a little slow and clumsy, but a dodge. Joe smiled. He went a little faster at Faran, told him how to move more effectively.

Joe put his broken right hand in a padded glove to keep the fingers straight. His left he kept bare. He raised his hands, told the boys, "Go at it." Joe stood, leaned his weight forward to absorb the blows. As the boys tired, Joe shouted, "You want to be weak, or do you want to show bullies that you don't take shit, that you're made of iron and hate?" Somehow, he kept his balance as the boys worked to exhaustion.

#

As they got stronger, Evan's bullying became more frightening. Simon and Faran knew they would soon act, yet, they were unsure what that would entail. Evan was much bigger. What if they tried and failed? What would happen then?

In the locker room, Evan pushed Faran and pulled Faran's locker open. "I have to check for bombs," Evan said. "He might want his virgins."

Simon said, "Get out of here."

Evan looked at Simon. Simon felt his body pulsing, his heart fidgeting like he was sprinting. "What?" Evan asked.

"Stop it," Simon said, the *s* coming out like a *th*.

"Thop it?" Evan threw his arms into Simon. Simon smashed into the lockers behind him. The air left his lungs and he gasped, unable to stand. Evan held up a fist before leaving to the sound of the coach.

Faran helped Simon up. "We're wasting our time with this training bullshit," he said. "I should be studying. That's the only way I'm going to escape idiots."

"We can do this together," Simon said. "We can put him in place."

"Violence never stops violence."

#

Faran stopped training, said he needed to focus on reading. Simon worked harder without Faran at his side, knowing he'd have to stop Evan alone. He sparred with Joe. Joe would tell Simon to watch his face, that they didn't want to leave any marks his mother might see. Sometimes Joe would get carried away, leave bruises on Simon's ribs. Joe had strengthened too, had lost weight, and his flexibility in his bum leg was better. He was shaving consistently.

One day, as Simon warmed up, Joe asked, "Where's your friend been?"

"He doesn't think he'll be able to stop the bully," Simon said, running in place.

"Shame," Joe said. "He was getting good." Then, "Jabs!"

Simon pummeled the air with left jabs.

“Crosses.”

Simon added his right cross.

“The Muslim boxers I knew were tough. They’d all been converts.”

“I’ll stop the bully by myself,” Simon says.

“You only fight if you have to,” Joe says. “Don’t get into anything you can’t win.”

#

In Mrs. Hartman’s class, Faran swapped books at the shelf. After class, Evan grabbed Faran’s backpack. Faran was trapped in a backward lean—like gravity’s direction had changed. “What’s in here?” Evan said, unzipping Faran’s bag. He pulled out the book, *Hatchet*. “You don’t get to read this. Stick with your Quran,” Evan said. He bit the cover and ripped the book in half with his free hand.

Simon said, “You shouldn’t do that.”

“Why not?”

Simon dropped his backpack, got into his stance. He bounced around, waiting for courage to move in on Evan.

Evan released Faran. Unexpectedly free, Faran careened forward. On the ground, zipping his backpack, he met eyes with Simon. Faran looked frozen.

Evan came at Simon, and Simon landed shots on Evan’s sides. Evan swung wildly, but Simon dodged. Then a punch came at Simon slow, like the fist chugged through water. But, being the one to catch Simon’s jaw, maybe the punch just looked slow. After, Evan was on top of Simon, and Simon had no clue what to do from his back, other than try to survive.

Faran stayed frozen.

#

On Halloween, Simon dressed as a boxer. Joe painted a black eye with whatever makeup looked cheap. Simon was shirtless with old trunks and his running shoes. The cut on Simon's face from Evan was mostly healed. Joe said that if Simon kept getting in fights, he wouldn't need fake bruises. When the makeup was done, Joe looped tied up boxing gloves around Simon's neck.

"I want to wear them," Simon said.

"How would you grab candy?"

The sun was setting as Simon left the house. Joe called to him to be careful, to stay in the neighborhood.

Simon hit the houses on the side of the neighborhood away from Faran's. The streets packed with families and other kids, and Simon's pillowcase filled quickly. He curled the candy as he walked. When he tired, he shouldered the sack, and looped back to hit Faran's side of the neighborhood.

He wished Faran had trick-or-treated with him. Though, Simon wasn't sure if Faran celebrated Halloween. The two had stopped talking since the fight. Simon had been angry that Faran hadn't helped.

When Simon got close to Faran's house, he saw toilet paper strung around trees and the roof. Whole rolls clumped in gutters. Red swastikas and red crosses chalked the driveway.

Simon knocked on the door. Faran's mother answered. She smiled and waved Simon in, called Faran. Faran's sister poked her head through the front window blinds, said the toilet paper looked crazy.

“She doesn’t know what swastikas are,” Faran said. Simon was cloudy on the details as well. Then Faran apologized for not helping in the fight with Evan, and he asked if they could keep training.

#

During Thanksgiving break, the two spent every day practicing how to hurt. After they trained with Joe, they went to a patch of woods on an empty lot and sparred harder. When they finished welting each other, they’d lay exhausted on damp leaves and watch the sky through trees.

On Black Friday, they increased the ferocity of punches in the wooded lot. After, they staggered to Faran’s house, punching the air in front of them while animal tired and satisfied with their body aches.

“I want to pray with you,” Simon said.

Faran led inside. Simon kneeled on the prayer rug next to Faran as Faran went through his motions. Simon had stopped praying sometime in the end of elementary school. But now, he concentrated, and willed good to come to the world.

After Faran finished, he told Simon to wait. He returned with a book. The cover had a gold border and lacework of gold squares and circles surrounding the words The Holy Quran.

Simon opened the book, was surprised to see English.

“Don’t let this touch the ground,” Faran said. “And don’t curse or swear when you touch the book.”

“Okay.”

“And don’t carry it in a backpack.” Then, “You shouldn’t put your back to The Quran at all.”

Simon nodded.

“And don’t place it anywhere that would be lower than where you sit,” Faran said. “Keep it high on a bookshelf.”

When Simon got home, Joe saw his fat lip and black eye. “Jesus. Did you win?”

“We were just sparring.”

“Goddamn,” Joe said. “What do have there?”

Simon held out the Quran. Joe nodded. “Keep it in safe place.”

In the morning, Joe woke Simon. “Your face looks better,” he said. “Let me see what you can do.”

Joe treated Simon like a fighter. Sending Simon real fists to contend with, Joe accidently inflicted more damage to Simon’s face. He probed at Simon with a left jab, and Simon sidled back, maintaining his stance and weaving to avoid the jab. When Joe swung a right hook, his arm like a club, Simon ducked, letting limp fingers flick his hair. Then Simon delivered a cross to Joe’s gut that made Joe squirm and swallow hard. “Now you’re doing damage!” Joe shouted. “You might just be able to hurt someone!”

#

“Were ready,” Simon told Faran. They squatted in the woods gaining their breath. It was the last day of Thanksgiving break.

They decided they’d get on the bus next to Evan. “It’ll be his chance for redemption. If he doesn’t mess with us, then we don’t retaliate,” Faran said.

So, returning home the first day after Thanksgiving break, Simon and Faran slumped in blue-benched, school bus seats behind Evan and his friends. The kids around hooted and

howled—always with cell phones like appendages. Unbuckled seatbelts dangled and clanked so if there was a crash, they'd whip like medieval flails.

Evan turned and elevated himself with his forearms planted at the top of the bench. Facing Simon, Evan asked, "Thighman, you get beat up?" Simon's lip bloated, and his faded shiner made him look more tired than battered. Under his shirt, his chest freckled with bruises the color of rotting lemons. Simon said nothing as the bus, chained with several others, inched away from the school.

Evan lurched over the seat, grabbed Faran's backpack. "Hiding any books in here, terrorist?" he asked.

"You shouldn't do that," Simon said.

"Shouldn't do what?" He rifled through, scattering loose papers across the bus floor before he tossed the backpack over the seat at Faran.

The bus stopped on a two lane, halting traffic. Kids made a line to get off the bus. When Evan stood, Simon and Faran joined the departing shuffle.

Evan noticed them. "What are you doing?"

"Getting off," Simon said.

"This isn't your stop. I guess you're as retarded as your dad," Evan said, looking at his friends. They laughed, but Simon kept following Evan beneath the emergency escape hatch, Faran behind. When they stepped to asphalt, Evan strode home, ignoring Simon and Faran as if in disbelief. They trailed, passing duplexes with lawns like scrap yards and camouflage capped men lounging. With Simon and Faran close, Evan asked, "What do you want?"

“You’re evil,” Simon said. “We know you littered the house. Drew those symbols on his driveway.” The air was cold and misty for a Florida day. The sun was clouded, and Simon’s breath fogged between them. There was a smell of woodsmoke and marijuana.

With an uneasy voice, Evan said, “Okay.”

Faran stepped closer. “I’m not a terrorist you dumb shit.” He looked up at Evan, who was a head taller.

Evan pushed Faran, “Get away.”

Faran staggered. Simon stepped up. “Apologize,” he said as Faran regained his balance. Simon slid off his backpack and wormed out of his jacket, leaving his things to the wet sidewalk. Faran dropped his bag too.

Evan looked around, as if he wanted help. “Sure, I’m sorry,” he said before a scampered retreat.

Simon and Faran quickened their steps, got behind Evan. Simon grabbed Evan’s shirt, stretching the fabric like a tail. Evan spun and pushed Simon as hard as he could. Simon careened into the street, cracked his head against the grimy asphalt, and saw street lights spin like ceiling fan blades. “Fuck off,” Evan said triumphantly, eyeing Faran as if he had just calculated the difference in their size for the first time.

Simon felt his head like he had lost a hat to wind. Wet hair clumped between his fingers, and he wasn’t sure if the moisture was puddle or blood. He realized Faran was charging Evan. Faran threw a hook, his whole body behind the fist. Evan raised his arms. The blow hammered Evan’s forearm, putting him off balance. Faran closed distance with lightning jabs. Evan gasped from a blow below his ribs, then dropped his guard. At some point, Evan swung back like he was clawing through water about to drown. Simon planted his feet and teetered before he too charged

like a rabid dog. But Faran connected with Evan's jaw. There was a thud, a solid click announcing a firework of blood, and Evan dropped. The sound of the connection felt euphoric, like a mouth of meat after going hungry. Dangling drool coated Simon's chin and throat.

Simon and Faran stood above Evan. Evan's bloody mouth canted so that he looked like a twisted-lipped Mr. Potato Head. They didn't know what to do. For the first time, Simon wanted to run but couldn't move his legs.

TRAUMA

I stabilize the boy's neck by holding C-spine. His hair curls around the knuckles of my thumbs, which are just above his ears. His name is Terry. He's maybe twelve, skinny as a rifle barrel, and has fallen from a big oak in the yard of a bargain bungalow—it's more a shack. This is Holly Hill, a tiny city sandwiched between Daytona and Ormond Beach, and though the coast is less than a mile away—so close that the breeze is constant and salty—the city limits don't reach the ocean. Terry lies in a sandy patch of yard where his uncle laid him after the fall. Feet away, the uncle squats, knees to his chest, staring at Terry from the threshold of an open door. Inside is dark and crammed with things like the home swallowed a house with twice the square footage. The uncle pants madly and retreats into the house only to emerge moments later. He is slightly deformed—a canvas of scar tissue drapes cheek to ear; the deformed ear pins to his skull. He's a large man with a bowling ball belly and arms that look able to bend a tire iron. He wears a bleached shirt and paint-stained jeans, work clothes that probably haven't seen a job in a while.

I tell Terry to keep still. "Don't move your head. Look at clouds," I say. "Imagine pictures." He can't move his legs; his arms, he has said, feel prickly. Fire ants scale his calves, patrol red bites.

On the street, the ambulance pinks the sandy yard. My preceptor and his EMT partner retrieve the stretcher, a cervical collar, and a backboard. I'm in EMT school. So far, the calls have been mostly elderly people—heart attacks, diabetes, falls. A few younger adults overdosed. Terry is my first pediatric. Looking at him, I feel lightheaded. The sand further swallows my knees, and I can hear ocean waves, though I know the beach is too far.

A firetruck crawls along the center of the narrow street, avoiding trash cans and haphazardly parked cars before settling behind the ambulance. The uncle's facial scar tissue blushes with emergency light. He is red-eyed and sniffing. He looks insane. My preceptor places the backboard next to Terry, and he and the EMT set the cervical collar as I stabilize the vertebrae. The EMT takes my place, and my preceptor asks me to lift Terry's shirt. He snaps his fingers inches from my face. I lift Terry's shirt, revealing a side doused in a wine-colored bruise. My preceptor tells me to run my hands along Terry's torso. I start with my fingers near his neck, and when I reach the base of his ribs, near the perimeter of the blood pooling beneath skin, the flesh is hot. "Maybe you can handle this," I say.

My preceptor looks at me for a moment, just long enough to register that I'm not okay. He says he'll take over. Once we switch positions, he tells me to watch and continues sweeping. We roll Terry on his side. A gold ball sized lump protrudes from the middle of Terry's back. I look away, focus on grooves of pitted sand. My preceptor lets out an affirmative *hmm*, as if he's a plumber whose found the source of a leak. Then he pulls the backboard under Terry. The firefighters slide him into the ambulance.

His uncle asks if he can ride with Terry. "I don't have a car," he says. My preceptor says it's fine, so the uncle sits across from me as I secure the oxygen mask. The mask frightens Terry. "I don't want it," he says. I look to my preceptor for guidance, and he asks the uncle to hold the mask. The uncle keeps the mask to Terry's face like a mother with a bottle.

The uncle says, "This is my fault."

"It's not," I say as I take blood pressure and my preceptor checks for a pulse in Terry's foot.

"I wasn't watching him," the uncle says, quietly. "I wasn't watching him."

We speed toward the hospital, the Daytona Speedway blurring in tiny windows, and I flash to my first huddle in the prison box of an ambulance. I was sixteen. My brother's corpse was within reach and the smell of sea mixed with antiseptic. I imagine the color of Alex's gradient skin—the blue started at his fingers and toes. His hair was slick with salt water and crusted with sand.

Halifax, the hospital, is close, so, in no time, we hand Terry to the hospital staff. This brings us to the end of our shift. Nurses orbit as my preceptor signs my final report at the emergency room counter.

I think this may be my last shift. I can't imagine responding to another kid. Leaning on the counter, I ask my preceptor, "What's it like to respond to a dead child?" I recall training videos with families strewn with debris across highways.

He says, "You never get used to it."

"How do you handle it?"

He hesitates. "Not everyone can do the job," he says like he knows I'm in over my head. Then, "I've got to piss."

Maybe he's right. Maybe medicine isn't for me, but what am I left with? Too anxious to lounge for the next twenty minutes the way I usually do before returning with the team to the ambulance lot, I wander the hospital—through halls with elevators broad enough for beds. Upstairs, where they open children, the ceiling tiles are checkered with hand-painted images of butterflies and Disney princesses. I pass janitorial closets and nurses' desks and find myself looking into the glass walls of the emergency surgery waiting room. Here, the people are made quiet and polite by exhaustion.

I wonder what it's like to anticipate surgical news, wait for doctors to sew shut a loved one. Alex was brought straight to the morgue that night. Incapable of forming coherent words, I had the hospital phone my father. Waiting for him, I became aware of how drunk I was. I swallowed an entire roll of mints from a vending machine. When he arrived, I knew he'd been drinking too. He went down to see Alex, his fifteen-year-old football star son—alone—then told me to get in the car.

In the waiting room, the uncle sits alone with his elbows planted into his thighs, his hands supporting his head and covering his face.

“Terry's going to be okay,” I say.

The uncle parts his hands. “Yes,” he says.

I take a seat across from him. “What are they doing now?”

“An MRI,” he says. “He won't be done for a couple hours, at least.”

I offer my hand. “I'm Tim.”

“John.”

We shake.

John asks, “How long have you been doing this?”

“Just over a month,” I say. “I'm an intern.”

“Do you like the job?”

“It's draining.” I realize this isn't the best thing to say, I smile and quickly follow with, “But rewarding.”

John nods, sinks a bit into his chair and looks at the television. “I told him to be careful, but I wasn't watching.”

“Kids fall,” I say. “That's what they do.”

The television is almost muted, so the crinkle of magazine pages dominates the room—a woman rattles through recipes, not really reading.

I say, “My little brother had an accident.”

John removes his gaze from the television. “What happened?”

“I was supposed to be watching him.”

“I moved Terry.” John looks at the television again, his hands wrinkling his facial scar like waterlogged skin. “After he fell. Picked him up and tried to bring him in the house. Then I remembered moving a person is bad for a back injury.”

I nod with nothing to say. The pages of the magazine scrape like a shuffling deck of cards. I look at my watch. “I’ve got to get my car from the ambulance lot. I’ll be back.” I almost forcibly shake John’s hand, hold his forearm with my left hand like I’m a politician. Then I leave.

I had to give the news to Alex’s girlfriend. I collected myself and told my father that I had to inform Kylie. He said I couldn’t drive, that I was too manic. I said the news wouldn’t be delivered over the phone. He screamed that she wasn’t family. I grabbed my keys but ended circling my car while hyperventilating.

Eventually, my father drove me to Kylie’s place. Being that she hadn’t heard from Alex, she was already unsettled, but she smiled when she saw me, pretended that my showing up was normal. Somehow, I told her everything without breaking down: there was a beach bonfire; I took Alex along; there was drinking; he drowned.

She stared through me, not registering what I said, and asked me to repeat it all. She wanted more details, to know everything. I told the story again, replayed the night in my head, but she didn’t grasp reality. I felt like I was crazy, rambling to myself and not making sense. I

repeated that it was an accident, and she said okay over and over. She seemed like a pressurized container, an over pumped coke bottle rocket. I went to hug her, but she pushed away and told me to leave. I did.

It wasn't until the funeral that I saw her cry. She broke down at the sight of the casket. I did too, and so badly that I had to cower in the church's bathroom.

I meet my preceptor and the EMT and climb into the ambulance. The defibrillator is across from me at eye level. My preceptor keeps a little window dividing the cab from the back open. He turns so I can see the side of his face, part of his mouth, and says, "It's always a dumb accident that ruins people's lives. Text at the wheel, and you've killed a friend. Fall from a tree, and you're in a wheelchair."

In the lot, we gather Styrofoam coffee cups and McMuffin wrappers from the cab, sterilize the back, ensure equipment is locked down. We check the engine. Shaded by the hood, my preceptor says, "That last call was a bad one." The EMT inserts the dipstick, and I inspect the undercarriage for leaks.

The hood clangs shut, and I say, "God, I hope that kid will walk."

The three of us say goodbye, but my preceptor follows me to my car. "You don't have much experience, but you have enough." We stand face to face beside my car's taillights. "You can't react like that again."

I want to tell him that I can handle shit. I was in the Army. That I froze up because Terry is a kid. Then I realize, what's the difference? I say, "I'll figure out my act."

"Sometimes the best candidates are the ones to drop out," he says as if I could take pride in failure. "Think on it before you start the job."

I get in my car. My preceptor calls out that he'll see me later, and I say I'll see him again—a goodbye that seems hopeful. I don't want to see any more hurt kids.

For months after Alex was put in the ground, I dreamed that he was buried alive, that I heard him wailing through coffin and earth and saved him. The feeling of those dreams sustained me through my father's resentment.

Alex and I spent our childhood together like twins. My mother had divorced my father and fled Florida when I was too young to make memories of her. The day of Alex's funeral was like the first time meeting her. My father was a good provider, but the motivation of roof, clothes, and meat in lunch boxes kept him at a job—driving a delivery truck around the state—that left energy for little else. He spent his free time chasing women.

With Alex dead because of me, I cared about nothing. I failed my senior classes, barely graduated, didn't get accepted to any colleges. All of this escalated my father's judgment. When I'd say I was sorry, he'd ask, "For what?" Really, he was beyond forgiving me. I know because I was beyond it, too.

When I return to the hospital, John is in the same chair. The woman is gone, the magazines disordered on a little table. I ask John if he's hungry. We find the cafeteria. There's a sandwich line, a salad bar, and a coffee shop. I treat him to the sandwich line, then settle at a table with black trays in hand. Scooping mayonnaise clumps from my sandwich as John stares at his roast beef, I say, "Don't worry about having moved Terry."

"I paralyzed him."

"Where are his parents?"

"His mother is going to kill me." He opens a bag of chips and dumps half on his plate.

"When will she be here?"

“I haven’t called her.”

I put my sandwich down, swallow. “You need to do that.”

“She’s working.”

“She needs be here,” I say. “In case a decision needs to be made.”

“People break their backs and still walk all the time,” he says with a chip pinched between fingers. “I saw it in football.”

I say, “I’ll take you to her.” I stand and begin rewrapping my sandwich in brown deli paper. John doesn’t budge, and he doesn’t seem like he will. I put my hand on his shoulder. “You want to call her first?”

“I just need a moment.” He sucks in air, gets to his feet. “She’s going to kill me.” He takes out an old iPhone with a shattered screen, and I give him space.

Even with two years on Alex, he was nearly as tall as me. The summer before he drowned, muscle thickened his frame. He could rocket a football and was fast, wanted to play at West Point—to be a war hero and a football star.

After his death, I stopped attending high school football games. When the Homecoming game came around, I thought the celebration would bring normality to my life. The team huddled as they pumped up. They rocked around the quarterback, that space where Alex should’ve been. I had to walk. Stepping down the bleachers, focused on not tripping, I felt like I was descending a mountain path.

I saw Kylie with another guy near the concession stand.

Everyone seemed to move on fast.

And there was sentiment around the school that Alex's death wasn't a tragedy, but rather a logical conclusion to underage drinking—that in some way, he deserved it. The guy Kylie was with stood in circles that whispered, *well he did drink a lot*.

I horse collared the guy. His shirt stretched, and he spun. I threw a hook but missed by feet—both my body and mind had been sluggish since the accident. Then he had his head down like a linebacker. I found myself engulfed, and we hit ground—my back first—crunching weed flowers and lungs. I went limp on the grass with his knees and the football thunder around me. Kylie wrapped her arms around him before he pummeled me.

In my car, John adjusts the A/C vent. He gives directions, but, otherwise, we don't say much. I drive west, and he bites his nails. After a couple of songs, he handles a cigarette pack, offers me one. I shake my head. He asks, "You mind if I smoke?"

I do, but I say, "Just keep the window down."

"I'll keep my head out like a dog," he says and does, at least when he exhales. He exhales so often that, while the wind whips his hair, he neglects directions, and I miss a turn. He says, "I'm sorry."

"I understand," I say, "but you've got to think of what's best for Terry."

John asks, "What did you do before this?"

"I was in the Army." I had little motivation beyond the desire to escape my father, so I joined. I signed my enlistment contract in Alex's honor and had the government take me in like an orphan. I was seventeen, so my father signed as well.

"You a medic?"

"Military police. The slots were full for medic."

“I was a cav scout.” John rolls up his sleeve to show a tattoo of the cavalry scout insignia: two golden, crossed sabers—though the tattoo is an ugly, faded yellow. “First Iraq.” John points to my bicep, asks, “What’s yours?”

My brother’s name is tattooed on my right bicep. John asks, “What happened to your brother?”

I consider making something up, but after a moment I say, “He drowned.”

John tosses his cigarette butt out the window. “Do you remember what he looked like?”

“I have pictures.”

“I don’t remember what my dad looked like,” John says.

“When did you lose him?”

“I was little, ten.” John says. “I was in the car too. It’s why I have this scar.” He traces the glob of skin on his face. “Sometimes I still get upset about the crash.”

I’m on the verge of choking up. Grief is strange; the person’s memory fades, and healing becomes traumatic. I say, “Terry will be okay.”

“If Terry died, I’d kill myself.” He lights another cigarette.

We reach a shopping plaza. The strip is lined with empty stores and the ruins of a Kmart; the weathered outline of the long-removed storefront letters etches into stone. Rusted carts with broken wheels dot a littered parking lot where sparsely parked cars seem abandoned. At the end of the lot, there’s a dollar store. I ask, “That it?”

John nods. “Let me finish my smoke.” He steps out and leans on the car, frames his head in my passenger window to look at me, looks away to blow smoke.

I say, “Be quick.” It’s incredible I have to tell him this.

“You got any kids?”

“No.”

“I’ve got a daughter.” He takes a long drag. “She turned out well.”

“Okay.”

“I wish she’d meet a good guy. Someone doing something with their life.” He inhales.

“Medical jobs are good.”

“I’m not sure I’ll be doing this much longer,” I say. “Let’s put a move on.”

John takes a last puff. The cigarette burns bright before he drops the butt, grinds with his toes, gets back in. I pull up a few hundred yards to the dollar store. He looks like a child going to a beating before disappearing behind dollar-sign-stickered windows.

I fiddle with the radio, look at the years on quarters from a grimy cup holder. I still count Alex’s birthdays, imagine what he would look like in his twenties.

He would’ve stepped through the ranks if he had gone to West Point. I was grounded to lower enlisted, glued to gate duty for years. Even when I’d been promoted to specialist, I felt I’d been wasting my life corralling drunk soldiers and keeping fucked up sergeants from striking their wives. I wanted to help people. Really help them.

My father’s heart seized up before I signed away another four years. We hadn’t spoken in years, but he left me everything. That was the closest I came to earning back his love. I was given a reason to come home and do something other than reenlisting. I found myself in Alex’s room. His clothes, other than a few Jacksonville Jaguar jerseys, had been donated, but his backpack and school work remained in a closet corner. The bed and the television and the stereo with a stack of pirated CDs and the shelf of Louis L’Amour paperbacks were all the same. I told myself, I’m going to help people.

A whole song plays before John emerges from the dollar store with Terry's mother. She's a small woman, older than John, with long dark hair. She marches with her arm on John's back as if she's escorting him, holding him up. She opens the front passenger door, and John gets in back. When John settles, he says, "This is Tim. He's the paramedic."

"I'm an intern."

"Tim says Terry will be fine."

"Things could be much worse," I say.

She says, "Thank God."

I pull out of the plaza onto the main road. The mother says, "Let's pray for my boy." She turns and reaches for John's hand. "Pray with me." Her other hand rests on my shoulder.

I say, "I need to focus on driving."

"Just send good thoughts." She cups my shoulder, squeezes.

I do just that. I think good thoughts. Terry's mother starts with an Our Father, and I think of the calls I've been a part of, the relief I've seen on patients' faces after successful surgeries, the smiles of those checking out of hospitals, the care and dedication of the staff. She asks God to protect Terry. Then she prays for us. She asks for guidance and absolution, and she asks God to bless me, says, "Guide all of us to be more like Tim." When she finishes, she says to me, "You're a blessing. Keep healing people."

In the waiting room, John apologizes to Terry's mother. She says he's not to blame, and he starts crying again. I don't know if her reassurance will help him, but it's more than I ever got, though I doubt my father's forgiveness would have changed a thing. I'm only certain that John will be okay if they get Terry walking.

The doctor comes out. Terry's mother is still praying. She stands, links her arm with John's. I'm seated in a waiting room chair. She says to me, "You can hear this too." I stand, and the three of us go to the doctor. The doctor leads us to a room with a large computer monitor where she cycles through the MRI images, details the surgery Terry needs.

My junior year of high school, Alex and I had the freedom afforded by my twelve-year-old Chevy Malibu and money from washing dishes in a nursing home. We had fun, though Alex—dedicated to his body—was always good about not drinking.

I wanted an in with a sophomore I had eyes for, so I dragged Alex to the beach bonfire. It was night, but someone anchored an umbrella into the sand. The canopy was closed. Duct tape secured a beer bong to the canvas. The funnel had the circumference of a basketball and supposedly could contain a twelve pack.

I shot four beers through the tube. Carbonation stung my nose, watered my eyes. Then I bet Alex that he couldn't top me, said that the big brother always dominates. We always competed in stupid things. Alex said he could beat me easy, but he laughed and said he didn't want to. Kids around started chanting, *do it*. With Alex shaking his head, we dumped in five cans. Kids pushed Alex from behind, toward the beer bong. He relented, told us to put one more in, just to prove he was the best. Alex lifted his arms to silence the crowd, stepped to the tube, and downed the beer in one gulp.

I sat in the sand talking to my crush while Alex dove into surf.

After he was found, the paramedics cracked his ribs, caved his chest with compressions. A slowing down of things followed. My brother was dead. I was culpable. I chanted, "Oh my god." Most of the drunk teenagers fled, and I paced as a few remaining friends tried to calm me. Trembling when still, I said, "I'm never going to see him again." I wanted to take my car to top

speed and missile a street light or an oncoming lane. I dry heaved, fruitlessly dug into my throat, and toppled—kicked my legs, making mounds of sand like a man being strangled from behind.

The doctor goes on about the surgery details. There's something satisfying about this horror—the struggle for a good outcome. Listening to the doctor is like the moments before they decided they couldn't get my brother breathing. I realize, maybe I'll be faster than Alex's paramedics, more alert, devoted. Maybe I'll save a kid.

APPENDIX: READING LIST

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