

LIKE WHERE YOU'RE FROM IS SO GREAT

A THESIS IN
Creative Writing and Media Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the University
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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

by
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ABSTRACT

The stories in this collection focus on leaving, staying, and coming back to the small town of Buffalo, Missouri, and how those decisions impact the characters who make them. Three of the stories are centered around Milford Riley when he prepares to leave Buffalo at 18, when he comes back at 19 during a summer away from college, and finally when he moves back for good at 22. Some of the stories deal with the economic hardships in a town too small to attract jobs, but big enough that local businesses have died off, unable to compete with Wal-Mart or McDonalds, while other stories deal with the rampant drug use and violence that seems to emanate from high unemployment and uneducated youths. Issues such as rape, incest, and pedophilia are dealt with in new and interesting ways. The future of small-town America is predicted; the outcome isn't pretty.

APPROVAL

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, have examined a thesis titled “Like Where You’re From Is So Great” presented by Matthew Stuart Pachmayr, candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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like where you're from is so great

They always come back . . . that's what we say about the people who leave Buffalo. Hyperbole, sure, but the mindset says. Vortex. Black hole. Sinking succubus of stuck.

Fact: In 1968, Buffalo, Mo., was named the largest inland city in America. No major state or federal highway connected the town to America's asphalt arteries. No river port, or harbor, no bus station, airport, or railway stop. The town threw a parade after receiving the news and had a plaque made in commemoration.

Why we stay: Pregnancy, marriage, and love, in that order. Inherited farms, businesses, or homes. A lack of imagination. Drugs. Jail. Free rent in our old bedrooms.

Why we leave: On the verge of something. College. Military. Jobs. Love. Escape. Fear of turning out like our parents, or to prove we're bigger than where we came from. An optimistic future. A pessimistic past. Drugs. Jail. A lack of opportunity. Curiosity.

Why we come back: Failed marriages and mortgages. A visit. Student loan debt. Free rent in our old bedrooms. Death. Pregnancy, marriage, and love, in that order. Parole. A lack of imagination. It's what we know, the feel of rebar, stamped Buffalo, Mo., criss-crossed in the concrete of our pour-slabbed souls . . . know all too well that mixture of venom and sugar the word home evokes, and the shame moving back squeezes out of us.

I've heard of happy stories where people move back home and everything works out . . . but I never believed a one of 'em.

Chocolate Cherry Date Rape Cupcakes

Two minutes of digging and Mary Hamilton weaseled her replacement's name out of school secretary Therese Bannimar.

"Thought I'd take her out," Mary said, "show her around. You know, catch her up on Buffalo."

"That should take all of ten minutes," Therese said. "What are you going to do with the rest of the night?"

Mary laughed politely.

"She's a real go getter," Therese continued. "Got her Masters in Elementary Education from Fontebonne University."

"Fontebonne?" Mary asked. "Where's that?"

"Says right here it's in St. Louis."

"Reading personnel files again?" Mary asked, squeezing the phone between her neck and left shoulder, grabbing a piece of paper and a pen off the computer desk.

"It's summer," Therese said, "I gotta have something to do."

"Go ahead," Mary said, "lay it on me. I know you're dying to gossip with someone."

"Hard to stay away, ain't it?" Therese asked.

"Like you said. It's summer."

"Angela Dismang graduated with her mast-"

"I already know this part," Mary said, writing down Angela's name on the mini legal pad.

"Betcha didn't know she was arrested for shoplifting at 18."

"Really?"

“Yeah. Didn’t come in on her background check, but she volunteered it on her application.”

“Why would someone do that?” Mary asked.

“Principal Hill said she was the most honest person he’d ever met.”

“Howard’s a soft touch,” Mary said.

“Didn’t help you out all that much.”

“His hands were tied by the school board, Therese.”

“You feel bad about leaving the way you did? I mean, we didn’t even have the chance to throw you a retirement party or nothing.”

“I didn’t retire,” Mary said.

“We could throw you one now,” Therese said. “It’s never too late for a party.”

Mary tried to think of something clever to say but hung up instead.

Mary pulled out a kitchen chair and sat diagonally from her *Buffalo Relex*-camouflaged husband. She drummed her fingers, from pinky-to-thumb, thumb-to-pinky, on the oval oak tabletop. Paul folded his newspaper and looked down at his wife’s aged hands, big veins and tendons rising like ridges.

“I’ve got an idea for how to get my job back,” she said.

Paul rolled the paper up in his hands and leaned back in his chair, no longer touching the table. “Mary . . . Will you-”

“I know,” she said, “I know, okay. But this could work. I read this story about two teachers in Bolivar who were fired because of photos they posted on Facebook. They were drinking, taking off their shirts. New teachers, Paul. I heard from Mrs. Holt that they had to ask

one of the retired teachers back because it's too late in the summer for another round of interviews."

Paul twisted the paper in his hands and slapped his thigh. Thwap. "We don't need you to go back to work," he said, tossing the stressed paper next to his coffee mug.

"I need-"

"You need," Paul said. "All summer it's been what you need, how you were wronged, how they forced you out, how that little boy deserved it."

"That's my job," Mary said. "My job. And I'm not giving it up." She crossed right leg over left and rested her back against the chair's wooden dowels. Right hand drummed fingers from right-to-left.

Paul reached into his back pocket and pulled out a brochure. "Here," he said, handing it to Mary. "Have a look."

"New Orleans?"

"We've always wanted to travel more," he said. "We can listen to some swing bands, eat all the deep-fried Cajun food we can handle. Really make it a proper vacation, you know. No kids, no grandkids. What do you think?"

"This is a bad time of the year, you know that, what with school about to start and all."

"I understand it's hard for you to give up 36 years, I get it. But this is our chance to have some fun. Don't turn retirement into one of your-"

"Into one of my what?"

"Into one of your obsessive crusades."

"D.A. Mallory is the only place I see Cody and Madeline," Mary said. "Should I just give that up? Is it okay that I was unjustly fired, that I was forced out?"

Paul inhaled and squeezed his stomach to exhale. "Is it so goddamned horrible being here with me that you'd rather go through with whatever cockamamie plan you've constructed out of this second-hand story?"

"I can get my job back," she said. "I know I can."

"Forget the fucking job."

"Are you going to calm down and hear me out, or not?"

"Whatever it is you're doing I don't want to know," Paul said, picking up the brochure and leaving the kitchen.

Mary parked the Volvo Station Wagon at the head of a quarter-mile driveway off of F Hwy., and chewed over the possible outcomes of asking her estranged granddaughter, Kelly, for Rohypnol:

-Kelly breaks down crying over our first contact in three years and says she's sober. She and Scott are back together, and my grand-babies are clean and healthy, well-adjusted children with responsible parents. I don't ask for the drugs and we slowly grow to trust one another again, redevelop some semblance of a relationship.

-Kelly's still on drugs, has lost more teeth. Face has that sunken-in look of a malnourished cheetah, and she doesn't recognize me. I cry, walk away before I see Madeline and Cody. Promise myself I'll never return.

-Kelly's still angry over my call to D.F.S., tells me to fuck off, and I don't even make it out of the car.

-Kelly treats me indifferently. I ask for the Rohypnol. She says no, and I'm back to square one.

Kelly vanished from Mary's mind and appeared, 50 yards away, waving. Loping waves from left-to-right. Mary's nerves sizzled. Her granddaughter approached the station wagon, yelling her grandmother's name over and over like a question mark exclamation. Mary marveled at Kelly's gleaming white teeth, at the abundance of blond hair where a mohawk used to be and the clean, light-green Kermit the Frog t-shirt she wore. Kelly opened the passenger door and sat down. Looked at her grandmother without a smile, or a frown.

"Are the kids here?" Mary asked.

"They're at Scott's house."

"You guys are sharing custody?"

"Let's not talk about the kids," Kelly said. "If you're just here to see them you can go ahead and take off. So what's wrong? Somebody die or something?"

"No," Mary said. "Nobody died."

"Gramps know you're here?"

"What do you think?"

"It's not like I've forgiven you for calling the state on me."

"I hoped I was helping. Did I? Are things better now?"

"Think that's your business?"

"You're right," Mary said. "It's not."

"Out with it *G r a n d m a*," Kelly said.

"I need a favor," Mary said, pulling a folded-up piece of paper out of her purse.

"You need a favor," Kelly asked, looking down at the paper, then back to her grandmother, "from me?"

"I've got really bad insomnia since I retired, and-"

“You mean since you were fired.”

“I wasn’t fired.”

“So you chose to retire?” Kelly asked with a smirk. “It’s still Buffalo, Mary. I heard all about it.”

“Nothing the doctors give me will help so I did a little research online and thought maybe you could help me find this.”

Kelly stared out the window.

“Will you just look at it?” Mary asked.

Kelly took the piece of paper and unfolded it. “Rohypnol,” she said.

“Is that how you pronounce it?”

“You want roofies?”

“I have money.”

“You’ll have to do better than money,” Kelly said.

“I don’t understand. What do you want then?”

“I want the title to the trailer.”

“You already live here rent free,” Mary said. “And you know your grandfather would never go for that.”

“The title’s in your name.”

“I know what the title says.”

“If you’re desperate enough to come to me then you’re desperate enough to give me what I want. And if not, then fuck off.”

“Fine,” Mary said. “The trailer, but not the land.”

“Meet me back here in three days.”

“Will Cody and Madeline be here?”

Kelly grinned and said, “nope.”

Mary opened a Facebook account and spent the day camouflaging its true intentions. She made friends with former co-workers and students. Friend requested old classmates, nieces, nephews, and her sister Nadine. Some people were excited to see she'd finally embraced social networking, and Mary played catch-up, posting positive remarks to people she'd stopped talking to for reasons like pretentiousness, thievery, stupidity, and a former teacher who'd tried to kiss her one night at a party 12 years ago. Uploaded pictures of she and Paul, old photographs of daughters, grandchildren, vacation memories from Branson, St. Louis, and Kansas City.

Eight a.m., the next day, Mary sent a message along with her friend request to Angela Dismang:

Angela,

My name is Mary Hamilton, which I guess you can see from my friend request, but it feels so awkward to not introduce yourself in the first part of a letter....I mean e-mail. Is this an e-mail, is there some other word being used now for a Facebook message, like f-mail? Listen to me ramble, I apologize. I hear you are taking over for me at D.A. Mallory, and I thought it would be great if we could get together before school started. I can show you around Buffalo and give you the ins and outs of working in Dallas County. I've heard nothing but great things about you so far. Look forward to a friendly chat.

Mary Hamilton.

Three hours later Angela approved the friend request and replied to Mary's message:
So great to hear from you, and I am so glad you found me on Facebook. I was a little worried with how people would treat me in a new town when I'm replacing such a beloved member of the community. Thirty-six years at the same school! I can't imagine. Anyway. I just moved into town. I'm sure things will be crazy for me for the first few days, but how about this Friday, the fifth?

Mary crammed Angela Dismang's Facebook page, lapped the information like a thirst-craved animal, binging.

Employers: Dallas Co. School District. Kindergarten Teacher. June 2011-present.

Spaghetti Factory at the Landing in St. Louis. Server. Feb 2006-July 2011.

Grad School: Fontbonne University. Ed. M. Elementary Education. Dec. 2010.

College: Suffolk University. Class of 2005. English.

High School: Oliver Ames High School.

Philosophy: N/A.

Religious Views: N/A.

Political Views: Liberal.

Favorite Quotations: "People bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. The world breaks every one and afterward many are strong at the broken places. But those that will not break it kills. It kills the very good, and the very gentle, and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too, but there will be no special hurry." -Ernest Hemmingway.

Activities: Walking. Biking.

Sports: Boston Red Sox.

Music: Talking Heads, Velvet Underground, Incubus, Belle and Sebastian, 311, Vampire Weekend, Patsy Cline, Hank Williams, Lemon Jelly, the National.

TV Shows: *Bones*, *C.S.I.*, *Glee*, *True Blood*, *Dexter*, *American Idol*.

Movies: *Stand By Me*, *Dangerous Minds*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.

“I’m worried about you,” Paul said, breaking her reading daze.

“Paul, do us both a favor and shut up,” Mary said.

Chocolate Cherry Date Rape Cupcakes

1 (18.25 ounce) package chocolate cake mix

1 1/3 cups water

1/2 cup vegetable oil

3 eggs

1 (21 ounce) can cherry pie filling

1 (16 ounce) can vanilla frosting

In a mixing bowl, combine cake mix, water, oil and eggs; mix well. Spoon batter by 1/4 cupfuls into paper-lined muffin cups. Spoon a rounded teaspoon of pie filling onto the center of each cupcake. Set remaining pie filling aside. Bake at 350 degrees F for 20-25 minutes or until a toothpick inserted at an angle toward the center comes out clean. Remove to a wire rack to cool. Crush Rohypnal into fine powder, combine with 3 tablespoons of frosting for each cupcake you wish to spike. Top with one cherry from pie filling to identify Rohypnal frosting from regular frosting. Serve additional pie filling with cupcakes or refrigerate for another use. Destroy all Rohypnal not used.

Friday. Aug. 5, 2011. Main St. Grill. Buffalo, Mo.

Mary liked sitting on the east side of the Main St. Grill, only four booths and the bar. The west side of the restaurant felt too crowded, all those conversations swarming around like uninvited dinner guests.

A waitress brought their first round of beers and took their order. Ribeye and baked potato for Mary. Enchilada for Angela.

“Probably good you went with the enchilada,” Mary said.

“Why’s that?” Angela asked.

“It’s good to dive head-first into mediocrity,” Mary said, laughing and taking a sip of beer. “You’re gonna be swimming in it for a while.”

Angela swept the room, looked back to Mary and took another drink. “What else should I know?”

“Ever worked in a small town before?”

“Not really.”

“Prepare to hear the phrase, ‘that’s just how we do things,’ a lot,” Mary said.

“Seems pretty safe and peaceful though.”

“There’s plenty of that. Do you walk or ride a bike?” Mary asked, then finished off her beer.

“Somebody read my Facebook page,” Angela said, and drank the last of her beer.

“I thought it was neat to learn about somebody without even meeting them, but it kinda kills the mystery doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, but it also lets you keep in touch with people that used to call on the phone before Facebook. So there is that,” Angela said. “You’ll see. It’s kind of nice. Easier than cutting people out.”

“Facebook is one of those things you do when you retire now, I guess. Got to cling to whatever social interactions you can have,” Mary said, signaling the waitress for two more beers.

“Why’d you ask if I rode a bike?”

“Not really something adults do around here,” Mary said. “In fact, you’ll be getting some strange looks from the locals.”

“That seems so silly.”

“That’s what they think about someone who chooses a bike over a car.”

The beers arrived with the food and the conversation trickled until to-go boxes arrived.

“I hope you saved a little room,” Mary said, “because I brought cupcakes.” She lifted the small tupperware container out of her purse and set it in the middle of the table. “Go ahead. The one with the cherry on top is for you.”

Angela opened the tupperware container and stopped.

“What?” Mary asked.

“I want to take a picture of this before I tear into it. I like to make people jealous on Facebook.”

“Oh, okay,” Mary said, grabbing the cupcake with plain frosting and peeling back the paper.

“Mary.”

“What?”

“Put the cupcake back.”

“Oh, right. The picture.”

Angela snapped a photo with her camera-phone. “This one’s too bright. Will you tear me off a piece of your napkin.”

“Standing between a woman and her dessert is dangerous, Angela.”

“Just real quick. The napkin. Please.”

“Will you just eat it already,” Mary said.

“What’s the big deal?”

“No big deal. I just want to know what you think of my cupcake.”

“Give me the napkin, and I will.”

“Sorry,” Mary said, tearing her napkin. “Like this?”

“No, the whole thing, yeah, like that. It needs a little thickness to it. I’ll use the napkin as a diffuser for the flash.”

“That’s pretty neat. Where’d you learn that?” Mary asked as round three arrived.

“I took some photography courses at Suffolk,” Angela said, holding the piece of folded napkin over the flash and capturing the cupcakes, digitally.

“All good?” Mary asked.

“Yes,” Angela said, licking the cherry off of her cupcake.

17 minutes later, halfway into beer three, Mary checked her watch and asked, “How do you feel?”

“A little loopy, which is pretty strange. How many beers is this? Nevermind. Really. I feel great.”

“Good,” Mary said, studying Angela’s face.

“Pretty fucking great actually. Oh my god.”

“What? Are you okay?”

“I had this urge to let out a big woo.”

“A big what?”

“Huh?” Angela asked, laughing, screwing her face up in confusion.

“Do you want another beer?” Mary asked.

Angela slowly shifted her focus to the beer and considered the question. “Do I want another beer?” she asked with the precision of a wolverine, each syllable slipping through a slur of intoxication.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” Mary said.

“You do that.”

Mary signaled for two more beers.

“Why’d you spank that kid?” Angela asked, hair streaming through her fingers.

“Excuse me?”

“Come on,” Angela said, raising her voice to careless heights. Dropped her arms down on the table, grabbed the beer mug and raised it to eye level. “We’re friends, right?” Angela shrilled. Decibels turned heads. “You can tell me,” she screeched. The bar hushed for three, four seconds, before the drone of conversation smothered the momentary silence.

The waitress arrived with new beers. “You two need to quiet down, or you’ll have to leave,” she said, taking the empty glasses with her.

Angela clamped a hand to her mouth and tried to hold back laughter. Took a second to regain composure. Shook the hair from her face and said, “You’re pretty fun for an old lady, but you owe me a story.”

“We’re having such fun,” Mary said, plucking a bulky digital camera from her purse. “Let’s not ruin it by talking about why you’re here and I’m no longer teaching. How about some pictures?”

“I’ll let you in on a little secret,” Angela said, “and then you can show me yours.”

“Say cheese,” Mary said, snapping a picture of Angela holding her beer mug against her left cheek. “If you buy the next round, I’ll tell you.”

“So,” Angela started, “I moved to St. Louis for a boy, Daniel Martino. Martino. Martino. We met in Boston, and he was from St. Louis. When school ended, he had a job offer. I was in love, blah blah blah, so we move to Missouri. I’m finally done with grad school and you know, ready to start a family. Engaged, seven-year relationship, all that bullshit. He has a career running things for his dad’s construction company, and I’m getting ready to start teaching and what not. The timing was right, wasn’t it? Yeah, it was. So I say, ‘let’s do this thing. Knock me up already.’ And he turns into this whiny little cunt.”

Mary leaned in and sternly said, “Angela.”

“Don’t give me the teacher voice, lady.”

“Fine,” Mary said, leaning back in the booth. “You’re a big girl.”

“So, whatever. Long story short, days after we’d have sex he’d slip a Morning-After pill into my coffee.”

“Oh my god,” Mary said.

“Yeah,” Angela said and slammed the rest of her beer. “Your turn.”

“You’re not going to remember any of this,” Mary said.

“Pfft,” Angela said. “I can maintain.”

“There’s something you don’t know.”

“Huh?”

“I.” Mary said. “I. Okay. Do you want to hear the real story?”

Angela leaned forward, teepeed her arms over the mug, creating a safe triangle home with a fleshy woven finger peak and said, “let’s hear it.”

Mary took a picture of Angela hovering over the empty beer mug, then said, “You know how you have one kid every year who tests you, over and over?”

“Huh?”

“Right. You’re fresh off the boat. Okay. There’s going to be a kid every year who takes you to that point where you stop being a teacher and start being a parent.”

“Get to the point already,” Angela said, left cheek flat against the wood table, right hand clutching the beer.

“The kids are supposed to stay in their seats during snack time. I’m in the supply closet, and I see Dakota Sullinger-”

“Yuck. What is with the shitty kid names these days?”

Mary took a drink and continued. “I see Dakota Sullinger standing next to my desk with an open milk, and he’s getting ready to pour it into my purse. I say, ‘Dakota, sit down.’ He looks right at me and pours the whole milk into my purse.”

“Seems like a pretty weak reason to-”

“That was the first time. I take away his toys for playtime, talk to his mother, ask her whether Dakota listens at home. She assures me he does, and that he’s just testing me. Fine. I’ve been through this before. Five year olds don’t really know the severity of their actions. Three weeks later, same thing. Snack time, I’m in the closet, and there he is, standing next to my purse.”

“Oh shit,” Angela says, peeling her face off the table and sitting up.

“I said, ‘Dakota, do you remember what happened last time you made this choice? Go sit down.’ He looks right at me and pours the milk in, again. The whole class starts laughing, and I scream for everybody to shut up. Scares Dakota so much he drops the milk carton in my purse and sits down on the floor.”

“You about done yet, because so far, pretty boring.”

“I get one of the other teachers to watch my class during recess, and I keep Dakota inside for detention. I’m talking and I’m talking and he’s staring right through me, like nothing is registering, and I just.” Mary leaned forward, elbows rested on the table. “I take out a thumbtack and stab myself in the hand with it and yell out, ‘Dakota, no. Don’t do that.’”

“No way.”

“Right here,” Mary said, holding the back of her hand up to Angela’s face. “See that little hole below my middle knuckle?”

Angela half stood-up, knocked against her beer and grabbed Mary’s hand. Attempted to smooth the skin flat, to erase vision-obscuring wrinkles. “Oh shit, there it is.”

“Then I spanked him, and well, now you’re here.”

“Holy fuck, Mary,” Angela exclaimed as the waitress arrived, check in hand. “What? No beers?”

“I’m cutting you off,” the waitress said, placing the black leather check holder on the table.

“Oh, this is some bullshit,” Angela said. She turned to the restaurant and yelled, “Are we being loud?”

The waitress looked to Mary and said, “Mind helping me out here?”

Mary surveyed the restaurant, decided it was full enough and said, “She’s fine.”

“Yeah,” Angela said, “I’m fine.”

“Grab your things,” the waitress said, “and follow me to the register, or I can have the police escort you out.”

“Guess it’s illegal to have a good time up in this shit hole,” Angela said.

Quiet sprouted. Forks froze in place. A child asked, “What’s happening?”

“We’re not bothering anyone,” Mary said.

“My boss says you two got to go.”

Angela wobbled upwards, swayed in the waitresses face and said, “Fine, killjoy. Fuck this place anyways. Mary, I’ll be outside.” Angela sidled past the waitress, still clutching the beer mug and tripped over her feet. Face plant. Mary smiled, snapped another picture. Patrons remained seated. The waitress helped Angela up, looked at Mary and asked, “What’s wrong with you?”

Outside. Mary pushed Angela up against the brick wall of the old building. “Stay right here, okay. I’m going to go get the car. I don’t think you’re in any state to be walking.”

“Mary,” Angela mumbled.

“What?”

“Mary!” she slur-screamed.

“I’m right here.”

“Do I look desperate to you?”

“I don’t know what-”

“What I’m doing here?” Angela asked. “Me either. I took the first job I could get and now I’m. Fuck. This place is such a shit hole. I panicked. I couldn’t stay in St. Louis, and I sure as fuck couldn’t go back to my parents. Why’d we have to lose our shit, Mary?”

“I’m going to get the car, wait here, okay?”

“At least you don’t have to teach anymore,” Angela said. “I’d kill to be retired.”

“Buffalo’s not so bad,” Mary said.

“Ha. You’re funny Mary. Mary. Mary, Mary quite contrary.”

“Look up,” Mary said, squeezing Angela’s face like a plump tomato and guiding its gaze up. Angela shifted with the precision of Jell-O, malleable muscle chords, slack and loose. Mary noticed the Kermit necklace and looked down at Angela’s closed eyes.

“What are you doing?” Angela asked, opening her eyes to a staring Mary.

“The stars,” Mary said, letting go of Angela’s head and nudging her shoulder back against the wall. “You can actually see the stars here. Even in town. Every night.”

“What are you talking about?” Angela asked, resting her head against the brick wall and pressing her palms against it.

“Nothing,” Mary said, rooting around in her purse. “You look sweaty, dear. Maybe you should unbutton that blouse.”

“Sure,” Angela said, lightly rolling the crown of her head back and forth against the pitted, rough brick.

Mary clenched the camera-case handle between her teeth, undid buttons three and four.

“That feels better,” Angela said, unbuttoning the rest of the blouse, eyes closed. “So fucking hot out here.”

“You’ll be better off,” Mary muttered to herself, pressing down on the trigger.

Mary struggles with her front door, jiggling the key, but unable to turn the lock. Rings the doorbell three times like an impatient kid forced to sell candy door-to-door. Turns right toward the car, checking on Angela, making sure she isn't drowning in vomit. Knocks on the door again. Paul unlocks the dead bolt. He cracks the door, peers out through the sliver, then opens the door halfway.

"What's wrong with the lock?" she asks.

"It ain't broke."

"What do you mean it's not broke? I couldn't get it to work." She scoots forward, reaches an arm through the open space, but Paul fills it with his torso. "Do you mind? I'd like to come inside."

"I changed the locks," Paul says, "that's why your key doesn't work. Where's Angela?"

"Just let me in. If you're mad, that's fine, but I don't want to stand out here arguing in front of the neighbors."

"Where's Angela?" he asks again.

"You broke into my Facebook account, didn't you?"

"If you're not ready to come clean, you should leave."

"Where am I supposed to go? God. Why are you doing this? Just let me in the house, and we'll talk, okay?"

"Tell me what you did."

"No," Mary hisses, trying to shoulder her way in.

“You’re not coming in,” Paul says, guiding Mary backwards and shutting the door.

“How could you go to Kelly for drugs? How could you . . . ah, fuck it. If you want to destroy everything because you don’t feel useful anymore, go ahead, but do it somewhere else.”

“Paul,” she says. “Don’t.”

“The only reason you want in here is to upload whatever incriminating photos you took tonight.”

“Where am I supposed to go?”

“You’ve got your mothers trailer,” Paul says. “Oh, that’s right, you signed it over to our estranged granddaughter.”

Mary sits down on the one porch step and looks over at Angela passed out in the Volkswagen. Paul stands behind his wife, leaning against the door.

“Remember that time Kelly got sick, and we did that puppet show for her? Kermit the Frog and Ms. Piggy battle the evil forces of influenza. I miss that, Paul. I miss having people in our house.”

“I’m still here.”

“No,” Mary says, staring out at the empty street. “We’ve spent too long being part of something better, something we created out of nothing.”

“Oh come on.”

“Do you want me to finish?” she asks turning toward her husband.

He nods his head yes and folds his arms.

“It’s been 40 years since it was just you and me,” Mary says. “And I don’t want to go back to that. I don’t even want to try.”

“You won’t even try?”

“No,” Mary says. “I won’t even try.”

“Come back tomorrow,” he says, “if you feel like trying.”

“This is my house too. We’re coming in. We’ve got no other choice.”

“You brought her here?”

“Well I couldn’t leave her alone. She’s completely passed out.” Mary turns away from her husband. Eyes the empty street, the mailboxes. “Don’t look at me like that, okay.”

“Take Angela home,” Paul says.

“Paul, don’t-” The door closes without an answer. The deadbolt snaps shut.

Back in the car, Mary tries to roust Angela from prescription drug purgatory. “Angela, wake up, come on.” Light slap on the thigh. Hard pinch of stomach fat. Three, short, hard slaps to the face. No response. She picks up Angela’s purse, rifles through it, hopes to find a home address. “Angela, where the fuck do you live?”

In The Prison Hospital Where John Gotti Died

Jefferson reviewed the article he'd written two years ago about his former? current? friend and incarcerated pedophile Michael Rinden. Read the confessions he'd laced into the piece, the guts Rinden had spilled to him in private and denied in public statements during and after the trial; the words that'd removed any lingering doubts of innocence friends and family might've had. Flipped through the notebook cramped with nights the two had shared, years past, when they'd lived together off Mill St. in Buffalo, draining liquor bottles and talking shit about Southwest Missouri; two young, single professionals in a town where that category didn't even exist. The memories felt good; like a steady drip of cocaine closing off his airway.

Jefferson opened Rinden's email again. *I'm doing the time of my life at MCFP in Springfield. Did you know Johnny Sack from The Sopranos fictionally died here? You owe me a visit. Bring cigarettes, hahahahaha!* Jefferson switched to Wikipedia to blot out the spotlight on memory lane.

It'd be cool, a barroom anecdote, a story for people at Anton's over a cup of coffee, or something he could rehash over a cigarette at work. But no. There were no famous residents of the United States Medical Center for Federal Prisoners in Springfield, Missouri, at least according to Wikipedia. No Gotti, no Larry Flynt, not even a Noriega equivalent. No infamous men he could lie about catching a glimpse of; not one notorious felon slurping Jell-O and looking pasty in white prison scrubs. Just Michael Rinden, Jefferson's tumor-of-guilt or gift from god, he hadn't decided which label made more sense yet.

Jefferson closed the web browser, shut off the computer, grabbed his notes, and left the offices of 417 Magazine, his place of employment for the last two years. He arrived at MCFP ten minutes later.

Federal guards performed pat downs and metal sweeps, acquired signatures. Thumbed through notebooks and uncapped pens. A humorless man in a dark khaki uniform led Jefferson to Rinden's room.

"Jefferson," Rinden said, scooting himself up in the hospital bed. Pasty gown, pasty face, forced smile.

"Excuse me," Jefferson said to the guard, "I have comfort to provide."

The guard stood sentry outside the open door.

"What'd you bring me from the outside?" Rinden asked.

"Never mind my little trinkets," Jefferson said, "you've been shanked. Tell me everything." He scooted a chair next to the hospital bed and grasped the rails like a child teetering over a staircase, leaning into the danger; the exhilaration of peering down and the white-knuckle grip of staying put.

"Three men surrounded me in the laundry room," Rinden began.

"If Shawshank has taught us anything it's that prison laundry rooms are full of danger," Jefferson said, smiling.

"Hey now," Rinden said, "who's the expert here?"

"You're right," Jefferson said, grave expression matching his journalistic tone, "please continue."

"How scared are you right now?" Rinden asked. "You probably don't get very many prison shanking stories from your new circle of friends, do you?"

“Being stabbed is number one on the list of horrible ways I’m going to die. So I’d say I’m pretty frightened to hear the gory details.”

“They say after being stabbed once your likely hood of being stabbed again increases by 200%”

“I,” Jefferson paused. “Shit man, what does someone say to that?”

Rinden slow-clapped Jefferson’s discomfort and the two men laughed together, felt that familiar, shared charge between them. When the trickle of laughter tittered out Jefferson felt a stage actor’s fatigue, the intermission hollowness. Jitters scattered and surged through his nerve endings; adrenaline flow a memory of self-confidence no longer available. He took a deep breath.

“How bad is it, Michael?” Jefferson asked.

“Just a little scratch.”

“Seriously,” Jefferson said. “I want to know.”

“I should have said I was accosted by brutes. Calling them mere men doesn’t do them justice.”

Jefferson imagined his rib cage coated in velvet, slowing swinging open, the creak of rope and pulley, exposed organs dipped in guilt-laden tar, hard, black crust; close the gate, play along. “I’m imagining muscly Aryans.”

“Imagine away,” Rinden said. “These muscly Aryans accused me of a predilection for little girls.”

“I’m guessing they didn’t make a distinction between consensual and non-consensual pedophilia.”

“Deaf ears my friend, deaf ears,” Rinden said, leaning forward, twisting to the right, pulling the hospital gown back and showing Jefferson the large, square, pink-stained bandage.

“Poor Michael,” Jefferson said. “If only you’d been born an ancient Greek.”

“That’s me,” he said, “born on the wrong side of A.D.”

“At least you don’t blame yourself,” Jefferson said.

“I’m past all that,” Rinden said. “Now I blame Jesus.”

“For making you a pedophile?”

“No,” Rinden said. “I’m talking about Jesus Franklin, the man who shanked me. Didn’t you do your research?”

Jefferson smiled sadly at his friend and broke eye contact. Glared up at the video camera nestled where most hospital rooms mount T.V.s. “Do you think I can get a copy of our visit?” he asked.

“Scrapbook?”

“Video compilation.”

“To show your new friends the sad outcome of a man you once knew?” Rinden asked.

“Or are we writing a follow-up?”

Jefferson paused again, and ran his fingers through medium-length graying brown hair. Leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs.

Rinden sighed, pretended to file his nails and looked at the wall, away from Jefferson.

Jefferson thought about the time he’d come home to find Rinden and Stephanie on the couch, drinking Coke and watching *Seven*; how she’d immediately stood up, grabbed her *Hello, Kitty* back pack and rushed past him, out the door, mumbling, “Thanks Mr. Rinden.” Michael explained the girl’s tough situation at home, the absent mother, the pilled-out father, how she

asked for help, how she needed someone to talk to; things Rinden made up to soften a suspicious after-school hangout. Jefferson had laid in bed that night conjuring up excuses for his roommate, reasons he would seek out a 12 year old's company and finally decided, no way he sought her out, he's being a good teacher, he's helping; it's not that weird. That reasoning was obliterated a week later when Jefferson came home early from a date and heard sounds of pleasure ripping through Rinden's door and the scramble of feet when they realized someone else was in the house. Jefferson knew right away. Eight days later, Stephanie made sure her parents and the cops knew too.

Jefferson scuffed the linoleum scooting the chair to the right, perpendicular with Rinden's head, getting his attention. Eye contact re-engaged.

"Where's that comfort you were supposed to provide?" Rinden asked.

"Did you know you straddled a fine line between pedophilia and statutory rape?"

"Really?" Rinden asked. "You know, I never bothered to look it up."

"*Really*," Jefferson said. "A year older and you wouldn't be doing federal time."

"A year older," Rinden said, "and I never would've bothered."

Jefferson shook his head and faked a smile.

Rinden scooted himself up the inclined bed and turned toward Jefferson. "Aren't we having fun?"

"I'm sorry," Jefferson said.

"Fuck you; don't start being genuine now. Let us drown in the suffocating syrup of sticky-sweet nostalgia."

"I see they haven't stabbed the English teacher out of you," Jefferson said.

"The pen is mightier than the sword."

“Yeah,” Jefferson said, laughing. “I’m sure Jesus Franklin is still recovering from the lashing your pen gave him.”

“Okay,” Rinden said, covering his face with both hands, “I’m ready. Give it to me straight. Who misses me?”

“Why do this to yourself?” Jefferson asked, backing away into the chair’s fabric, hoping to slip through the hardwood and out the door.

“Shush,” Rinden said. “You don’t deny a stabbed man. We have the same rights as pregnant women and brides.”

Jefferson leaned right, lifted his left ass-cheek off the chair and snagged a notebook out of the back pocket of his jeans.

“You took notes?” Rinden asked, eyes aglow with curiosity.

“I knew you’d ask, and I wanted to be prepared.”

“You’re really enjoying this.”

“Not as much as you are,” Jefferson said. He slipped on his reading glasses. “Stephanie made the honor roll, but lost Carnival Queen to Christie Tompkins in a widely disputed election.”

“That cunt.”

“Stephanie?”

“No, Christie.”

“Stephanie’s dating Taylor Myers.”

“You could have left that part out.”

“No, I should’ve left out that she’s pregnant and planning to audition for MTV’s new show, *14 and Pregnant*.”

“Seriously?” Rinden asked

“No,” Jefferson said. “But it’s exactly what she deserves.”

“You were the only person who didn’t treat her like a victim,” Rinden said.

“Yeah,” Jefferson said. “That didn’t make me very popular either.”

“What did my mom say?” Rinden asked.

“This isn’t funny anymore,” Jefferson said, taking off his glasses.

“No. Finish.”

“Why didn’t you try harder?” Jefferson asked.

“What?” Rinden said, laughing at the question. “Try harder at what?”

“You could’ve done something, seen somebody, talked to somebody about your feelings.

Anyone. You could’ve talked to me, told me what you were feeling. I would’ve listened.”

“It’s easy to say that now,” Rinden said.

“I could’ve-”

“Then why didn’t you?”

Jefferson stared at the camera, waited for someone off-screen to deliver his answer, the guard maybe, anybody. “No one talks about you anymore,” he said, leaning forward again.

“After it happened, everyone wanted to know about you. Students, teachers, people in Buffalo I’d never met. Suddenly everybody knew who I was. They’d come into the *Reflex* office, stop me at gas stations, drive-thru windows. A lot of times they’d just say, ‘you’re friends with that Rinden, aren’t you?’ I got used to defending our friendship. Hell, I even had to start shopping at the grocery store in Fair Grove because I got into a screaming match with one of the checkers at Woods because she called you a diddler.”

“Oh you poor, poor man.”

“You’re right,” Jefferson said, squirming against the chair. “This isn’t about me.”

“You’re goddamn right it’s not about you. You owe me this visit. I told you things in private, my *dear* Jefferson, and then you told made sure the whole world would always know what I am. Thank you for that. Truly.”

“I wrote the truth,” Jefferson said. “You were the one so eager to spill your story. Why tell me if you didn’t want it known? It’s not like you didn’t know I was a reporter.”

“I thought I was talking to my friend,” Rinden said, “not the sports writer for the *Buffalo Reflex*.”

“You said every single thing I wrote in that article.”

“Over a period of five months,” Rinden said, “and never on the record.”

“I wrote the truth,” Jefferson said. “You fucked that girl. Would you rather someone else explained the whole affair? Would you rather I didn’t at least try to show you as something other than a predator?”

“You used me,” Rinden said, “and we both know it.” He stared out the barred window and turned back to Jefferson. “I actually believed you cared. All those visits to the county jail, the books, the food you’d send every day without fail. I thought this is the one motherfucker who hasn’t abandoned me whether I deserve it or not.” Rinden stopped, gripped the bed railing. “This is vacation for me. Do you get that? This is as good as I can expect to have it for the next five to seven years. All I want is you to help me forget how completely fucked my life is, to have an actual conversation, but here you are, wasting my time with how I affected you. Well guess what, I’ve got it worse, so how about a little fucking empathy.”

Jefferson leaned back in the chair, crossed his legs and asked, “What do you want to know?”

“What did my mother say?” Rinden asked.

Jefferson slipped his glasses back on and consulted the notebook. “Your mother said, and I quote, ‘No comment.’”

Rinden snorted laughter and blurted, “She actually said no comment?”

“I knocked on the door, I said, ‘Mrs. Rinden, how are you?’”

“Fast-forward,” Rinden said.

“I said I’m visiting Mikey, he’s going to be in Springfield for a little bit. Anything you want me to pass along? And she said, ‘No comment.’”

“What about my brother?”

“He spat in my face.”

Rinden’s face lit up with joy. “Did you tell him that’s how people get tuberculosis?”

“I’ll write it down for next time,” Jefferson said.

“Ha, next time. Good one.”

“You should hear what your lawyer said.”

“How is Wayne?” Rinden asked.

“Wayne said, ‘Rinden, Rinden, Rinden. Where do I know that name from?’ I stood there for a full minute before reminding him who you were. ‘Right, right,’ he said, ‘tough case. In retrospect we probably should have taken the plea.’”

“He remembered me.”

“Sweet guy, right?”

“Incompetent, but sweet,” Rinden said. “Is that all? What about the prosecutor? Did you get Judge Hanna?”

The guard knocked on the open door and said, “wrap it up.”

The two men looked at each other like some spell had been broken, like they were no longer back at a kitchen table, smoking cigarettes and laughing over something stupid and meaningful, like a redneck with a bumper sticker that said, "Fighting terrorism since 1492."

"Tell me something truthful before you go," Rinden said, somber tone.

"I've had enough passive aggressive play-time with Michael."

"Apparently shankings bring out the masochist in me. Come on."

"Will I be the only person that mourns what you used to be?" Jefferson asked.

"Are you writing a follow-up?" Rinden asked.

Jefferson let out a deep breath and said, "I'd like to think I'd be here even if I wasn't."

"One serious question," Rinden said. "You get one."

"What's the worst thing about your situation? The prison sentence? The fact that you're sexually attracted to children, and you'll never be able to legally fulfill that desire?"

"It's not the prison rape that gets you," Rinden said. "It's the cuddling after. It's like, hello, you've raped me, now I'm supposed to make you feel better about yourself? Come on."

Rinden laughed, eyes closed, holding his belly. Jefferson smiled, awkwardly, and turned to look through the open door for the prison guard's attention. Stood up to leave.

"I told you once," Rinden said, voice loose and fluid like water dripping off an ice cube. "Do you-"

"That night we drank brandy and ran over that orange and white striped cat on M Hwy. Yeah, I remember the story. You said you were 20 though and the girl was 14. I mean, yeah it's a gray area, but it didn't seem like it was something you still wanted or sought out-"

"Do you remember what you said to me?"

“Old enough to bleed, old enough to breed,” Jefferson said, sadly. “We were drunk, Michael. I don’t. What do you want me to say here?”

“Why didn’t you write that part of the story, or that you came home when Stephanie and I were having sex in my room? You knew for a full week before I was arrested,” Rinden said.

“Why didn’t you tell your part in all of this?”

“As far as I’m concerned that girl seduced you for the attention and both of you got what you deserved. Is it wrong that I didn’t protect her from you or that I used our relationship for a story? Maybe. But no one cares except you and me. It’s old news,” Jefferson said, and the guard told them their time was up.

Matthew 25:43

Davis sought revenge on an old, deaf man who'd embarrassed him greatly. Fueled by amphetamines and ill-conceived notions of pride, revenge, and the word of Jesus. Wore that strung out Dallas County poverty; sunken cheeks, a few missing teeth and a tightly clenched jaw chomping at the bit for meaning. The type of look that takes a mission seriously, but never has the means to act. That's where I entered the picture. Manipulated friend weighed down by loyalty and a sense of responsibility for the situation. So. There we were, careening down rural Missouri back roads, searching through darkness, rain and Davis's clouded memory for the old man's house.

"Take the fork to the right," Davis said. Flick of a lighter. A flash of Davis's seriousness in the orange and blue glow.

"Why didn't you pay better attention?" I asked.

"Ask me again and the repercussions will be serious."

"Too busy trying to cover your dick to discern from whence you came?"

"Quit it with the old-timey shit."

"Dear brother, are we not the modern serfs?" I asked. "Men enslaved by debt, doomed to waste away behind infernos hot and slick with dead meat. But tonight. Tonight we seek out and unfurl our anger upon those we serve. Revenge upon the unending parade of mandibles, upon the teeming complaint-ridden mouths that haunt our daily trade. Where once we cowered before the mighty whip, we now tremble like frightened curs every time a round giant complains of receiving one disc of cow instead of two. Tonight we exact glorious revenge upon our feudal lords!"

“I never know how seriously to take you,” he said.

“Don’t worry about me,” I said. “Try to remember where the fuck we’re going.”

Davis turned off the stereo. Windshield wipers squeaked against rain. Hurling drops of water smacked glass at amazing speeds. The repetitive crunch and slush of tires rolled through slurry gravel. Tall grass behind barbed-wire fencing, like two-dimensional Indian chiefs. Each blade and tip a head dress and spear. I took a deep breath and thought, *does he know?*

“How far are we from K?” Davis asked.

“Which part of K?” I asked. “32 or 64? Windyville or Long Lane?”

“You know where this started, what do you think?”

I shut up and drove.

How this started: paper bags, cans of spray paint, after-work boredom and isolation at a place called William’s Ford. Gravel bar next to a river. The type of spot one would expect to find a gaggle of man-boys ingesting whatever stimulants they could afford while leaning up against a car and listening to recycled Black Sabbath songs from an off-brand boom box.

There was a group of us, surely. I liked an audience, and Davis had no car, but who they were I couldn’t tell you. One of the forgotten-names ranted about an ex-girlfriend who’d made him a laughing stock by sleeping with a cripple at a party we’d all attended.

“What I couldn’t figure out was his face.”

“Oh god, that crippled’s face.”

“Was it palsy or just a sex face?”

“What’d he look like after he came?” asked someone who’d missed the party. “Same expression or what? ‘Cause that’s your winner. Before and after.”

“That cripple never did cum. Not that she didn’t do her damndest.”

“I finally got tired of watching.”

“Can’t believe you guys stood around watching my old lady take it from some freak. Should’ve let me kick his crippled ass.”

“First off, she’s not your old lady anymore,” I said.

“Yeah man, fuck you.”

“We couldn’t let you ruin that for us. Car wrecks aren’t as beautiful and tragic as that sight. Your ex, an unknown cripple. Shoe on the other foot, you’d have cheered them on. He looked happy.”

“I’m telling you it was some sort of palsy.”

“Palsy, retard, autistic, whatever,” I said. “That cripple knew how to satisfy a woman. I hope somebody took notes.”

That’s when Davis took his mouth out of the paper bag, that big stupid grin he had when we were deep in it, gold-paint-flecked-face, and asked, “did he look like this?”

It was more than what’s-his-name could take. Crushed a can of spray paint upside Davis’s face. Or maybe the fall on the rocks knocked him out. Whatever the case, we played our parts. Restrained the offended man. Cast dispersions on his character for not having a sense of humor. Attended to Davis, but he wouldn’t wake up. Someone had to calm the tension. I solicited ideas, ways to right the wrong. Truck guy said he had a canoe, knew a place we could take Davis, have a little fun with him. The mood shifted along with the locale. We stripped Davis naked, sprayed on a little gold paint, and put him in the canoe. First we took some pictures. Then we shoved him off down stream, no paddle. Yes, he had a life jacket.

I probably should've kept my mouth shut but I couldn't help myself.

"How long do you think that old man stared at your pale naked ass before you woke up?"

I asked.

"You never should've let that happen to me."

"Out of my hands. They were drug-crazed animals, and you disrespected their women.

After they promised not to kill you, I left. You know my motto. Better you than me." Davis brooded. I continued. "You'd think the old man would've offered you some clothes or something."

"At first I thought he was playing the silent bad-ass," Davis said. "Nope. Just a goddamn deaf old man with a shotgun."

"And the cops didn't offer any clothes either, just took you in naked. Goddamn travesty if you ask me."

"How the hell does a deaf man call the cops?" Davis asked. He'd asked the very same yesterday, and it morphed into an intriguing prospect for revenge and a little b&e.

"Stop," Davis said, suddenly. "Back up. Turn left down that drive. I think this is it."

The car bounced in deep ruts. Ditches. Reservoirs. Moats. But we made the hill. The land flattened out. Short grass. Maintained. Somebody lived here.

A man stood directly in front of us, maybe a hundred yards ahead, silhouetted in headlights, all yellow and black. Umbrella and what looked like a hunting rifle. The umbrella said I'm here to help, but the rifle told me to ignore the umbrella. I stopped the car.

"Should I shut the lights off?" I asked. "What the fuck man? Is this it or not?"

Davis said, "back up."

The man walked forward. Dropped the rifle to his side. Did he yell something, or was that Davis?

“We’ll never make it down that mountain in reverse,” I said.

“Then get out of the car,” Davis said, opening his door. “At least I can run while he’s busy killing you.”

Didn’t feel so much like summer in the dripping darkness. Davis raised his right hand, offered a salutation.

The man halted progress. He looked grizzled. Forties. Privacy nut or meth lab operator, I figured. Appeared physically fit. He stepped to his left, out of the headlights, a frightening 20 yards directly in front of Davis. Rested the rifle against his hip, pointed it my direction. The umbrella remained upright.

“Don’t know what you’re doing here,” the man said calmly, “but you should turn right back around the way you came.”

I looked across the roof of the car at Davis.

“Sorry to disturb you, sir,” Davis said. “We got ourselves a little lost out in this rain. Looking for-”

“Let me stop you right there son.” He spoke eloquently, the accent thick but clear, low in timbre. “You don’t want me to ask you to leave again.”

Davis moved slightly forward. The rifle turned its attention. “Larry. Is that you?”

The man lifted the umbrella. The rifle stared intently with its one good eye.

Davis took another step forward. “It’s me. Marcia’s son, Davis. What’s it been, like, eight years since you and my mom split up?”

The reply tumbled out of his barrel chest, a rumble of bass. Perfectly spaced words and elocution. “What business you got here Davis? I know you didn’t come looking for me.”

I kept silent, began to believe I might not die. Davis yelled above the rain, “It’s kinda funny. I was looking for someone else, thought this was the right place. Complete fucking accident, man. Small world, huh?”

The rifle swung right, stared intently at my chest. “Who sent you?” the man asked Davis.

Davis’s voice shot up a register. “No one sent us did they, man?” he asked, turning to me. I shook my head no, vigorously, my eyes like maracas of panic. “We’ll just get in the car and get out of your hair man, you didn’t see us and we sure as hell didn’t see you.”

The rifle thought for a moment, I counted forty-nine seconds, seemed more like the entirety of my life. “What is it you seek, Davis?”

“A duck mailbox, painted green and brown.” I stared holes through Davis, began to think I might die again.

“You need to head back on down the road another three miles or so. Turn right down Rocket Rd. The mailbox is another two miles south.”

“Thanks Larry, that’s really co-”

The rifle pointed skyward and boomed with enthusiasm. Took a moment for composure after proving its seriousness. “Don’t make the same mistake twice,” the man said.

I don’t have to tell you our actions were swift.

When the old man called the cops, and they found Davis covered in gold paint, they called for backup and a video camera. At least that’s what Davis said happened. The video ended up on the internet. Not sure how. Didn’t take long for the whole town to see it though.

The mailbox quacked right where Larry said it would. Green and brown mallard. Little wings attached that spun round and round. White tips. Davis had everything planned out from there. Stashed the car quarter-mile down in one of those field entrances used by a farmer before the field became a subsidy check.

I waited at the bottom of the driveway. Davis returned, handed me a ski mask, and we leapt to the house. Shitty little domicile if you ask me. Turd brown in the moonlight. Clapboard. Probably nothing but faulty wiring and PVC piping. Good old Dallas County ingenuity. I gingerly opened the screen door.

“Hey, dummy,” Davis said. “He’s deaf.”

I laughed from embarrassment, tried the doorknob. It opened like the legs of a trusting woman. Inside. Living room. Crap strewn everywhere. Newspapers, dirty dishes, fishing poles, netting, and several book stacks. Books in the walkways, behind chairs, on tables, everywhere but on a shelf. Two bedrooms off to the right. A kitchen straight back led to a rear entrance.

“Go ahead,” I whispered, “open up the bedroom.”

“You don’t have to whisper,” Davis yelled.

The old man woke up when Davis pressed the dry washcloth covered in duct tape over his eyes as I restrained the old man’s withered arms, all flappy skin and retreating muscle. Davis smoothed the tape over the old man’s temples, using gentle perfection to erase the bumps and crinks from the tape. We didn’t stop there. Davis straddled the man’s chest, told me to hold his legs. Lifted the old man’s head, wrapped duct tape, once, twice more round the eyes. He became auditory, but incomprehensible, like sounds emerging from a cave full of pissed off

poltergeists, enraged ooohs and aaaahhs and the sick music of impenetrable panic. Davis said, “Guess you can talk after all,” and silenced the mouth. I held the legs while Davis hopped off the old man and rolled him over, taped his hands behind his back. Poor man’s handcuffs. Feet next.

“Shall we restrain the old chap to his place of slumber?” I asked.

“You’re always giving too much effort,” Davis said. “Does he look like he’s going anywhere?”

“My mind ponders,” I said, “at this old man’s ruminations.”

“Rumi-what?”

“His thoughts Davis. You know, like, what the fuck is he thinking right now.”

“Who cares. Let’s get on with it.”

Pillaging is the the fun part, though usually done in too much haste. Davis gave obligatory drawer swipes and mucked about in the closet, tossing shoeboxes full of receipts and other useless pieces of paper. We flipped the mattress together. The old man knocked his head against the night stand. I yelled, “Be careful,” and laughed loudly. What was it like for him, the sensory deprivation? Did he feel our reverberations? Could he tell what we stole or destroyed through the tremors in his skin?

The book towers came next. Ivory white, purple, red, the deepest blacks and blues. Hardback books. I kicked wildly, laid waste to lands of make believe. Grabbed them by the spine. Shook. Nothing fell out. More drawers in the kitchen. Bathroom cabinet nothing but aspirin and generic laxative. Surely we wore gloves.

The second bedroom. A trove of baseball cards and old comic books.

“Davis,” I yelled, “come here.”

“Money?” he asked.

“Look at all this awesome shit.”

“What?”

“He must’ve been collecting all his life.”

“Who cares? Look for some pills or cash and let’s get on with the plan.”

“This stuff is worth money.”

“And completely traceable. Ask yourself, who are we gonna sell that shit to?”

“I could keep it,” I said, “sell it years from now.”

“Why the fuck would you wanna do that?” Davis asked. “Keep to the pills and money and move on.”

It’s not like I could tell the old man I needed to cut off his clothes, so he got real freaked out when he felt the cold steel of the scissors against his skin, but I put a stop to all that with a rabbit punch to the ribcage. I felt poignant and awful. The shirt, thin flannel fabric, cut easily. The old man sucked in his stomach, must of blindly hoped I wouldn’t slice him. The sweat pants were more of a chore, especially the elastic waist band, and I never did figure out how to remove the pants without having to re-tape the feet. Luckily, the old man didn’t attempt anything silly.

Davis came back with the car. We carried the old man like a rug being taken out to have the dust beat from it. He’d stopped squirming by this point. Car trunk open and waiting. Deposit made.

Back inside, *voilà*. Small roll of twenties inside a coffee can in the hall closet underneath boxes and boxes of paperwork.

“Revenge is sweet, no?” Davis asked.

“Shouldn’t we tell him something?” I asked. “Like maybe, you’re not going to die? He’s probably pissing all over my trunk.”

“How’re you supposed to talk to a blindfolded deaf man?”

Hanging. Serious defeat. How else to describe the silence? “Where to now?” I asked.

Davis raised his eyebrows and smiled. I don’t have to tell you it was rather menacing.

It’s the color I remember most. Pink, grape-fruited dawn rising behind luscious, flowing greens. The type of perfect grass you want to swim through. Sunlight burst through leaves, crested the hill like golden trumpets of goodwill. Great day to be alive. The feeling so overwhelmed me I convinced Davis to join me for a scenic view.

“Take it in,” I said.

“It is pretty,” he said, “I’ll give ya that.”

Big oak tree halfway up the hill. Surrounded by nothing but grass and fence. Isolated, but centered in the hill’s upward climb. You couldn’t plant a more perfect sunrise. And the old man. Naked. Tied to the oak tree. Still blindfolded and duct taped. Pretty little note taped to his chest. The note read:

“Naked, and you did not clothe me. Then they asked, Lord, when did we see You naked, or sick and did not take care of You? Then He will answer them, truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me. You will go away into eternal punishment old man, but the righteous into eternal life.”

“Isn’t that a little obvious?” I asked.

“Every cake needs a little icing.”

“But does the icing need to read Davis did it?”

“Your negativity,” Davis stopped, pulled out a phone and turned to me, “is ruining the moment.”

“Who are you possibly calling right now?” I asked.

“Calling the cops on this untraceable burner,” Davis said. “Someone’s gonna learn a little humanity today.”

“Aren’t you worried about the consequences?” I asked.

“What are consequences compared to this?” Davis asked.

“It is pretty,” I said, “I’ll give ya that.”

“Looks like a god damn postcard,” he said and brained me upside the head with a rock.

It’s the color I remember most. Gold paint on my arms, legs, genitals, hands, and stomach. Brown rope tied tightly around my feet and silver handcuffs round my wrists. At least he cuffed me with comfort in mind, didn’t wrench my arms behind my back or try to hog tie me like some people would have. The note taped to my chest read: Judas, as we’d always known him to be. That hurt more than anything else, that name he hung on me.

from **Brotherly Love: A Memoir**

Rachel wouldn't meet at our . . . my . . . house. Said it'd be too hard for us to talk there, too easy for something to happen that shouldn't happen. I screamed, "What do you want from me you fucking harpy?" The silence on the other end of the line rounded out my anxiety and stifled the anger in my voice. She told me to meet her at the old park, near Buffalo, Missouri's tiny airstrip, around eight p.m., September 29th, 2011.

I arrived 15 minutes early. Smoked a bowl, two cigarettes, and swallowed enough water to take a Xanax. Rachel rolled in 12 minutes later.

I leaned against my car. Wore the first christmas present she'd ever bought me; a brick red Arkansas Razorback hoodie. Beard trimmed down how she liked it; short, no mustache, no neck hair. Tried to replicate her idea of Matt at his most attractive.

"Let's walk down to the gazebo," she said.

"Anything you say sis."

"Right away, huh?" Her long face, like something out of a Modigliani painting, radiated disappointment.

"You've made it abundantly clear that we're no longer lovers."

She kicked me in the shin, nudged me back with a hard shove.

I smiled. "People always said we fought like brother and sister."

"Don't do this, okay. I didn't come out here so you could take out--"

"We're over," I said. "I get it. So nice of you to do this in person though, really appreciate it."

“Can you just pretend for the next hour that you aren’t a bitter, heart-broken fuck, and be nice to me. Please.”

“So I shouldn’t be me?”

“Matt,” she said, clutching my pinkie, “we need to have this talk. So drop the sarcasm and walk to the gazebo with me.”

“Is everything-”

“Gazebo,” she said. “Then we’ll talk.”

“I’ve missed you,” I said and attempted to graph my skin to hers.

She backed away, one step. Two. “Let’s. Let’s talk first.”

I slipped my hands into the hoodie’s pocket, following behind Rachel, and in that way we trudged the hill to the gazebo.

On September 5th, 2011 Rachel’s mother, Doreen Macabe, read an article in the *New York Times* titled “One Sperm Donor, 150 Offspring”. An hour later Doreen tells Rachel, “You have 27 brothers and sisters.” Oh what a day we had discussing test-tube babies, sperm donor regulation, and morals involving blood and what all that meant.

The next night Rachel and I had dinner with my parents. Taco Tuesday with Steve and Nancy.

“Anything interesting happen today?” Steve asked, crunching a hard shell.

Rachel and I exchanged a look.

“What?” Nancy asked.

“I found out today that I’ve got 27 half-brothers and sisters,” Rachel said.

Steve dropped his taco, wiped his hands with a paper towel. "I thought you didn't know who your father was."

"I don't," Rachel said, looking to me.

"Her mother used a sperm donor," I said, "and apparently the sperm bank sold his sperm to 27 other women as well as Doreen."

Steve coughed loudly, hacking deep, the kind of full bodied cough that turned him into a beet, lack of lungs and all. Nancy got up from her seat to rub Steve's back. Twisted napkin in her left hand resting on Steve's left shoulder. The emphysema hack subsided.

"That's," Nancy said, struggling to finish the sentence. "That's pretty shocking news."

"Pretty crazy, right?" I said to my father.

"Yeah," he said, staring off into the living room. "Crazy."

"So we did some research today," Rachel said, "and there's not one law regulating how many times a sperm bank can sell the same sperm. This one guy has like 150 kids."

"Which sperm bank did your mother use?" Nancy asked, sitting down.

"Mom," I mumbled, my mouth full of lettuce, cheese, taco shell and meat.

"What?" she said. "I'm just curious."

"She went to the Midwest Sperm Bank out of Chicago," Rachel said.

Steve picked up his half-finished plate and walked into the kitchen.

"Where's he going?" I asked.

"Did your mother live in Chicago?" Nancy asked.

"This is not how I expected this to go," I said. "How about we change the subject?"

"It's fine," Rachel said.

“Is he always like this?” Nancy teased. “I swear Matthew, I don’t know how you got to be such a prude.”

“I do mother. Home. Birth. Video.”

“Oh you weren’t too young,” she said.

“I was seven.”

“And now you’re 29, get over it.”

“Yeah,” Rachel said, flashing me the full-toothed grin of mischief. “Get over it.”

I stacked our plates, made for the kitchen while Rachel supplied Nancy with the backstory, the whole dramatic ordeal of her birth.

Dad leaned against the sink. Bubbles covered the top like whip cream on a sudsy sundae. He smoked a cigarette with great urgency.

“I thought you quit,” I said, scraping leftovers into the trash can.

“You quit yet?” he asked.

“I’m not the one with C.O.P.D.,” I said.

“I was thirty once too,” he said. “You want one or not?”

“Where’s the secret pack?”

“Right here in the utility drawer.”

I sunk the plates into the dish water. Bubbles plopped higher. A domestic wave slushed to the floor. I grabbed some paper towels and sank to my knees to clean the puddle.

“Everything alright?” I asked, water soaking through the cheap paper. “You guys do make enough to afford good paper towels.”

“How long you two been together now?” he asked.

I stood up and said, “three years,” then crossed to the trashcan.

“You happy?”

“What is this?” I asked, opening the utility drawer, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it.

“Just answer the question,” he said.

“What’s with you?” I asked. “Why aren’t we talking about how horrible the Chiefs are? Why’d you get up from dinner?”

“Yeah,” dad said, turning on the faucet and extinguishing his cigarette, “the Chiefs suck. Did you know she had a donor daddy?”

“Yeah, I knew. Kinda came up when I started asking about her father.”

“Do you know his donor number?”

“What?” I asked, laughing.

“We didn’t tell you because it never seemed to matter.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m still your father,” he said without confidence.

I flicked my cigarette into the sink full of dishes. Opened the utility drawer and grabbed another. “Give me the lighter.”

“We tried for about five years.” He paused. Weaved his hands together and clasped them to the back of his head. Exhaled heavily. Arms fell to his sides like independent guillotines. “We tried for about five years, but we had no luck. Got all the fertility tests we could. This was in 1980 and the technology wasn’t all that great yet. Your mother tested normal. Apparently I’d been shooting blanks for years.”

“Don’t you fucking tell me you went to the Midwest Sperm Bank out of Chicago.”

“You think I want to have this conversation?” he asked.

I clenched every muscle in my body, held my cigarette like a spear, wanted it to burn straight through my father's body. Instead I kicked him in the shin. "You motherfuckers," I said, pacing around, "you fucking motherfuckers."

My father turned around, grabbed the edge of the sink and started doing bends. "Fuck that hurt."

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked.

"I guess we never considered this situation," he said breathlessly. "What are the chances?"

"Do you have the donor number?" I asked, exhausted.

"We'll have to find it."

I stared into the eyes of the man I'd received no genetic material from and said, "Were you ever going to tell me?"

"What's all the ruckus back here?" Nancy asked, holding an armful of tupperware filled with taco toppings. Rachel came in behind her, skillet of taco meat in both hands.

"We're leaving," I said, grabbing the taco meat from Rachel and dropping it to the floor. Meat smeared the pristine linoleum a greasy orange.

"Matt," she said, surprised.

"They're getting divorced," I said, "and we're leaving."

Everybody stopped. Silent configurations of the new dynamic.

"Aren't you going to clean up your mess?" Nancy asked.

I squeezed Rachel's side and shoved her through the kitchen door.

Silence on the four minute drive home to the house on Mill St. we'd been living in for the last two years. Slammed myself down on the couch, tore open the coffee table doors and

brought out the bong and the weed tray. Rachel sat next to me, comfort-tousled the back of my head. I packed Angela Davis, our black ceramic bong with the head of a panther and handed it to Rachel.

She shifted her body, sat indian-style on the couch, faced me. Took a rip and blew it in my face. “That should dry those tears.” In between rips from Angela Davis, Rachel’d rest her hands on my shoulder, using that petite pedestal of right and left as a mantle for her sharp, hard chin. She liked to overwet my ear for laughs.

“Stop it,” I said, wiping saliva from my ear lobe.

“Awww,” she said. “Sad Packy.”

“I told you to stop calling me that.”

“You said I couldn’t call you Packy in front of your friends.”

I rolled my left shoulder back, knocked her head off its base. She pecked my cheek, my temple, my neck. Rapid little kisses like gunfire. I pushed her away and stood up.

“Would you like to tell me what’s going on?” she asked.

“No details.”

“That’s okay. We don’t have to talk.”

“You don’t always have to be so fucking nice,” I said.

“You know what? You’re using up most of the leeway I’m giving you here.”

“Maybe I need another hit.”

“Maybe.”

We went through the motions. Pack, light, inhale, exhale, pass. Light, inhale, exhale, pass. Light, inhale, exhale, pass. Light, inhale, exhale, pass.

“It’s medically impossible to overdose on marijuana,” Rachel said, poking me in the side.

I adjusted. Knees underneath my ass, faced her. She slapped a hand on each side of my face and tractor-beamed our lips. Lulled me into a sense of false security then slipped her gum into my mouth.

She cackled. “I got you motherfucker. Rachel nine, Matt seven.” Her arms shot up like field-goal posts. “I’m the greatest, the prettiest. I can’t be beaten.”

I knifed my hands between her neck and collarbone, immediately forcing her onto her back. She screamed out, “no, no. Matt, quit,” but her laughter contradicted. I dug in. She crushed her neck between her shoulders, tried to strangle my hands.

“I can’t be stopped,” I said in my best Russian accent. “I am strong like bull.”

Her knees raised like shields, a puny defensive system against the onslaught of my red army. I pressed forward, strove to finish her off when a knee shot upwards, cracked me beneath the chin. I immediately fell backwards, my upper body on the couch, my legs on the floor. She squawked like a witch from *Macbeth*.

“The Ukraine is weak,” she said.

“Ukraine is not weak,” I whimpered. “Ukraine is strong.”

Rachel laid on top of me, chin on my left shoulder, nuzzled her neck against mine. “Oh Packy.”

“What?” I asked, engulfing her body into mine, our pelvises perfectly aligned.

She kissed my nose, my chin, my forehead. “You’ve still got me.”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” she asked, rolling my shirt up, kissing down my chest and stomach.

“I don’t really-”

“You don’t really what?” she asked, unbuttoning my jeans, sliding them down my legs. Removed my shoes and slid the pants off.

“Not really feeling it,” I said.

On her knees lording over me. Placed a hand on each hip and said, “somebody begs to differ.”

“Fuck,” I said. Her mouth, warm and familiar like a favorite meal or a movie you know so well you’re laughing before the punch line. “You might be my sister.”

She took my dick out of her mouth and said, “I told you I don’t like role play.” And then I explained my life as relative to hers.

“This was always a nice place for us,” Rachel said as we sat down across from each other as foes at the picnic table under the gazebo.

“*Was* being the key word,” I said.

She tilted her head down. Locks of brown rushed to separate, cascaded over like currents of curtains. “I guess I thought of it the other way,” she said to the picnic table. “Like when we rolled down this hill on acid, or that time we tied streamers to all of the airplanes. And the time we had sex right here on this cracked and splintered wood.”

“And now we can add this to our list of memories,” I said. “Oh joy.”

“Really letting the drama queen out, I see.”

“Fine,” I said. “Let’s talk. What are you, pregnant or something?”

“I hate it when you do that.”

“What?”

“You always jump to the worst possible conclusion.”

“No, the worst possible conclusion is that you’ve already had the abortion, you’re moving far, far away and never want to talk to me again.”

“Why would you think I’m pregnant?”

I lifted a cigarette from the pack in my pocket, spun the lighter between my left thumb and index finger. Cigarette dangled from my lower lip. I glanced over, expected to see her laughing, but she ducked behind a luscious brick wall of hair.

“You’ve refused to see me for over three weeks now,” I said, lighting the cigarette. “It’s been three fucking weeks and you won’t even acknowledge the fact that we’re in love with each other, despite everything that’s happened. So I figure why else would you be here if you’re not pregnant?”

“Maybe I miss you.”

“Fuck your maybe,” I said.

“Fuck your maybe,” Rachel mocked, sweeping hair behind her ears “I do miss you. I do. But that’s not why I’m here and I’m not pregnant.”

“Get to the point then,” I said, stubbing out the cigarette on the picnic table, bending the nub into a wrinkled, burned waste.

“How are you so okay with this?” she asked.

“It just doesn’t matter to me,” I said.

“Simple as that?”

“Simple as that.”

“Matt,” she said, paused. “You can’t be okay with how our parents would look at us, you can’t be okay with that. What kind of family are we supposed to be now?”

“How do you feel about me, about us?”

“It’s not about how I feel.”

“How is this not about how we feel?” I said. “That’s all that matters to me. How do our feelings not cancel out a shared father we’ve never met or knew about?”

“Incest is a pretty big trump card,” Rachel said.

“You’re fucking cold sometimes.”

“What about marriage or kids? Don’t you think it’s risky?”

“But we’d have the cutest little retards.”

“Be serious.”

“I’m not making this easy for you, okay,” I said. “You’re not my sister, I don’t care that we share a sperm-donor daddy. I’m not your brother.”

“But you are,” she said, eyeing the cracked, wooden divisions in the picnic table.

We spent our last day as a family, September 6th, 2011, searching through years of Pachmayr history in an attic appropriately titled “the hell hole”. Steve and I went in first to clear out the inevitable bird carcasses that’d get caught in there after slipping through the chimney and finding escape impossible. Two robins and a starling that time.

“Must’ve been three years since I came up here,” he said, ducking to avoid the low, slanted ceiling and handing me a three-carcass-bearing plastic shopping bag.

I looped the handles, strangled them into a knot. Went outside. Buried the birds amongst black trash bags.

The four of us stood outside the stifling stale hell hole and looked at each other.

“It’s not getting any less weird,” Rachel said. “We might as well get this over with.”

“We’re looking for a box marked Matt’s baby stuff,” my mother said.

The search for the donor number stuttered, stammered. I'd get caught up in forty-year-old yearbooks or comments teachers had made about me in third grade. My parents would pause to determine which relative was which in various black and whites. All of us knowing we were looking for a box, but wanting to delay it just a bit, spend some time going over the very things we'd be left with when this day was over; recorded memories. Rachel laughed over my seventh grade rendition of Picasso's The Spanish Civil War (you were a dark little fucker even at 12, all the figures are so soft and rounded but not in a good way, is that a dinosaur tail?, yeah that was my one artistic touch) the laughter causing us to reach out for each other, to supply those nudges, brushes, and tender touches we so often gave one another, but the minuscule chance of incest lurked behind everything.

Steve said, "really guys, what are the chances? One in a million, right?" He flashed a smile around and got nothing back. Nancy handed him a box attached to a look that said this is all your fault, why'd you have to tell him.

We searched through decades of tax returns, school pictures, newspaper clippings from various Pachmayr disgraces and conquests. Brittle paper bags crumbled under our fingertips. Yellowed paper receipts danced in the box fan's insufficient air flow and dust floated through sun beams, spurring our sneezes, choking us to ragged shards of breaths.

"Do you guys want to break for lunch?" Steve asked.

"No one leaves," I said, "until we find that donor number."

We silently went back to work. The fan roared. Papers shuffled. My insides felt like wet, crumbly mortar; heavy disintegration. The silence hung like carbon dioxide.

"Anyone thought about the profits to be made if we really are brother and sister?" I asked. The fan roared back an empty response. "We could go trashy, hit the day time talkies.

Or we could class it up, become advocates, go on Good Morning America. Would America support an incest couple like us?" I pulled boxes out of an old ottoman. "There's money to be made on something this crazy, which is why there's no way we're brother and sister. It'd be like winning a real shitty lottery, but a lottery nonetheless."

"Will you stop," Rachel said. "I just want to get this over with and you're not helping."

"We laugh at everything," I said. "That's what we do."

"Guys," Nancy said, "I know we're all stressed, but if we could-"

"Fine," I said. "Let's just get this over with as soon as possible. If the fucking box is even in here."

At 1:46 p.m. Rachel found the box and handed it to me.

"I can't look," she said.

The Schwann's box was made for creamy crab rangoon. I thought about making a semen joke but decided against it. "I can't do this either," I said, handing Steve the box.

"You do it," he said to Nancy. "You're his mother."

Nastiest look I ever saw her give Steve, but she took the box. Pulled the two little flaps out and opened the graying box.

"Don't," I said. "I don't want to know."

"This is not something we can just ignore," Rachel said.

"She's right," Nancy said.

"What if this is the last moment?" I asked "I lose a father and a girlfriend just like that. No. I'd rather not. Close the fucking box and let's burn it."

"What are the chances?" my father asked again.

“100 percent you’re not my biological father,” I said. “See how far we’ve come already? Doesn’t the truth feel great?”

Nancy turned to face us, the box firmly in the fan’s air stream. Papers flew. We clawed desperately at the cluttered, paper-heavy air.

I gazed east down the hill toward our cars and the shitty silver slide, all rusty, neglected, reflecting moonlight off its dimpled steel.

“Are you going to stay in town?” she asked.

“So finally we come to it,” I said. “If I stay I guess that means you’re leaving?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “If I leave my mother says she’s coming with me.”

“We could start over,” I said. “We can’t marry, but we could start over somewhere else.”

“Unless that someplace else is three weeks ago, then it’s no use.”

“So that’s it?” I asked, tears digging irrigation ditches.

“I wanted to be pregnant,” she said, looking up at me, grabbing my pack of cigarettes and pulling one out. “Kind of the last glimmer of hope I had. We’d be stuck, you know? I’m not saying I would’ve felt great about it. And maybe it wouldn’t have worked out anyway. But it’s the only way I would’ve stuck with you.” She lit her cigarette. Placed my lighter back on the table.

“Yeah,” I said, sniffing. “We couldn’t have killed off little Royal or Sloane.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “But we can’t both stay here.”

“I’m not leaving,” I said, wiping away saline sentimentality.

“Fine,” she said, exhaling smoke, “I guess I’ll leave then.”

Seconds stretched themselves into micro-moments of intense tenacity, like bungee cords stretched taut to the limit of release.

“Don’t you want to meet our dad?” I asked.

“Why would you ask me that?”

“Aren’t you curious?” I asked. “I’d like to meet the man whose sperm ruined the best relationship I’ve ever had.”

“This isn’t the only reason we’re breaking up,” she said. “It would’ve ended eventually.”

“You’re just saying that,” I accused.

“You talk down to me,” she said, stubbing out the cigarette, “like all the time. You have this way of making me feel stupid. We don’t like any of the same things, so we don’t end up doing much but getting high and watching T.V., which I love, but come on, what’re we going to be like as parents, or as actual adults and home owners, you know, those things that I want that you don’t really seem to care about.”

“You know this works,” I said. “Nothing’s perfect, and I do want those things. You know that.”

“Okay. How long until you act that way?” Rachel asked. “You’re a substitute teacher with one published story and a really nice rejection letter from the Atlantic Monthly. I don’t really see those things preparing you financially for a family. For fucks sake we’re still in Buffalo. You’re almost thirty years old.”

“So why were you still with me then? Why were we still together until the moment we became brother and sister?”

“You made me happy,” she said. “On a daily basis. Guess that used to out weigh everything else.”

“Your use of the past tense is so insulting.”

She stared at me with watery eyes that refused to spill a tear or look away.

“You can go now,” I said. “I think we’re done here.”

“Are you going to be okay?” you asked, standing up from the picnic table.

I snorted a single laugh, looked away and said, “what the fuck you care?”

I plugged my mouth with a cigarette and watched you walk away. Coaxed myself with smoke and the belief that cancer would accelerate, masticate a tumor to my lung before the cigarette burned out. I pictured the elegance of dying alone. No chemo, no oxygen tank. No. I’d lock myself in a studio apartment. T.V. Couch. Ashtray. And slowly, but surely, choke to death on my own exhaust.

We met at our friend Aimee’s house on August 28th, 2008. I played badminton and you stood off to the side, the creepy spectator no one else at the barbecue bothered talking to. Sweat poured off my face, dripped into my beer, but you smiled anyway.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hello,” you replied, extending your pretend dress out in a faux curtsy.

“Every quirky girl in every tired rom-com does that,” I said.

“I have a sick fascination with cliches,” you said, “which is why you’re going to ignore the obvious red flags and continue thinking I’m adorable.”

I laughed, tilting the cup back. “You know Aimee from the restaurant?”

“No,” you said. “I live next door.”

“Ah,” I said, rocking back on my heels, giving you my that’s-interesting-but-I-have-no-idea-what-to-say-next look.

“Rachel,” you said, extending your hand.

“Matt,” I said, “but I can’t shake your hand.” I held the hand up for inspection.

“Herpes.”

“That’s unfortunate,” you said.

“It’s not so bad,” I said. “I got herpes from my mother. And no, not how you’re thinking. I fucked her.”

You laughed, the tips of your fingers touching the tip of your long nose, and I stepped closer.

“So what do you do?” I asked.

“I sell cars.”

“Oh shit,” I said. “Really?”

“Why does everyone always say that?”

“Because you’re the scum of the earth.”

“Naturally,” you said, “but everyone needs a car, right?”

“I think it’s kind of like how women see men after being raped. You get fucked one time without permission and from then on you’re wary of every salesman you meet.”

“Did you just call me a rapist?” you asked.

“If the shoe fits.”

“You could at least clarify my rapist type. Like, wallet raper.”

“How about the bad credit rapist or the raper of financial dreams?”

“No,” you said, “the title’s too long. How about lemon sodomist?”

I laughed and killed off the rest of my beer. Arched my left eyebrow your way and asked, “You’re not one of those girls who claims to have a rape fantasy are you?”

“What?” you asked, tittering laughter.

“Women with rape fantasies want you to trust that when you show up dressed in black, a stocking cap over your face, and a big knife in your hand, the police won’t be in the other room waiting to billy club you into an attempted rape charge.”

“No worries there,” you said. “I’m more into incest fantasies.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Sure,” you said. “There’s nothing to be scared of. You just gotta think about it like the first time you got laid. You just gotta go, ‘Daddy, are you sure this is right?’”

“*Tank Girl*,” I said. “Very nice.”

You widened your eyes and dropped your jaw in surprise. “So great you know that movie. No one ever laughs at that joke.”

“I love that movie,” I said.

“Me too,” you said.

“I know this is probably a little forward.”

“You’ve already called me a rapist, I think we’re way past forward.”

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

“As a matter of fact I do.”

“That’s too bad,” I said.

“Why’s that?” you asked, giving the full-toothed grin of mischief.

“Too bad for you,” I said, making sure to hit you with eye contact as the words left my mouth, the sincere, I’m a good guy look, the one I used when lying to my parents, “because I happen to be pretty great at thumb wrestling and video games, which most women find irresistible.”

“I really do have a boyfriend,” you said, voice dropping, shifting gears to serious for the first time.

“That’s okay,” I said without a hint of sarcasm, “you’ll only be able to resist this for so long.”

“I should probably go,” you said.

“Be seeing you around,” I said, winking.

“Creepy.”

“You will be mine,” I said, lowering my voice, tapping my fingers together in an evil manner, “oh yes, you will be mine.”

You grimaced, turned around, and started toward your house. Halfway there you stopped, turned back to me and yelled, “Aren’t you coming?”

Home of the Buffalo Bisons

We needed something to add excitement to otherwise boring days, something to fill our nights with idiotic conversations full of importance and dick jokes. So we stood in line at a Casey's convenience store for the type of legal amphetamines that kept truckers pulling 18 hour shifts, and gave middle-aged mothers the illusion of weight loss without exercise. 6:30 a.m. 26 hours without sleep and no bed in sight.

“Do you want the Zing, the Yellow Jackets, or the Hi-Ball Pep?” I asked Celia. Beautiful, 15, the new girl in town; a relative unknown in a town full of relatives and knowns.

The cashier shot me a, “no way in hell this girl is 18, but frankly I wish you'd just hurry the fuck up,” look. Celia batted non-descript brown eyes, the one plain feature about her, and said, “Zing, zing, zing-zing-zing¹.”

Inside my 1988 Chevy Beretta we immediately opened the bottle. Three for me and five for her. I swallowed one pill at a time. They raced through my bloodstream, widened pupils, and set nostrils to flare. My jaw clenched in anticipation of chemical exuberance.

Celia tossed all five pills into her sideways ovaled mouth at once. The pills floated on a raft of tongue, awaited deployment. She snagged the soda from between my legs and filled her mouth with soda until her cheeks puffed out like a cute blowfish. Brown carbonation drizzled down both sides of her cheeks. I reached over to wipe the foamy specks from her face, but hesitated when my fingers got close. She waited, pursed her lips together and pointed her eyes at

¹ A reference to Eminem's “Vicodin, vring-vring-vring.” Poor white kids love white musicians who talk about destroying shit, thus the popularity of the Insane Clown Posse. Where my juggalos at?

my fingers. I pulled my hand back, turned toward the driver side window. She slid her hand under my shirt sleeve, used me as a napkin.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” I asked.

“I’m a girl who does whatever she wants.”

“One day you’ll be ugly,” I said, “but I’ll still be smart.”

“That’s okay,” she said, “three weeks from now you leave for college and I’ll forget all about you. Good luck forgetting me.”

“Another day without sleep and that won’t be a problem,” I said.

“Aww, so cute. You actually think that’s possible. Sorry, Milford, but that brain of yours never shuts off.”

“Engaging penis shuts off brain,” I said, smiling.

Celia laughed and pulled her hair back into a pony tail. She shifted toward me and placed her right hand three inches above my knee.

“This is new,” I said.

“Testing your theory,” she said. The hand crept upwards, inch by inch. I sucked in my slight paunch and stiffened against the red cloth of my driver’s seat, but there was no escape.

“Look at you, you’re freaking out,” she said, laughing, removing her hand from my knee and sitting straight forward in the passenger seat. “Brain shuts off my ass.”

Buzzed silence. The Zing thrust forward, gyrated thoughts like accelerated particles in a demolition derby. Outside of drugs, what did we have? She had her body and I had a car. Barter, barter. Except the body said no, repeatedly, yet every few days or so she needed my car. Intrigued by fuck or love? At 18 is there a difference? Maybe she used me as much as I wanted to use her, a necessary evil she endured in order to get out of the house. I imagined touching her

hand, lightly brushing our fingers together, rubbing her palm with my thumb, knowing eventually she'd wear down, tire of saying no. And then the sirens blasted me back into reality.

A town of 2500 white people, Buffalo, Mo., owned five police cruisers and each one of them howled past us. Sirens blared in full glory. Was that a little Ludwig Van I heard in the background? We followed the commotion, the Zing begged us to. Elusive excitement.

Yellow police tape fluttered in haphazard formations across the front yard of 617 Missouri 32/73. Officers gathered in huddles discussing death and crafting stories they'd tell for the rest of their lives. They wondered where the news van was. Imagined thoughts of sitting home surrounded by wives and unwanted children, gasping together as Daddy spoke on T.V., hoping to come off as important, hoping people at Wal-Mart would soon stop them to say, "you looked good on KY3 last night, have you lost some weight?" Elusive excitement.

We turned down Spruce street, parallel to the house and police officers.

"Oh shit," Celia said, slipping a cigarette into her mouth, "is this Bolin's house?"

"You know it is," I said.

She flipped me off and we laughed. Pulled into an empty driveway and turned around. Parked the Berretta even with the crime scene and flipped the ignition off. We craned to see misfortune happening to a friend. Other cars parked behind us. Traffic slowed to a crawl on 32/73 Hwy.

Nothing distinct about the home itself. Covered in teal siding. Looked exactly like every other house built in the '70s: shaped somewhere between a square and a rectangle, cheap chain link fence surrounding a small yard, front porch with three steps, no railing, and a white door with a knocker. I had no idea if Bolin was alive or dead, but I figured the yellow tape had something to do with his mother.

Bolin's mother made you nervous when she waved a knife around and threatened to stab herself. She wasn't all bad though. Turned a blind eye to our dope use, and by dope I mean whatever inhalants we could find inside the tool shed to huff.

The coroner arrived. Buffalo had its first official homicide of the year.

"Think Bolin's dead?" Celia asked, her jaw busy at work, smacking gum.

"I don't know," I said. "Would you like to ask one of Buffalo's finest?"

"Oh hell no," she said.

I snorted laughter and asked, "Shall we go?"

"Shouldn't we wait until they wheel out a body?"

"Or bodies."

"Right," she said.

"We could be here for a little bit. Bet they're waiting on the press to show up for the money shot."

"Money shot?"

"The black body bag being wheeled out."

"Well, shit. Whatya wanna do then?" Celia asked.

"Marijuana?" I asked.

"Uhhmm, yes."

"Then crazy monkey sex?" I asked.

"Funny," she said. "I was about to offer the same thing, and then I remembered you're a pussy."

"I prefer testicularly challenged," I said.

And then my best friend, Slackjaw, knocked on the passenger-side window and scared the shit out of both of us.

Slackjaw's Top Five

5. Slackjaw and I drove to Salem, Mo., down I-44. He leaned out the passenger window and puked, hitting the windshield of a 1997 F-150 in the next lane, on purpose.
4. Slackjaw took his girlfriend to Six Flags one day. He drove her car back from St. Louis, at upwards of 100 mph; a four hour drive took closer to two. The engine blew later that night. To punish himself Slackjaw punched a large wooden church sign, repeatedly. A group of us stood and watched. Someone made him stop, because the whiskey wouldn't. His grandmother took him to the doctor the next day; three broken bones in his right hand. Cut the cast off two weeks early so he could start back at Sonic.
3. *Allegedly*. Slackjaw passed out drunk in his car, a half-empty² pint of whiskey on the seat next to him. The cops saw his car and tried waking him. Slackjaw remained unresponsive. Officer Hodges reached through the open driver's side window and grabbed Slackjaw by the collar. He woke up, grabbed the whiskey bottle, swung it at Hodges and connected. The cops beat and hog-tied Slackjaw in such a fashion that no charges could be brought.
2. Some friends threw Slackjaw a party for his 17th birthday, or maybe their parents were just out of town. Either way. He drank a fifth of Southern Jack³ and could barely sustain by eight p.m. I set up camp in a back bedroom and enjoyed the benefits of being a pot head: peers with a

² Slackjaw is a pessimist

³ A combination of Southern Comfort and Jack Daniels

similar interest in getting ripped, hack T.V. actors become hilarious, and a boring life no longer seems so mundane. Gravity bonges are spiritual things in these parts. Elsewhere, someone handed Slackjaw a shotgun and took him for a walk around the property. They returned 30 minutes later, speckled with blood and screaming obscenities. Slackjaw had shot a cow.

1. Slackjaw stood outside of my car, smoking a cigarette and looking like hell. He wore mid-thigh running shorts and an old REO Speedwagon shirt. Cupped his hand over a cigarette, exhaling, inhaling, the serious work of burning lung tissue. He looked intense. Intensity screamed sobriety. Celia rolled down her window.

“Hey there soldier boy, you be needing a lift home?” I asked.

Slackjaw ignored me and got in the back seat behind Celia. He turned his head to look out the window, fist placed under his sunken but hairy chin.

“What’s wrong with you this morning?” I asked.

“Nothing.”

“Liar,” I said.

“Home,” he replied.

Slackjaw lived off the town square in a garage outside of his mother’s house. The garage contained a cot and a cd player, camping chairs and a makeshift cabinet, slab of concrete and a jar of ears taken from stuffed animals. He planned on crafting an intricate necklace.

The three of us went inside, lit our cigarettes to fill the silence with smoke and breath.

“Alright, what the hell is wrong with you?” I asked Slackjaw.

“Nothing,” he said.

“Bullshit,” I said. “If nothing were wrong you’d be regaling us with some tale of drunken debauchery.”

“Look at college boy with the big words,” Celia said.

I winked and flipped her the bird.

“Just leave,” Slackjaw said. “I don’t feel like company right now.”

“Celia, you think we should leave?” I asked, shaking the bottle of Zing like a maraca. She rose to her feet and shimmered to the faux-amphetamine rattle, swaying hips from side to side, arms above her head, exposing a few inches of brown belly. Slackjaw looked at me and smiled. We each took three pills. He extracted his opium pipe from underneath the cot and we took turns hitting residue that tasted like brand new shoes⁴ from Wal-Mart.

The opium and the zing collided simultaneously, a strange feeling, being tugged in two, defying the logic that what goes up must come down. Celia laid down on Slackjaw’s cot and grinned up at us like a reformed junkie rediscovering the beauty of numb.

“Want me to take you home?” I asked.

“Shhh, it’s all draining, the, shhh.”

Slackjaw and I stood up, lit new cigarettes and whispered.

“Spill it,” I said.

“I was out with Mikey Eisner last night, drinking Natty light and doing whip-its⁵. We end up over at Mary’s house and they start fucking, so I walked to Bolin’s house for a place to crash.”

“Oh shit,” I said.

⁴ We smoked red rock opium. Most red rock “opium” is nothing but a rock of incense called Dragon’s Blood.

⁵ Little cartridges of CO2 that make everything go wah, wah, wah, wah, wah, for about 10-15 seconds.

“I knocked on Bolin’s door about two-thirty in the morning, heard a bunch of yelling and screaming so I left. Went to your house, but you weren’t there. Passed out in the cab of your dad’s truck.”

“Did you see anything?” I asked.

“I tried looking through the peep hole, but I didn’t see much. Just the screams.”

“You think Merna killed her own mother?” I asked.

“Anything’s possible,” he said, extinguishing a cigarette under shoe. “I need to take a shower, get out of these ridiculous shorts.” He walked out the garage and into his mother’s house.

I laid down next to Celia and put a blanket over us. She snatched my arm and draped it over herself.

“Crazy monkey cuddle?” she asked.

“Sure,” I said, laughing. It was 8:13 a.m.

“Milford, wake up man. Come on, you’re in my bed ya fucking Nazi scum.”

I opened my eyes and stared up at Slackjaw’s beard. What a magnificent beard.

“What time is it?” I yawned and raised my torso with my right arm, keeping my legs still, resting against Celia’s.

“Nine,” he said.

“Shit,” Celia said, “is it Sunday? If it’s Sunday I gotta go home.”

“It’s Saturday night,” I said.

“What are we waiting for?” she asked, throwing off the blanket and grabbing the bottle of Zing out of my hand. We were halfway through the bottle of thirty-six. She withdrew six pills,

leaving us with twelve to last the night. Broke the capsules, dumping piles of dirty gray snow on the back of an old comic book⁶.

“You gentleman wouldn’t let a lady smoke a foil by herself now would you?” All she needed was a girdle and a mint julep.

“Slackjaw, aluminum foil and a pen, stat,” I said in my best doctor voice.

He returned, items in hand. Celia knew exactly where to cut the sheet of foil, where to fold it, how deep each side of the boat should be, how to make the hull pointed and not flat. She handed me our Reynold’s Wrap smoke boat. Scraped the pile of Zing to the edge of her razor blade, picking the pile up gently and dumping the powder into the bottom of our aluminum pleasure craft. Slackjaw disemboweled a Bic pen. Celia held the aluminum at one end and placed the empty pen casing in her mouth, ready to suction the smoke that would soon be rolling off the foil. Placed the lighter far enough below the boat so as not to burn all the Zing at once, but close enough that the powder burned slowly and evenly.

The smoke wafted upwards in curvaceous waves, lingered like thick fog fingers along the thin metal sides until Celia deemed the hit big enough. The pen casing extended from her lungs. She strived for perfection, reached her limit and exhaled in my direction. I shut my eyes and lapped up the momentary feeling of her breath on my face. Placed the boat in my hand, put the pen in my mouth, and lit me up. The vessel sailed back and forth between the three of us until we were left with nothing but a grimy, black residue.

“We getting fucked up tonight or what?” Slackjaw asked.

“I got nothing else going on. Celia?” I asked.

“In it to win it,” she said.

⁶ A comic book about a group of hillbillies who fought off Charles Darwin. Darwin was trying to take their thumbs.

“Alright, but we need supplies,” I said.

We put on our respective sunglasses and piled into my car.

Signal held title as the best gas station in town. It had a McDonald’s, liquor, beer, rolling papers, snacks, soda, light bulbs, salt, aluminum foil, and cough syrup. We came for soda, smokes, candy bars, and liquor for Slackjaw. The beard made him look of age. Of course, Signal also had pigs hanging out for the free coffee. Bored police and fucked up teenagers. Sounds like a bad combo, right?

Slackjaw bought a fifth of Southern Comfort and a fifth of Jack Daniels while Celia and I grabbed everything else. He paid and went outside before we allowed ourselves to stand in line.

“We should have waited,” I said. “It’s too busy in here.”

“Quit being paranoid,” Celia whispered.

Two old men in light blue coveralls gave us the once over. “Those farmers are staring,” I said.

“What are they gonna do, call the cops, tell’m some kids are wearing sunglasses after dark.”

“Maybe.” I rocked back and forth on my heels, waiting for the woman in front of us to complete her purchase. A large pile of junk food and six large fountain drinks with six straws sat on the counter⁷. She handed over her EBT card to the clerk.

“Excuse me?” I said, tapping the woman on the shoulder. She turned around and sneered at me. Melissa Johnson. We’d gone to school together before she got pregnant a second time and dropped out.

“What?” she asked.

⁷ Fountain drinks are not an approved EBT item if a straw has been inserted.

“Are you buying all this shit-food for your kids?” I asked.

She turned away.

“If you’re gonna buy shit food,” I said, “you could at least buy it at a grocery store. Save a few bucks for them little rascals.”

Silence.

“Shouldn’t you be somewhat responsible for how you spend taxpayer money?” I asked.

The clerk avoided eye contact with both of us, the other customers stopped milling around and listened.

“Maybe you shouldn’t be spending \$39.76 on junk food for you and your crackhead friends. Don’t make your kids suffer because you were too stupid to take birth control or get an abortion.”

She turned around, jaw clenched, trying to hold back tears or anger, I wasn’t sure which. “You don’t know a goddamn thing about me,” she said.

“I know you’ll be here for the rest of your fucking life,” I yelled. Celia grabbed the back of my shirt but I shook her off.

“Here are your things,” the clerk said, handing over the EBT approved assortment of fatty salts and sweet chocolates. Melissa seized the bag and ran out, staring only at Celia.

“Where’d that come from?” Celia said.

“Years of witnessed stupidity,” I said, ignoring the stares and paying for our junk food. We walked outside. I turned left toward the car, but Celia stopped.

“What was that all about?” she asked.

“You’re mad?”

“This isn’t like you,” she said.

“I believe you called Melissa a skeezy hoe bag just last week.”

“Not in public I didn’t.”

“We talk shit about people all the time.”

“You humiliated her for no reason. Why? Because you’re better, because you’re smarter? Just ‘cause you’re leaving don’t mean you can suddenly start treating people like shit.”

“You don’t get it,” I said. “This is the scariest place in the world and I’m just. I’m so tired of seeing the same thing over and over again.”

She eyed me suspiciously and said, “What are you talking about? Nothing ever happens here.”

“You’re wrong,” I said. “So much happens here most people never leave.”

“If I have two kids by the time I’m 18 you gonna talk to me that way?” she asked.

“That depends,” I said, “is one of those little bastards mine?”

“You’re such an asshole.”

“And you love it,” I said. “Can we go now?”

Back at the garage with liquor and snacks. Celia pretended to be angry. Smoked Marlboro Lights silently on the cot. I stood in the corner by the roll up door, eating Funyuns and drinking Mountain Dew. Slackjaw cradled his trusty jug handle, poured in the contents of both fifths through a funnel, mixing the whiskeys. Inserted his index finger through the hole near the top of the jug handle. Rested the bottle against the back of his hand like it’d always been there, cool glass and the reassuring weight of 1.75 ml. Raised to his lips. The Jack Daniels burned, but the Southern Comfort coated his throat like citrus cough syrup. He brought the jug handle down,

rested it against his hip, used his other hand to wipe the drops of whiskey clinging to his mustache and lips.

“Ahhh, god damn that’s nice,” he said, looking over at us. “What’s wrong with you two? Lover’s quarrel?”

We both said, “ha ha,” at the same time and smiled.

“Take some more zing,” he said. We agreed. Four pills apiece.

“I called Bolin while you two were in Signal,” Slackjaw said.

“Really? What happened? Is he ok?” I asked.

“He’s not dead, I don’t know how okay he is.”

“What did he say?” Celia asked.

“I asked him what happened, and all he said was, ‘She killed Grandma.’ That’s it.”

“We’ll have to keep an eye on Milford,” Celia said. “He might just be the next Merna.”

Slackjaw shrugged his shoulders and tossed back another drink from the jug handle.

Leaned back in his foldable camping chair and reached through the makeshift cabinet to his right and pulled out a small drinking glass, filled it. “What are you talking about?” he asked Celia.

She told him what happened at Signal.

“You never have understood what it’s like here,” Slackjaw said to me.

“I’ve lived here my whole life,” I said.

“You haven’t lived like the rest of us.”

“We spent a summer on food stamps.”

“One summer out of 17. Excuse me. I’ve got you all wrong.”

“Yeah, I’m above the poverty line, but so what. I did what I needed to do to get out. It’s not like I’m going off to Yale or some shit. People down here, man. It’s always the easy way.

How many parents do we know that got a disability settlement, blew it all in a couple months on stupid shit like jet skis or a big ass truck and then end up living paycheck to paycheck? Or the unemployed sweatpants living fat at the first of the month then scrounging, mooching, sucking up every resource they can find just to make it the next three weeks.”

“Listen to you. How have you lived here for so long and not gotten this yet?” Slackjaw asked. “Money’s temporary, it goes one way or another. Normal for us is those last three weeks, scrounging, getting by, limping to the first of the month. That’s fucking normal. Extra money ain’t normal, so when we get a little spending cash, we spend it, ‘cause we know how to survive on nothing.” Slackjaw finished the last half of his glass and poured another.

“You guys are fucking boring. Good god.” Celia said.

“What do you wanna talk about little one?” I asked.

“Don’t be an ass,” she said. “I wanna know why the football team is called the Bisons and not the Bison.”

“Because bisons is the plural of bison,” Slackjaw replied.

“You guys fucking with me?” she asked. “You know bison is the plural for buffalo, right?”

“You mean an institute of learnin’ was ignorant enough to name their team the Buffalo Bisons and then paint a large mural inside the football stadium that done declares that very misnomer,” I said in my best southern belle.

Slackjaw and I laughed heartily. The mural was one of our favorite Buffaloisms. Other Buffaloisms: the *Buffalo Reflex* saying a rape victim had been forcibly ravished and the sign outside of the First Baptist Church that said, “Accept Jesus or pay the ultimate price.”

Celia played along like she always did. I loved watching her laugh, the way she put four fingers in front of her mouth to cover it, and the pride I felt when my words and her laughter bound us, momentarily.

We popped the last four Zing. Slackjaw poured another drink. The whiskey down past the neck, but the belly sloshed. The drugs and alcohol did their work; filters ceased, stories became better. It all felt important and right.

Topics: various feats of drug use and consumption, hallucinogenics, whether or not Celia had sex with her ex-boyfriend, Slackjaw's various arrest stories, whether or not Mrs. Gimson was a drunk⁸, Sonic work stories⁹, how awesome the nickname Nadine the Sex Machine was for Mrs. Piper, whether the number of pregnant high schoolers was 12 or 13¹⁰, the ice story, the lynching in '94, the possibility of selling fireworks for Glaston's over the summer and finally, Bolin's mother. It was two in the morning.

"I could have done something," Slackjaw said, half-empty jug handle resting against the back of his palm, empty drinking glass in the other hand.

"Who gave you permission to be serious?" I asked.

"Fuck off."

"Ah, come on," Celia said. "We're having a good time."

"Somebody died because I didn't do anything. I heard her screaming for help."

"You didn't say that earlier," I said.

⁸ Though I never saw her take a drink, Mrs. Gimson did have her husband slip her a few pain killers through the window of our classroom one day. She claimed her back hurt, that the pills didn't affect her. 15 minutes later she passed out on her desk.

⁹ Slackjaw put a package of strawberry puree (used for the strawberry sundaes) beneath his apron. In front of several car hops Slackjaw and I pretended to argue. I grabbed a knife and stabbed him in the abdomen.

¹⁰ The youngest pregnant girl in town, Holly Conden, 14, was home schooled. I said she didn't count. Slackjaw and Celia disagreed.

Slackjaw lifted himself out of the camping chair, swaying. He pointed his drinking glass at me. "I've done some fucked up things, but I've never let anyone die."

"You're being a drama queen," I said, "and heading towards pathetic drunk territory."

He glared down at me and walked out the door. We followed. Empty night. Nothing but starry skies and streetlights.

"Come back in," I said. "I'll leave if you want but you should go back inside. Nobody out but us and the pigs."

"Leave me alone," he said. "I'm turning myself in."

"For what?" I asked.

"I already told you."

"You didn't do anything you fucking moron," I yelled. "Bolin's grandmother didn't die because of you."

He ignored me, stumbled in drunken zig-zag half steps, glass clutched in hand.

I turned around and headed back for the garage.

"Stop him," Celia said.

"No," I said, walking past her.

Slackjaw staggered up the hill and turned right toward the police station. I stood in the garage's side entrance, waited for her to come back from the street.

"No reason you should get busted for curfew because of Slackjaw's dumbass," I said.

She gave me a pity smile and rubbed my back with her left hand as we re-entered the garage. We sat down on the cot.

"It's not your fault," she said.

"I know."

“What’s wrong then?” she asked.

“He’s intent on destroying himself and I won’t be here to see it,” I said. “I’m going to get a call someday telling me Slackjaw’s going to prison, or that he finally killed himself driving drunk without his lights on.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Just stay here with me for a little bit, maybe he’ll show back up.” I laid my head in her lap and she ran fingers through my hair.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving in a few weeks,” she said.

I sat up. Grabbed her hand and said, “thank you.”

She whispered, “You’re welcome,” and moved her thumb against mine. We laid down and faced each other.

“I’m going to kiss you before I leave town,” I said.

“I know.”

I leaned in to kiss her, but she said, “Not yet,” and turned over.

Slid my right arm underneath the pillow, my stomach against her lower back, my knees tucked under her ass. “Is this okay?” I asked.

She grabbed my left arm and put it around her waist. I stared at the back of her head and thought about my next move when I heard the boom.

“What was that?” Celia asked.

“A ratty ’73 Chevy pick-up, backfiring.”

“I didn’t see any headlights go by,” she said. “Shouldn’t we check on Slackjaw?”

“He’s gonna do what he’s gonna do.”

Celia faced me again. “I didn’t go out with you because I knew you were leaving.”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“It’s mostly true.”

“Doesn’t matter one way or another,” I said. “I’m still leaving whether you kiss me or not.”

We approached each other slowly, neither of us smiling. She grabbed my t-shirt, pulled my lips to hers. I’d concocted this exact moment in masturbatory fantasies and silly daydreams of sexual conquest; impossible not to be disappointed. My mouth went limp.

“What?” she asked. “Did I do something wrong?”

“We shouldn’t do this,” I said.

“You’re kidding me,” she said. “Are you worried about Slackjaw?”

“Yeah.”

“Well don’t,” she said, index finger touching my chin. “This is what you want.”

“That’s what I thought too,” I said, shifting my eyes around the room, avoiding contact.

“But we can’t do this.”

“Why not?”

“It’s not that I don’t want too, because I do, obviously. You know that. I’ve been trying to put myself in this exact situation for the last five months. But this can’t happen before I leave. Maybe when I come back and visit sometime, but not now. You’re the last thing that could keep me here.”

“What?”

“If I fuck you maybe I never want to leave. Maybe you get pregnant. Maybe we fall in love, and I can’t leave you behind. Maybe-”

“Why are you so scared?” she asked. “It’s always about how fucked up Buffalo is, how fucked up these people are. Well, what the fuck is wrong with you, huh? Why are you so scared you can’t even kiss me?”

“Maybe I’ll start thinking it’s not so bad here.”

Slackjaw walked down Jefferson street toward the police station. A group of large rocks acted like a border due to the lack of concrete-poured curb. A single pole light bathed a lone police cruiser in yellow sulfate. Slackjaw turned left on Tyler street and stepped diagonally toward the front door of the cop shop. He stood for a moment, swayed lightly side-to-side like an experienced drunk with impeccable balance.

The drinking glass in his right hand hurled itself at the front door of the police department, shattering.

No response. No man in blue to punish the violent act. Slackjaw picked up one of the border rocks and brought it up to his chest, cradling it with both hands, unsure what to do. Pole light became spotlight became moment of beautiful harmony as recognition became reality became the police cruiser’s window smashed to pieces.

Nothing came through the front door except a lack of acknowledgment.

A shotgun rested between the front and passenger seats of the police cruiser, carelessly left there by an officer rushing home for meatloaf and a rerun of *Jackass*’s final episode. He’d missed the original air date.

Slackjaw placed his hands on the shotgun and pulled it out of the glass splent front seat. Pumped the shotgun as he’d seen actors do his whole life. He pointed it into the air and fired. Sounded like a backfire from a ratty ’73 Chevy pickup truck.

An officer stepped out, gun drawn, stance wide; scared. “Put the gun down,” he yelled.

“Hi Dell,” Slackjaw said.

“Robert? What the hell you think you’re doing?”

“Turning myself in.”

“I’m gonna need you to put the gun down before I can put the cuffs on ya.”

“Oh yeah. Sorry about that. Forgot I was still holding it.”

Slackjaw placed the shotgun on the ground and Officer Dell approached slowly.

“Sorry Robert, but you know what’s next.”

“I certainly do,” Slackjaw said. “And you should know I’m not gonna make this easy for you.”

Office Dell slammed Slackjaw up against the white cinderblocks. He grinned as left side of his face bounced off the slightly cool wall and said, “that’s it Dell. Fuck me up you goddamn pussy.”

How the Young Vacation in Buffalo

Milford Riley

June 22nd, 2001: Slackjaw met me at Glaston Fireworks on the corner of Springfield Rd. and North 65 Hwy., three miles outside of Buffalo, Missouri. The store, rectangular in shape, cinderblock built, with a flat panel corrugated red roof and a neon sign exploding light-bulb fireworks 24 hours a day. Looked more like an auto body shop that'd collected 20 years of grime, grease, and industry than a retail store. The two acre lot behind the building glittered with rusting semi-trailers used as makeshift storage for the products Glaston sold in Mississippi and Louisiana over the 4th of July and New Years.

The store barely held the inventory, much like a snake bulging from too much prey. Plywood shelving bowed under the weight of flimsy cardboard boxes containing cheaply made Chinese fireworks. Shelves constructed in a rectangle, the clerks corralled safely inside, the same sales design used in every Glaston tent. Garish bunting hid the stock shelf while adding a touch of color to the room. These were the richest people in Dallas County; the crown jewel of their explosives empire radiated flea market in a basement.

The guy we talked to about getting a job looked typical. Bald. Fully bearded. Mid 40's paunch. Baldy jotted down directions to the warehouse in Clinton, Mississippi. Forked over 60 bucks for gas, and strict instructions to show up by the next night or "you'll have driven all that way for nothing." I asked some questions, wanted to make sure Slackjaw and I ended up in a tent together. The man repeated the same mantra. "Just get down there and everything'll be straightened out. R.J. Glaston's the man you wanna talk to."

Outside in the parking lot we smoked cigarettes and leaned against our respective vehicles.

“What do you know about R.J. Glaston?” I asked

“He runs things down there,” Slackjaw said. “He’s the boss, what’s there to say? He doesn’t carry a whip if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“What do I need to pack?” I asked, changing the subject.

“Pillow, sleeping bag, and something to read. We’ll charge the rest to Glaston’s.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, we buy whatever we want and give them the receipts. Two weeks without paying for food, liquor, or cigarettes. I mean, the work is gonna suck, but it’s just for two weeks and then we see get to see the ocean.”

“Technically it’s a gulf,” I said, crushing my cigarette underfoot.

“Technically it’s a gulf,” Slackjaw mocked. “Listen to yourself college boy. I thought you were excited.”

“That was before my dad explained Riley/Glaston relations.”

“What?” Slackjaw asked and I summed up how I found out my mother’d been raped, 26 years ago, by the man I’d just signed on to work for.

My father muted the television and said, “This is a stupid idea. You’re gonna sell fireworks in Mississippi. Why?”

“I’m not asking permission,” I said. “I’m telling you where I’m gonna be.”

“Who’s going with you?” he asked, sitting across from me at the dining room table.

“Slackjaw.”

“Does he even have permission to leave the state?”

“I’m not sure how relevant that-”

“And let me guess,” he said. “You’ll be taking your car and could use some gas money and an oil change.”

“That would be really ni-”

“You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into.”

“I’m going to make some money and see the ocean, have a little working vacation. It’s not a big deal.”

“You should be working in an office somewhere, doing an internship like last year, not fucking around in Mississippi with Slackjaw. You’re in college for christ’s sake, don’t start acting like some dip shit native Buffalonian now.”

“I think I deserve a break from logic and responsibility.”

“Do you even hear yourself?”

“Nope. I’m on vacation from self-reflection too.”

“You’re 19 years old, and I can’t make you stay, Milford.”

“Glad you realize that.”

“I do, son. But you need to know what you’re getting yourself into.”

“I’m working for tweakers, money launderers, and overall shitty people. I’ve heard all the stories too, dad. Why are you being such a dick about this?”

“Fine. You want to act like a grownup, you should know the truth.”

“What?” I asked. “Did they screw us out of money two decades ago or is there some other little grudge you’ve been holding onto since you were my age?”

“R.J. Glaston raped your mother when she was 15.”

Everything else dropped from my mind. I mouthed the question, but nothing came out.

“You need to know who you’re involving yourself with,” he said. “I’m sorry to tell you like this.”

“We haven’t seen mom in years,” I said. “Is this supposed to matter to me?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” he asked. “Of course it’s supposed to matter to you. She’s still your mother. The Glaston’s use people, Milford. They’re dangerous.”

“Why couldn’t you just let me have this, huh? I was actually looking forward to getting out of here for a few weeks.”

“You’re being dramatic.”

“Did you do anything about it?” I asked. “Did you do anything when you found out?”

“It was three years after the fact when I found out.”

“And it’s been what, 26 years since it happened? A full seven years before I was born. I don’t know what you expected that little nugget of information to accomplish, but I’ll see you in a couple of weeks when I get back.” I grabbed my car keys off the table.

“Still need money for an oil change?” he asked. “That car’s got to last you through college, you know.”

“Yes,” I said, holding out my hand, “I still need the money.”

“Wow,” Slackjaw said, lighting another cigarette. “That’s uh, that’s fucked up, man. You sure you still want to do this?”

“Yeah, man, we’re going. That piece of shit R.J. has to answer at some point.”

“Milf, you’ve heard the same stories I have. People don’t fuck with the Glaston’s for a reason.”

“Isn’t this a switch,” I said, “you trying to convince me to do the sensible thing.”

Robert Duncan (a.k.a Slackjaw)

Glaston Wholesale Fireworks in Clinton, Mississippi. The building was one of those pre-fab monsters in a shit-brown corrugated-siding shell. R.J. Glaston met us outside. Bald head with some scraps of gray horseshoed around a crater of sun-damaged, scabby scalp. Late 40’s, early 50’s maybe. Squashed Mr. Potato Head face. We shook hands and shit. He remembered me from the year before. Forgot to ask Milford’s name, which I was thankful for. Thought maybe Milf had come to his senses, dropped the whole revenge thing. He was better off being all talk.

R.J. spoke in a flat tone and a confident bossiness, like everyone else with money in Buffalo. “In the morning we’re gonna take you two over to Raymond, set you up there. Go ahead and grab your sleeping bags. You can sleep in the store tonight.” It was 11:47 p.m.

The store looked just like the one in Buffalo, right down to the bunting and cheap plywood shelving, but had a lot more room. Little office upstairs. Storage space in the loft wings at each end of the building.

R.J. pointed to some cardboard boxes in a corner, underneath a shelf. “Break those down,” he said, “they’re as good as any cot you’re gonna find around here,” and left.

Milford looked at me and said, “seriously?”

We ripped tape off cardboard, broke down folds, laid our sleeping bags on top of our cardboard cots and tried to keep our pillow cases clean.

One of the teenage girls working the store mentioned spider problems. “You might want to stay in a sleeping bag. Those motherfuckers are everywhere.” The girls turned off the main lights and headed upstairs to their cool little office.

“And they are?” Milford asked.

“You know those are R.J.’s daughters.”

“Wanted to make sure.”

“Don’t even think about it,” I said.

“What?”

“You’re not the revenge type. Besides. People don’t fuck with the Glaston’s for a reason. Just drop it, okay?”

“No worries. Don’t I always play it safe?”

“I tried to tell you there would be some suck.”

“You failed to mention my Sophie’s choice of dying by spider-bite or heat stroke.”

“If I had, would you have come?”

“Oh fuck you,” he said.

“That a boy. Now. Dare me to smoke a cigarette in here.”

“Oh goody, maybe you’ll blow us up before we spontaneously combust.”

“Nah,” I said. “We were meant to suffer this goddamn heat.”

“Fine,” Milford said, “don’t kill us. But zip me up first. I’ve chosen death by heat stroke.”

20 minutes later, the girls sauntered downstairs while I stamped out my fourth cigarette. Milford stared up at the ceiling, stuck between knowing he couldn’t do anything about R.J. and wanting to be the type of person who would. The 15 year old, Stacy, wavy, golden-blond hair.

She wore a purple scrunchy, white Hanes V-neck t-shirt, tight shorts from American Eagle, and New Balance tennis shoes, no socks. The younger sister, Jamie, 13, sported a mid-riff Care Bears t-shirt, a bikini bottom with Gap stamped across her ass, and purple flip flops from Wal-Mart. Her toenails shone neon-green, tiny emoticons painted onto each canvas nail.

“You bitches get high?” Jamie asked, pregnant joint in her hand.

Milford looked up at me for answers.

“So what if we do,” I said.

“We’re going outside,” Jamie said. “You two fags can come if you want, or stay here and suck each other off. Whatever.”

Stacy giggled and followed her little sister outside, each girl wagging her ass so hard we couldn’t help but notice.

Milford unzipped his sweaty ass from the sleeping bag and asked, “Um . . . what the fuck was that?” like I translated Buffalo.

“You’re gone for one year,” I said, “and you forget what shit’s like? Young girls like to get fucked up with older guys . . . shocker. You’re still the same guy who chased 15 year old Celia around for a year, right?”

“Maybe I am,” he said, “and maybe I’m not.”

The girls leaned against a pop-up Coleman camping trailer parked behind the fireworks store in a strip of mowed grass that separated us from the tick infested weeds behind the store. We stayed quiet while the joint got passed around. It burned Stacy’s fingertips when it got too small to handle. She offered the roach to Milford and I, but we waved her off. Jamie extended her tongue and swallowed the burnt residue whole, smiling at Milford. Another joint popped out

of Stacy's bra, the girl making sure we saw the bit of cleavage she owned, and we repeated the process.

"So, your Dad leaves you guys alone here?" Milford asked.

"Yeah," Jamie said. "Got a problem with that?"

"If the store doesn't burn down" Stacy said, "R.J. don't give a shit what we do. He puts up with way worse from you tent kids."

"Kids is a funny word to toss around," Milford said.

"How many times you been down here in this shit?" Stacy asked.

"I'm a newbie," Milford said.

"And you?" Stacy asked, turning to me.

"This is my second time."

"Jamie and I have been doing this shit since we were seven and nine, so don't be acting all fucking uppity cause you're older."

Milford cackled like an asshole and said, "Your last name's protected you real fucking good, hasn't it?"

"What's the story with limp dick over here?" Jamie asked, and the four of us set to laughing.

The girls told stories: A dumbass 15 year old from Buffalo we all knew blew his hand off with a sparkler bomb, four 16 year old girls got tossed in jail for DUI and drug possession and their parents had to come down and bail them out, a 20 year old male clerk shot an unarmed black man after being robbed three minutes earlier by a couple niggers with guns, a 17 year old girl we all knew who'd been fed liquor and felt up by a former Glaston employee in her fireworks tent and how the Glaston family paid her off to keep it hush-hush.

We countered with: The number of drugs we'd taken and their different effects, the time I ramped a Buick Tornado and blew all the tires, Milford's lie about seducing a teacher, the fantastic way I quit school, the time I shot the window out of a parked cop car with a shotgun, and Milf's lame escapades in college.

The talk seemed like one of those dick measuring contests you'd see in a middle school locker room. Some boys eager to show off what they'd gained over the summer; the echoes of laughter when someone was proud of something short and stubby; the hush that came over the room when the biggest cock announced itself.

"We got some Apple Pucker," Stacy said, "up in our room."

"Party liquor, party time," Milford belted out.

"We should probably go back in and pass out," I said. "Early day tomorrow."

"What happened to you?" Milford asked. "When'd you start caring more about work than getting fucked up?"

"Some shit ain't worth it," I said. "I've learned that the hard way. You sure you want to learn that lesson tonight?"

"What the fuck?" Stacy said. "I figured Milford for the pussy, not you."

"Me too," he said.

"Hey, faggot," Jaime said to me. "Come upstairs if you change your mind."

They went inside and headed for the air conditioned office. I smoked two cigarettes, talked myself out of saving Milford from future castration and went to bed. Two hours later he woke me up by laying on top of his sleeping bag and poking me in the gut.

"Well?" he said. "Aren't you going to ask?"

"I don't want to know."

“You? Captain debauchery himself. You don’t want to know?”

“I don’t want to know.”

“I’ll tell you in seven years.”

“Huh?”

“That’s when the statute of limitations is up on statutory rape charges.”

“So you fucked them?”

“I thought you didn’t want to know?”

“Who the fuck are you right now? This isn’t you, you don’t do this. You’re acting like the type of retard you always complained about.”

“Why should the Glaston’s always get away with everything, huh? Where’s the justice in that?”

“Who are you kidding?” I asked. “You’re talking like a naive little bitch. What’re you gonna say next, ‘life’s not fair’.”

“We’re gonna bleed these motherfucker’s dry,” he said. “Are you with me or not?”

“You were right,” I said, “death by heat stroke is the way to go. Fuck messing with a bunch of spiders. Now zip me up.”

Milford Riley

June 24th: We followed R.J. to a gas station parking lot off of Hwy. 18 in Raymond, Mississippi. While the set up crew got the tent ready, Slackjaw and I loitered around the Sinclair station we’d be calling home for the next two weeks, but decided against lounging in the creepy pawn shop next door. Two ham, egg, and cheese biscuits later, R.J. walked over. Guy still looked like a rapist.

“You clear on everything?” he asked us.

“Seems pretty cut and dry,” I said. “Slackjaw will keep me on the straight and narrow. Speaking of, please thank your daughters for being so welcoming last night.”

“Yeah,” he said, “I’ll make sure and do that. What was your name again?”

“Milford Riley,” I said, heart echoing in my ear like the pounding of a Taiwanese sweat shop drum. “I think you knew my mother in high school. Tracy McCrayton?”

“That’s your mom, huh?”

“Yep. Told me she hadn’t forgotten you from high school.”

“Yeah, well.” R.J. plopped a palm on his bald pate and searched for gray tufts of hair.

“Buffalo was a lot smaller back then. We all knew each other.”

“Want me to tell her you said hi?” I asked.

“Just call the office if you need anything.”

“Will do, R.J. Tell Stacy and Jamie we said hi.”

R.J. drove off in the old Ryder truck with the set-up crew.

Slackjaw punched me in the arm and said, “Quit acting like a fucking retard.”

“Fuck him.”

“I get it man. You feel like you should do something, but you’re not that guy. Hell. You’re not even capable of pretending to be that guy.”

“What would you do?”

“Drop it,” he said. “Forget the whole damn thing.”

“Is that what you did when James used to beat up on your mom, just forget it?”

June 25th: I was pocketing a 20 from the register and nearly pissed myself when I heard gunshots. The owner of Pawn ‘N Gun had stepped outside with a large bearded man in sweat pants and a wife beater. The owner squeezed a silver hand gun and fired it off into the distance behind us, a mere 33 feet away from our tent. The two men tested the gun several more times, loudly discussing its strengths and deficiencies.

Pawn shop owner reminded me of a retired offensive lineman. Shaved head, no neck, bulbous stomach, and gobs of fat entombing a sculpted mausoleum of muscle. The kind of guy who used to strike fear into the hearts of men and pummel them mercilessly, but now relied on intimidation to keep from running out of breath 37 seconds into a fight.

“You boys must be from Missouri,” he said, thrusting a mighty meat paw at me. I shook it and silently thanked him for not crushing my smooth, unworked right hand.

“How’d you guess?” I asked.

“This has been a Glaston lot for going on 12 years now. You boys need anything, a little protection,” he said, waving the gun from side-to-side in front of our faces, “or a shower, you know, anything I can help with, you let me know.”

“We can borrow a gun?” Slackjaw asked.

“Ha. Don’t think so fella. But I’ll sell you one on the spot, no paperwork, no questions asked. It’s nice to have some protection from the niggs around here.”

“I don’t think we’ll be needing a gun,” I said, “but a shower would be nice.”

I grabbed my things and hurried to the basement. Square upon square of dark gray cinderblocks, no overhead lights except for the one bulb at the bottom of the stairs. What kind of store needed three shower stalls? Rape scene from *Pulp Fiction* flashed through my mind. I shuddered to imagine life without shower sandals. While I washed off two days of sweat, fast

food, and soda, I expected rotund southerners to wobble down the stairs, lock the door, and have at me in a *Deliverance* sort of way. I showered in three minutes flat.

June 26th: This hick, Jimmy Beckley, from the cliched part of the South, stopped by the tent and asked if we had any work he could do, any errands he could run for us. We bought him some Burger King and he found us some weed. Black kid with a big afro delivered it. Paid him out of the register while Slackjaw stood behind me and judged.

“You’re just inviting trouble,” he said after Jimmy and afro left the tent.

“This whole good guy act is starting to get a little old.”

“Guess you can hold off on stealing from the register today.”

“Fuck that,” I said, pocketing a 20.

“Is it still revenge,” he asked, “when nobody notices?”

June 29th: Outside, the mid-morning rain lashed out at the concrete like liquid nickels pinging off hot asphalt. Bellows of thunder, flashes of lightning. We unrolled each canvas flap, closed ourselves off and stewed in humidity. Couched in cheap patio chairs, the vinyl kind where your ass sinks down and the individual vinyl strips suction themselves to bare skin.

I fell sideways when lightning struck the pawn shop. Slackjaw laughed and helped me to my feet. “That was the loudest god damn thing I’ve ever heard,” he said, grabbing my hand and leaning backwards to fulcrum my weight.

“This is bad juju,” I said.

“It rains everyday.”

“I should’ve listened to my father and stayed the fuck home.”

“You’re never going to make it through the next week if you keep bellyaching like a pussy,” he said. “We haven’t even gotten to the busy part yet. There’s fourteen hour days coming.”

“It’s not the work that’s got me freaking out. It’s the underage girls, the man who raped my mother, a racist pawn shop guy firing off hand guns, who also happens to own a basement that reeks of sodomy, and now god strikes from above. So fuck you, this shit doesn’t happen to me in Missouri. I should have stayed home.”

July 1st: My car battery died. Asked Desiree, the gas station clerk we’d been talking to for the last week, if she’d give me a ride to Wal-Mart for a new battery and she said, “no problem. Shift’s over in a couple of hours.” Two hours later she said she couldn’t because she had to pick up her grandmother, and her grandmother hated white people. I walked back to the tent.

“I thought you were getting a ride from Desiree,” Slackjaw said.

“Something came up.”

“Guess you ain’t a man of the people after all.”

“She’s giving me a jump before she goes.”

“And then what?”

“Leave it running while I grab a battery.”

“How you plan on getting back here after the car’s stolen?”

“Give me some cab money.”

Jumped the car. Desiree apologized, told me not to take it personal. Slackjaw stayed to watch the fireworks tent. I left the car running for six minutes in the Wal-Mart parking lot in

Jackson. No one touched it. Repeated the process the next day when Slackjaw reminded me we had no tools for battery installation. I called my dad and told him he was right, that I should have stayed home. Told me he hoped I'd learned something. I said, "Yeah. Stay out of the South."

Jimmy Beckley: A Scout's Guide to Fireworks Tents

It ain't as easy as picking a tent manned by a couple of kids and taking off with their fireworks. Use caution and choose wisely 'cause you wanna bleed that sucker more than once, and I've always advocated the slow bleed. The slow bleed enables me to work just six months out the year. Slow bleed maintains my stay in Sarasota, Florida going on eight years now.

First off, you want to avoid middle-aged men and couples in general. Middle-age people are more likely to have a gun or call the cops, more likely to remember things like license plate numbers and physical descriptions. Did I mention they're more likely to be carrying some goddamn cannon their daddy brought back from Korea? I shouldn't have to say avoid gun play unless it's a matter of life or death, but I'll be goddamned if some dumb shit don't end up shooting a clerk every year. Eight years on the job, I ain't never fired a gun. Rather proud of that. But don't confuse less likely to carry with easy pickings. Sometimes you'll get a young buck built like a brick shit house. I advise you to keep on walking. Assume the worst, 'cause if it comes down to an ass whooping you wanna be taking and not giving. That was always my thinking anyway.

Other people do it different, and I always say 'to each their own,' but I think you're a fucking retard to go it alone. That's why I use a crew. A lot of folks around here don't wanna mess with negroes, say they ain't trustworthy, and blah blah blah. But think about the advantage.

You got out of town kids coming down here ain't never set eyes on no southern black. These rubes see that dark skin and their minds start conjuring up news reports of drug dealing, drive-by shooting, stick-you-in-the-eye-with-a-sharp-blade gang bangers. Not that I'm recommending the use of gang members. Often found them to be lazy and violently unreliable. I recruit kids with clean records and good attitudes. How does a felon like me find good help you ask? I pay well and do my research. Find out where the kid lives, who his parents are, and what he does outside of home and work. Fast food restaurants and sneaker outlets are good bets. Malls too. I start recruiting a full five months before fireworks season because I start fresh every year.

Never work the same tent and never work the same town two years in a row. And for god's sake don't go hiring kids from the town you're working. Learned that shit the hard way. I keep a crew of three or four. You could go smaller, but this way somebody don't show up, I still got enough people to work. I can't stress enough the importance of training. You got to teach these kids to play up their blackness, to embrace the stereotype, 'cause there's nothing scarier to some corn-fed white boy than a stereotypical nigger. I suggest rap videos. Give 'em what they know.

Crew ain't worth shit though without a scout. You're the man on the inside so don't go thinking your appearance ain't important, 'cause it fucking very well is. Most of these tents in central Mississippi got kids from southwest Missouri and they can tell an average white guy from white trash, no problem. Heighten your accent, grow the hair out, wear trucker hats, jeans with paint and food stains, old work boots, and ratty t-shirts. Try to keep the face somewhere between clean shaven and derelict. Drive a piece of shit, preferably a '70s Chevy, Ford, or Dodge pickup truck. If you can't get your hands on a truck, an '80s American sedan will work

in a pinch. Fill your vehicle with scrap metal or bottle recycling, something that says you barely scrape by.

High traffic tent vs. low traffic tent is what it all boils down to. Each has its advantages. High traffic tents got the money, but they also got the most witnesses. Let me tell you, bunch of people see black kids ripping off some white kids fireworks tent, they're calling the cops. Low traffic is safer, no doubt about it, but high traffic will always be my choice. Common sense helps. Avoid peak hours, wait until customers leave, don't take too much product, and I'll even throw this one in for free; sell the clerks some marijuana, and they'll be that less likely to call the cops after getting robbed.

Robert Duncan (a.k.a Slackjaw)

Milford manned the register while I stalked the tent to straighten stock and answer any questions the customers might have; tried to look busy so I wouldn't have to run the register. Jimmy stood next to his truck wearing the same thing he always wore: wife beater, stained blue-jeans, trucker hat for the 13th Annual Tractor Pull in Jackson, and a pair of old work boots.

Group of young niggers walked in the tent wearing different combos of red and black. Three total. The big one had an afro and the look of an oaf. The skinny one looked young as shit, wore a Raiders jersey, black pants cinched around the waist, and black and red Nikes. I recognized the third one because we'd traded him some fireworks for weed. Darryl something or another. He walked straight to me, pretended to look at all our mortar rounds. I wanted him to open his mouth so I could steal another look at his one gold tooth.

“Maybe you can do something for me,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“Keep cool and don’t act like a little bitch.”

“Huh?”

He invited me to look down, lifted up his shirt and showed me why I’d want to keep from acting like a little bitch.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“We gonna take all the fireworks we want, and you ain’t gonna say shit.”

“What about the customers?”

He inched closer, right up against my ear, smiled like we were best friends. “You think I’m dumb, motherfucker? Keep your mouth shut and your boy under control.”

Number three nodded to one and two. They grabbed the big family packs, boxes and boxes of mortar rounds, saturn missiles, roman candles, but left the cheap stuff like firecrackers and bottle rockets.

Milford yelled to number one, “I see you out there man, you and I both know you didn’t pay for that.” Number one grinned in an aw shucks way and started back toward the tent. I told Milford to “let it go,” and he gave his whatever look and continued running the register. Number one stopped in the parking lot, got another nod from Darryl, and turned back around toward the shit box they drove up in. Darryl slapped me on the back, told me to have a good day. I searched for Jimmy outside but he’d already left for McDonalds.

Milford crept up my ass as soon as the tent emptied. “Did you do that for me?” he asked.

“What? No. We were just robbed, dumb fuck. He had a gun.”

“Who?”

“The one with the gold tooth and the small fro.”

“You mean the one you were talking to.”

“Yeah, the same guy you propositioned for marijuana, and surprise, he came back with a gun and two other niggers.”

“Good,” he said with a smile. “I hope we get robbed three more times.”

“If you’d let me buy a gun,” I said, “this wouldn’t of happened.”

“Yes it would have.”

“No it wouldn’t,” I said. “Look. He flashes his piece at me, I flash one right back and then they know not to fuck with us.”

Milford laughed. I felt my face redden, my breathing sharpen.

“I can’t imagine it would’ve gone that smoothly,” he said.

“Yeah, well, you don’t know shit.”

“We aren’t exactly intimidating. And who cares, anyway. We’re fine and the Glastholes are out some money. Win, win.”

“I’m not scared of a couple niggers.”

“First off, you do realize we’re in a black town, living in the parking lot of a gas station owned by a black man, and most of our customers are black.”

“Tent’s empty, dumbass.”

“And yes, you were scared of those black kids. When someone threatens you with a gun, fear is good thing. Proves you’re not a fucking moron.”

I exited our corral area and straightened up stock, tried to make it look like we hadn’t been robbed, but Milford wouldn’t shut up.

“I think it’s great you’re finally on board with bleeding this tent dry.”

“We were just robbed at gunpoint by three niggers and you want to thank me?”

“Will you quit saying that?”

“What? Nigger? Nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger. Better?”

“No reason for you to say that.”

“How about we were just robbed by three niggers. Afro having, Nike wearing, gun-toting niggers. Seems like reason enough for me.”

“Color of their skin doesn’t matter. Put us in an area with no commerce, no jobs, shitty educational system, and we’d turn out like them.”

“Hello, asshole. We come from a place with little commerce, no jobs, shitty educational system and we are nothing like those guys.”

“I’m nothing like those guys.”

“Did you just call me a nigger.”

“If the shoe fits.”

“You’ve been stealing money since we got here, and you’re going to look down on me? Fuck you, college boy. Should’ve stayed your ass in Kansas City instead of coming back to Buffalo for the summer.”

“And miss all the fun?”

I tackled him into one of the tables, boxes skidded across hot pavement and we struggled against each other, grappling for position. He got on top of me, hunk of my sideburn in his left hand and said, “Don’t make me do it you Nazi scum.”

Milford Riley

July 3rd: I woke up to R.J. Glaston standing over me, nudging my side with his work boot.

“Where’s the money?” he asked.

I sat up for a second, stretched my arms and yawned.

“Let’s speed it up,” he said. “I’ve got 75 more stops after this one.”

“Let’s talk about my mother,” I said, peering down at Slackjaw, seeing him pop open one eyelid then quickly shut it.

“The money,” R.J. said again.

“Was she awake or passed out drunk when you raped her?”

“Shut the fuck up,” he said.

“15 years old,” I said. “Same age as Stacy.”

R.J. grabbed me by the throat, forced me to the ground. I wrapped my hands around his forearm, pulled to no avail.

“Listen here you little fuck. I know exactly who you are, and I suggest you shut your fucking mouth if you want to keep using it.” He removed his hand from my throat. “Where’s the money?” he asked for a third time.

I scrambled to my feet, searched for my duffel bag between gasping for air.

“You got 30 seconds,” R.J. said, “and if I leave without the money the people who come get it won’t be near as nice.”

I found Jamie’s Gap bikini bottoms and threw them at R.J. They landed at his feet. “Recognize those?” I asked. “I got ‘em from Jamie. She’s got the sweetest little-” The air rushed out of me. R.J.’s shoulder buried in my diaphragm and then he’s on top of me. First punch I ever took. Right hand to left cheekbone. Sharp pain then numb. Second punch hurt worse than the first. Right hand to left eye.

“Get off of him,” Slackjaw yelled, and R.J. turned to see a snub nosed .38 pointed in his general direction. He stood up and broke one of my ribs with a kick.

“That’s enough goddamnit,” Slackjaw yelled.

“Give me the money,” R.J. said.

Slackjaw grabbed the book bag, threw it at R.J.’s chest. I snagged a cigarette out of the pack in my cargo shorts and wiped imaginary blood off my face with the dirty t-shirt I wore.

We’d stored rubber-banded rolls of 500 dollars in the book bag. About six thousand dollars total. R.J. snatched them up, one by one, threw them in a paper sack. Slackjaw watched R.J. leave and then stood over me, shit-eating grin on his face.

“What?” I asked.

“Never thought you had it in you.”

“Didn’t know I could take a punch either?” I asked.

“No, I mean yeah, but I can’t believe you revenge fucked a 13 year old.”

I sat up. “How bad does it look?”

“They’ll have your nuts, that’s for fucking sure. So yeah, it looks pretty bad.”

“How does my face look?”

“You’ll live,” he said and picked up the book bag. Rooted around in the bottom and found two rolls of money. “Here,” he said, tossing me a wad, “guess he forgot these. That make it better?”

“Five hundred bucks and all I had to do was confront my mother’s rapist and let him beat on me.”

Slackjaw grinned and asked, “let?”

“Ha, ha,” I said. “Where’d you get the gun?”

“It’s fake. Got it off the pawn shop guy for one of those 100 dollar family packs.”

“Seriously?”

“Yup,” he said. “I’d like to see those niggers come back now.” I ignored the racism and thanked Slackjaw with a hug.

“I wouldn’t thank me yet,” he said. “Most likely you just guaranteed an ass kicking for both of us. And that’s if we’re lucky.”

July 4th: We closed down hours after the gas station and pawn shop had flipped their signs from open-to-close and headed out for explosive celebrations. It’d been a 16 hour day behind the register.

We boxed up bottle rockets, firecrackers, saturn missiles, smoke bombs, rattlers, spin wheels, mortars, roman candles, strobes, parachutes, snakes, poppers, snaps, and about a hundred gross of punks and sparklers. Cakes, assortments, aerial displays, rockets, and missiles; pretty packages with names like, Braggin’ Rights, Warm Greeting, Haunted Fish, Light It and Run, Vivid Conception, The Best Partner, The Punisher, and Big Deal. Flipped over flimsy tables, folded hollow metal legs. Constructed a rectangular haven out of tables for our boxes of unsold fireworks.

“Fuck I’m tired,” I said.

“Well it’s all over princess. All we gotta do is wait around for the Glaston’s to pick up the money and fireworks, and then we’re out of here.”

“That should be a fun encounter.”

“Quit your worrying,” Slackjaw said. “Maybe we proved to R.J. he shouldn’t fuck with us.”

“Your fake gun doesn’t give me that warm feeling of security.”

He pulled a large cone shaped item out of his duffel bag. “Here. Take this.”

“What is this?”

“Sparkler bomb.”

“A what?”

“A bomb made of sparklers. Weren’t you listening when Stacy told us that story about the kid blowing off his own hand?”

“Apparently not.”

“You take a couple hundred sparklers, use electrical tape, wrap ‘em in foil, use about five more rolls of tape, and boom. Sparkler bomb.”

“What’s it do?”

“It blows the fuck up.”

“Sounds simple enough,” I said.

Jimmy’s truck rumbled to stop in front of the tent, blocking our view of the highway. He hopped out, looking like he always did; white trash runway model.

“Jimmy, where the fuck you been, man?” Slackjaw asked.

That white trash fuck pulled out a black handgun and waved us over like a magician with a magic wand.

“Hand over the piece, Slackjaw.”

“Well shit, Jimmy, thanks for ruining our goddamn night,” he said, and handed over the forgery.

“You got to be kidding me,” Jimmy said, “fake gun?” and pocketed it. “Empty the register and that fucking book bag where you store the rest of it.”

“What happened to your accent?” I asked.

“You see this,” he said, holding the gun inches from my face. “It means you shut up and do as I say or spend the rest of your life as a cripple.”

We didn’t say a word. Jimmy tossed 11 rolls of 500 each into a small, brown paper sack. Dropped the money onto the bench seat of his truck and climbed in. The truck rumbled to life. Took off with a start, decimated the one pay phone in the parking lot, and then headed east down Hwy. 18.

“We’re fucked,” Slackjaw said.

“Wasn’t our money,” I said. “What’s the big deal?”

“R.J.’s never going to believe we didn’t take that money.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah. Didn’t think about that did ya?”

“We gotta call the cops,” I said.

“How?” he asked. “Pay phone’s out, everything’s closed.”

“One of us needs to leave and call the police.”

“You’re not leaving me here.”

“It is my car.”

“You’re not leaving me down here, too.”

“What?”

“You left me in Buffalo and now you’re gonna leave me here. I can see it in your eyes. You’re scared to death of seeing R.J. again.”

“I’ll call the cops and pick you up tomorrow, swear to god man.”

“How’s it gonna look we get robbed for our whole fourth of July take and you’re nowhere to be found?”

I yelled, “Fuck,” at the empty parking lot. Sat down on the crumbly asphalt and lit a cigarette. I imagined how this would all play out. The cops would ask questions, take our statements, and then leave us with R.J. and his tubby enforcers. They’d tie us to chairs in the pawn shop’s basement, spout cliches like I’m gonna teach you some respect and no one steals from the Glasons, hammering us without mercy while asking us where the money was. After I’d been pummeled, blood and spit dripping down my face and onto my lap, R.J. would whisper in my ear, “Now you’re going to know how your mother felt when I raped her.”

“Let’s blow it up,” I said, standing up.

“What?”

“We use the sparkler bomb to blow the tent up. We’ll say Jimmy robbed us at gunpoint for the money, and then made us destroy the tent with a sparkler bomb he’d brought with him.”

“Hell no,” Slackjaw said. “It’s going to be bad enough having the money gone with everything else that’s happened. I’m not destroying all the inventory too.”

“They’d have to believe us,” I said. “Who’s crazy enough to think we stole all the money and then destroyed the tent and everything in it?”

“Maybe the guy we just pulled a gun on yesterday.”

“If he’s not going believe us either way, then what’ve we got to lose?”

“Pull the car back,” he said. “We don’t want to be anywhere near this motherfucker if all these boxed up fireworks start going off.”

“Wait,” I said. “Let’s grab our clothes and shit first.”

“No way,” Slackjaw said. “If Jimmy made us do this, he wouldn’t let us grab our stuff first.”

I parked the car by the demolished pay phone while Slackjaw nestled the black cone of sparklers between two boxes in the tent, the pointed end wedged in tight, the open cone end - with several sparklers sticking out of the top so he’d have enough time to run away after lighting it - pointed at the tent’s canvas roof. He ran toward me, balls of yellow phosphorescence behind him, working like a fuse toward the 500 tightly compacted sparklers. We sat on the hood of the car, shielding our eyes from the massive flame fountain swallowing the canvas roof, cardboard boxes, and long conference tables. Loud, muffled explosions started from the boxed up inventory. We inhaled destruction and practiced our creation story.

No One Reads Kerouac Anymore

The McDonald's connected to Signal Convenience Store owns a spotlight that beams into the Buffalo, Mo., night sky. This baffles me. Why does a fast food restaurant in a town of 2500 people need a spotlight? We don't live in a post-apocalyptic world. No roving bands of starving survivors seek rescue from death by cannibal. Perhaps rural folk become entranced with the big 'ole light in the sky. Ad execs probably picture the Clampetts strolling inside a McDonald's, Jed taking off his cap, placing it over his heart and saying, "we saw a strange ray of light up there in that big black empty thingy, and by god if it didn't point us right where we needed to be. Bless these golden arches." Or maybe somebody got a great deal on a spotlight and couldn't pass it up.

"Jesus Christ, you're finally here," Rachel says as I walk into the annoyingly bright convenience store. I recently added her to my roster of imaginary sexual conquests. Half-Filipino and half-Mexican, trim figure, thick black hair, and dark skin.

"JC is pissed, Rachel. Why the hell am I working tonight?"

"I had to fire Patti today."

"For what?"

"Bouncing personal checks at work. She'd have Mike come in and-"

"Yeah, I don't care how she did it," I say. "I mean, I knew she was retarded, but damn, how long do you really expect to get away with cashing bad checks at work?"

"Took us almost two months to figure it out," Rachel says.

"I already knew this place was retarded," I say.

"Most people fake being nice to their boss," she says.

I look around, no one's paying attention. People stand in line at McDonald's, but that's across the building, past the chain link barrier separating the two businesses from eleven p.m. to five in the morning.

"Those people don't sell weed to their boss," I say.

"Shit," she says. "You're gonna go to that well one too many times and end up getting your ass fired."

"Whatever will I do without all this?"

"Spare me," she says. "One of these days poverty will erase that too good for this job attitude you got."

"I am too good for this job."

"No, no," Rachel says, "tell me how you really feel," and grabs her purse from underneath the counter and walks out.

Alone. Standing at register one. The chewing tobacco to my right, the cigarette racks behind me. Pint and half-pint bottles below the smokes. To my left, trucker speed and different variations of fake Viagra that promise erections but only succeed in making you giggle at funny names like Jackhammer and Bonez.

I pull my portable CD player out of my book bag and place it on a shelf underneath the pill display. Mini-speakers the only thing between me and the constant hum of fluorescent tube lighting. Work forbids music, but without my cd's to carry me through the abyss that is one to five a.m., I might be tempted to get my conceal and carry permit, shout inventive threats toward surly customers.

The door chimes. A girl I went to high school with walks in. I sigh.

“Milford is that you?” she asks, handing me \$20.00 for \$18.38 in gas. “It’s for pump one.”

“Hey, Kelly, how you doing?” I ask, opening the register.

“Doing good, doing good. When’d you start working here?”

“Couple of weeks ago,” I say, pulling out her change, “doing the year off thing, saving some money, living back home, applying for law school.”

“What’s it been, five years now? Can you believe it? Seems like just yesterday we were sitting in Beckner’s class,” she pauses, reaches into her purse. “I’ve got a couple kiddos now and-”

“I don’t need to see any-” I try to say, closing the register, clutching her change.

“That’s Cody, he’s three. And this little angel is Madison, she’s one.”

“Cute,” I say, politely glancing at her ugly children.

“Thank you,” she says. “They’re pretty great. Me and Ronnie’s still together. He works over at Wil-Drill.”

“Great,” I say.

“Well,” she says, laying a hand on the countertop separating us, “I gotta run, but it was nice catching up with you. We should get together some time.”

“Yeah,” I say with a grimace, “let’s do that.”

“Umm, I think you forgot my change,” she says.

I drop the crumbled dollar bill and the loose change on the counter then turn around and pretend to stock chewing tobacco until I hear the door chime.

Alone again. I brew coffee and refill the cappuccino machines with flavored powder before midnight. Fill the bins of free condiments people take out of need or because they can.

Fake sugar always runs low. I head back behind the counter, stock cigarettes until a steady stream of tired workers from the chicken plant huddle inside. It's the biggest employer of poor people in town, which also makes it the shittiest job around and the easiest one to get. Each tired face is like looking into a mirror and seeing what would've happened if I'd never left . . . so I try to be nice.

Three ex-classmates straggle in for Dr. Pepper and Snickers after the initial rush ends. Pero, Wallum, and Slag, all decked out in black, knee-high rubber boots, hair nets, and vinyl company jackets. They're as fat as they were five years ago, which is an accomplishment I suppose, or maybe they just fat-plateaued.

"What ya hear Milf?" Pero asks.

"Rumors about the chicken plant closing down," I say.

"Those rumors are spread by skittish white men," Wallum replies.

"At least we'll get rid of all the wetbacks when the plant closes down" Slag says. "These two white devils on the other hand . . ."

"I hear all this bullshit about the Mexican takeover of Buffalo," I say, "except when Rachel's working. I guess a pretty face and nice tits trump race."

"No one would dare insult that molasses goddess" Pero says.

"Just cause they don't say it to her face," Slag says, "don't mean they aren't saying it behind her back."

"I don't get it," I say. "White-trash tweakers scare me way more than a bunch of mexicans, who, coincidentally, all have jobs."

"But we know those tweakers," Slag says. "What do we know about these mexicans except their refusal to buy auto insurance?"

“I know they come in here on Friday nights, buy beer, cigarettes, and food, same as you fools do.”

“This coming from the man who couldn’t last two hours cutting chicken shoulders without throwing up,” Slag says.

“Yeah, I’m a shitty worker, and you’re a racist,” I say, “both of us do the Ozarks proud.”

“White power,” Pero says, putting his hands in the air for a double high-five.

After the chicken plant rush, I insert my combo *Doolittle/Surfer Rosa* CD, whip out the dust mop. I half-ass sweep floors, weave between aisles made up of overpriced grocery store staples like bread, mayo, aluminum foil, light bulbs, and salt; the latter three items very popular with users of methamphetamines. The other aisles contain more junk food than a store should be allowed to carry.

What necessity do I sell besides gas? Water? You can get that for free in the bathroom, just take your own cup in there. Can’t come up with it either, can you?

Work typifies the leviathan we call the American economy; useless shit made by underpaid foreign workers, sold by companies employing thousands of people who sell it to as many middle-men and women as possible to squeeze every penny of obtainable profit, sometimes four or five layers of sticky middle before it reaches the lowly store clerk, where I peddle it to someone who has to have that Larry the Cable Guy mirror clock. Or, to explain the whole process in one word; magic.

The problem with duties like sweeping, mopping, picking up the parking lot, stocking the cooler, and cleaning the bathroom is that my brain does no actual work. When the customers stop I’m left with dredged up memories. Futile attempts to pinpoint where I fucked up and ended up back in Buffalo. Imaginary conversations with the girl who wanted, then rejected me,

conversations where words change outcomes, where promises of future action secure momentary baskets of happiness. What happens tomorrow when I wake up and feel mediocre, everything dull and sober liked rounded edges inside where I'm supposed to feel . . . I remember something, something sharp and wicked like serrated hope.

The girl. Friends first. Long walks. Platonic coffee. Animated talks about various boys and girls we'd fucked. Two years later I said, "I'm in love with you." She said, "Took you long enough, puss," and we kissed. Plans were made. Apartment hunting, rugs, coffee tables, pots and pans, drunk internet searches for the perfect abandoned dog or cat. Saving up for a security deposit and first months rent. Five weeks before the big move-in she said, "You're distant and boring. Why can't you open up?" I whispered, "this is as good as I get." She said, "I liked us better as friends, when your lack of depth wasn't so glaring." I strung together well placed obscenities, yelled in outrage. "You sound like a wounded little boy," she said.

Three in the morning and I'm done with my chores for the night, ready to get high in my car when a red El Camino pulls up and the youngest homeless couple I've ever seen hops out of the truck bed.

The girl stands tall, built like a skinny, large bird. Sharp beak and blond hair, scissor-shorn short. Face smudged with grime, solid green army jacket patched with Vietnam insignia. Maybe she stole it off a passed out vet or bought it at a thrift store somewhere. She looks late 20s, but who knows. Doesn't homelessness add 10 years?

The man wears a black skullcap despite the 60 degree weather. Patchy beard, bald spots underneath his chin and on his left cheek. Softer features than his traveling companion. Round face, tiny pug nose. Probably cleans up alright with a shower; something he hasn't had in a

while. Wears an army jacket like bird girl, no patches. His white shirt looks gray, proclaims Happy Earth Day 1992. They both carry army-issued duffel bags.

Man and woman light cigarettes, heads turned, looking out toward the highway. How do the homeless size up a town, determine whether it's safe to stick around for a few days or skeepaddle before they get "handled" like the former tenants of Times Square?

I step out from behind the counter and walk outside, stand to the left of the door, homeless couple to the right, and light my own cigarette.

"Okay if we hang out here for a little bit?" the woman asks, tossing her cigarette butt on the ground, watching it roll back toward a puddle and extinguish itself. I sigh and silently bitch about the wet broom I'll have later.

"You're not bothering me," I say. "The cops will probably swing by at some point, they usually do for free coffee, but you shouldn't have anything to worry about. Barney's alright."

"Appreciate it," the man says, "but we could really use some food. Haven't had a bite in a few days now, just trying to make it up."

"You are in luck my good man. I've got one of those big cans of chunky soup. It's baked potato, which is my favorite, but you can have it."

"You sure?" the woman asks.

"Yeah. It's cool. Just a can of soup,"

The man and woman exchange glances as we walk inside, a sort of worked out street language where talk ceases and body language conveys coded messages.

"Are you sure about this guy?" she asks with a scratch of her nose.

"He seems alright, looks kinda weak," he relays back with the power of an arched eyebrow. "I could take him if he tried anything,"

“Make sure you see him open the can of soup and pour it in the bowl,” she replies with a sniff of her nose, a wipe of her chin.

The man props their duffel bags against the side of the Krispy Kreme case. If I knew the couple better, or if surveillance cameras were blind to dirty hobos, I’d beg them to lick each and every Krispy Kreme so I could laugh maniacally as people I went to school with, worked for, slept with, or otherwise despised, ate transient-tainted pastries.

I step behind the counter, grab the can of soup, a plastic bowl, and the spoon I brought from home. “Here,” I say, handing the items over, “I’ll let you guys do the rest. Put it on for about two-and-a-half minutes in the microwave.”

“This is a good move for you,” the girl says, wagging a finger at me.

“What?” I ask.

“Karma,” she says.

“I bet you say that to all the strangers who give you food.”

“Kinda,” she says, laughing.

“Is that one of the tricks you pick up begging for food, the karma con?” I ask. “Could you teach me how to get sympathy from strangers?”

“Yeah, it’s called being dirt poor and hungry,” the man says, pulling back the soup can’s lid, pouring the contents into the plastic bowl and setting it in the microwave. The woman touches his arm and smiles. “He’s just kidding,” she says. “Was that your way of trying to find out if we’re homeless?”

“I already assumed you were homeless,” I say.

“Everyone wants to know,” she says, “it’s okay if you’re curious. Seems we should come right out and say it.”

The bell dings. Man pulls out soup. I suggest they grab a styrofoam cup and a plastic spoon so they don't have to share the only bowl. She thanks me, takes their food and sits on a duffel bag. The man sits down next to her. They eat slowly, use napkins, and chew with their mouths closed. The soup is not slurped. He rinses out the bowl and spoon in the bathroom. Hands the items to me over the counter and I put them in my backpack next to a CD holder and a notebook full of song lyrics I'll never use.

"You mind if we stick around here until morning, try to catch a ride?" the man asks.

"It's cool with me," I say. "This place picks up around five or so. Surely someone will give you guys a ride."

"We don't want to get you in trouble," she says.

"Don't worry about it," I say, "I hate this job anyways."

Does it bother the jobless when people complain about work? Maybe the nomadic unemployed enjoy the lack of responsibility, the spontaneity that comes from an absence of forced purpose. Maybe they feel sorry for me, see my snarky unhappiness and think their lives could be worse. I tell myself I'm better off snuggled inside the strictures of job, free rent, and debt repayment. The days of voluntary homelessness are over. Living outside the structure leads to nothing but stabbings and anal rape.

Man and woman smile. I think I'm making them nervous. The woman says, "We're going to smoke, be right back." They heft duffel bags onto shoulders, head out. Not even the homeless trust me with their shit.

The newspaper guys usually show up by now. Terry and Barry Garvin. Brothers. Paper delivery men. Lottery enthusiasts. Serious lottery enthusiasts. The kind who keep the Missouri educational system afloat.

“How we doing this morning?” Terry asks, not wanting an answer. Darkly tinged with dirt and car grease, several missing teeth, and a buzz-cut hair do. Stares intently at the clear plastic case housing the lottery tickets, especially the ten-dollar ones. Ten-dollar scratchers are your big dogs, the ones with the largest payoff. Each one is named differently, but they all come with \$100,000 stamped across the top in faux-gold lettering.

“Doing fine, Terry, doing just fine. Where’s Barry?” I ask with a twang.

“That son-of-a-bitch called me this morning saying he was sicker than shit. Sounded like a bunch of malarkey if you ask me. Come next Sunday I’m gonna leave his ass high and dry, see how he likes it.”

I nod in agreement. At this hour my patience knows no bounds.

“Now, let’s see here,” Terry says, putting on his glasses. “Let me get one of them Rags to Riches, a Diamond Dog, and a Big Bucks Count ‘Em Up.” He points to each ticket in case I don’t know how to read yet.

I tear out the scratchers and Terry hands me a debit card. Removes his keys from the right pocket of faded black jeans. Leans on the counter, left arm propping himself up, bulbous stomach smashed against my work station. Mumbling to himself, he scrapes with his right hand, moving the key left to right, hoping for a life changing moment. Filthy hands and tanned skin contrasted against the white and beige countertop. Normally it irritates me when customers scratch at the register, but Terry’s the only one here and it doesn’t matter. This is what maturity must feel like.

Terry sports a familiar face: disappointment followed by the rationalization of one more ticket. When that one craps out he’ll shake his head twice and say, “Well, damn. Better get out of here before I spend all my money.” But not tonight.

Terry scratches off another Diamond Dog and says, “Looky here, one hundred dollars. I had a feeling about this one.”

“I bet you did,” I say.

First rule of the lottery, never trust the customer. Scan the bar code on the back of the ticket and a computer will tell you the scientific truth. Nothing’s worse than scanning lottery tickets for people who think they’ve won but really haven’t. A winner never wants to hear they’re a loser and the ignorant always blame the messenger.

Triumphant beeps of victory. Terry’s a winner. Open the register. Hand over a Ben Franklin. Terry buys another Big Bucks. Nothing. A second Diamond Dog. No sir. A third Big Bucks. Nada. A second, then third Rags to Riches. Nope. Two more Diamond Dogs. Winner: One free ticket.

“Well, damn,” Terry says. “Guess I better get out of here before you get the rest of my money. Broke even though.” He slaps a palm on the countertop and raises his hand goodbye.

I hesitate to glance at the clock. 3:57 a.m. 27 minutes since the homeless couple went for a smoke. Where are they? Casing houses or something? Shit. The girl seemed alright, but that guy, something about him. Maybe they go town-to-town breaking into empty houses, squatting and plotting. I grab the Buffalo phone book and find the number for the police department. Should I dial 911? No. I’m being ridiculous. Maybe they went off to fuck. Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Minutes pass before I quit thinking about it and decide to do some work.

Masturbation sucks when you’re listening for the chime of the front door, but I’m stressed and the homeless couple interrupted my normal 3:15 jerk-off in the single bathroom stall in the men’s room.

I'm picturing the first girl who ever gave me a blow job, except this time she's sticking a finger in my ass while blowing me. I pretend I don't like it, but she could always tell when I was lying. My breath shortens, face reddens, and then I hear the front door.

"Milford, where the hell you at?" Barney asks. "Yanking that tiny crank again?"

I wait a second for the erection to subside, zip my pants back up and wash my hands before leaving the bathroom.

"I was just getting ready to call you," I say to the mustached deputy.

"Wouldn't of found me because I just caught me two bums back behind the Woods Motel," he says, face lit up with joy, "toking up like a couple of dirty burnouts. You should've seen 'em. I come around the corner, gun out-"

"You're gonna end up shooting another teenager armed with a fly swatter if you keep pulling that gun on everybody," I say.

"Not tonight Milf. I'm trying to tell a story," he says. "So I got the gun pointed right at this tall ugly girl's face and she's got the joint in her mouth. She starts shaking, saying, 'oh shit, oh shit. Hey don't shoot man, we're cool, we're cool.' I ain't laughed so hard in weeks. This job's alright sometimes."

"Cop scares stoner. Wow. Shocker."

"What's up your craw?" he asks. "Out of pot?"

I'm unsure how to respond. I never pegged Barney for an actual cop. More like a low-paid moron with an inflated sense of self worth. So I ignore it.

"That couple you just busted came in here tonight to wait for a ride up north. You already take them in?" I ask.

"Nope, got 'em in the car right now."

“You came here first?”

“I’m the only one working and dispatcher Tiffany don’t appreciate a good drug story like you Tommy Chong.”

“Wow, you seriously stopped here to brag about busting a homeless couple smoking pot?”

“What?” he asks, brows furrowed, shoulders sloped.

“Don’t take them in,” I say.

“What do you mean don’t take them in? I already arrested ‘em. Taking ‘em in’s what happens next.”

“Leave them with me.”

“Fuck you,” he says. “‘Leave ‘em with me.’ What the hell’s a matter with you? You know I can’t release a prisoner into your custody.”

“Those aren’t prisoners Barney. You haven’t even taken them to jail yet.”

“They’re going in,” he says. “What the fuck you care anyways?”

“Barney,” I say, laying my palms flat against the countertop, leaning closer to the pudgy officer, “you know how you like to take naps around two a.m. out on K-159, the little gravel road about three miles down K?”

“You’re word against mine,” he says, smugly.

“And some pictures I took last week of you fully reclined and straight passed the fuck out.”

“Bullshit,” he says.

I pull out my phone, show him a picture. “I have plenty of copies, don’t worry. Funny captions and everything.”

“You’re gonna use this for a homeless couple?” he asks. “Really?”

“Just leave them here and I won’t say-”

“I get how blackmail works.”

“And here I was agreeing with everyone about what a dick you are,” I say.

“Funny,” he says, “everyone says the same thing about you.”

“Ignorant hill folk with an uncanny ability to produce high grade meth and defraud the disability system don’t count.”

“Alright,” he says, laughing, “they’re all yours. But I’d keep an eye peeled next time you’re toking up in that piece of shit car of yours.”

“How you gonna explain the video footage of you arresting the homeless couple?” I ask, laughing loudly.

“Fuck you,” he says and walks outside to retrieve the newly freed.

Barney opens the back passenger door, tells the couple to get out of the car. I assume he’s having to convince them this isn’t a trick. They emerge, sling bags over shoulders. Barney points them inside and peels out before taking off.

The door chimes.

“Did you do this?” the man asks, setting their bags against the Krispy Kreme case.

“Not bad, eh.”

“Seriously. You got us off?” the woman asks.

“No thanks necessary. Maybe karma will reward me, right?” I ask, laughing by myself.

“You guys just hang out here, someone will give you a ride.”

“That’s okay,” the man says, “we got things under control. But thank-”

“I insist,” I say. “Sit down on your bags, chill out, and I’ll have you guys on your way in no time.”

The couple exchange looks.

“Go ahead,” I say, “sit down. You got nothing to worry about. I’m sure there’s someone around here with some liberal guilt eating away at their insides.”

They sit on the floor, propped against duffel bags, and avoid looking at the customers who start pouring in around five a.m. for jolts of sugar and caffeine. I become one with the void. Work face empty of emotion. My voice robotic precision. My mind nimbly reads the register, tells my hands the correct change to give back. Time becomes measured in increments of \$17.51, \$9.19, \$3.02, \$0.57, \$42.86. Here are the goods I wish to purchase, my machine will calculate cost of goods, here is money for goods I wish to purchase, here is money minus cost of goods purchased. I exchange these words with every customer, but not one audible syllable passes between us.

I stare at the homeless couple sleeping despite the noise of early morning coffee and McDonald’s. The customers sleep too. Dreary eyed wanderers from home to work, work to home. No one bumps into the homeless, no one even acknowledges the two people passed out next to the donuts. Robots? Task. Perform. Verbal nicety. Head nod. Back to the car, the job, the home, the mess. Is the repetitive dance, the muscle-memory key chain, worth it, is the sacrifice for security or family worth it?

I blink and it’s seven a.m. 15 minutes until shift over. No one’s volunteered to give the homeless a ride. I remind myself to take midwestern politeness off my list of astute stereotypes. “Hey. Wake up,” I yell from behind the counter. They stir momentarily, taking seconds to

stretch and yawn in my direction. “Go wait out by the white car. My boss’ll be in soon, and she doesn’t need to meet you.”

The couple wearily grasp duffel bags to their chests and head outside.

I wait for Assistant Manager Darlene to show up so I can count my drawer and go deal with the rest of my night. She saunters in smiling like always, annoyingly happy. I relinquish my register while she blathers on about Patti getting fired, how Patti never should’ve listened to that no-good boyfriend Mike. Do you think he’s a drug user? she asks. I can’t help but think he’d have to be to put with Patti, I say. Milford, you’re so silly sometimes, she replies. I finish my count, print out the paperwork, take off my name badge and work shirt. Goodnight Darlene.

I step lightly to the car. Man and woman hoist bags again, look ready to leave.

“Sorry no one offered a ride,” I say.

“No worries. We owe you enough already for speaking to your cop friend,” the woman says.

“Where are we headed?” I ask.

“We can’t impose anymore-”

“Fuck that,” I say. “I’ll take you wherever you wanna go. Within reason.”

“Seriously?” she asks.

“Seriously,” I say.

“Why?” the man asks.

“You want a ride or my intentions?”

“Your intentions,” the woman says.

“We’ll take the ride,” the man says. “You pick.”

“Weird,” I say, “but okay. Kansas City it is.”

I unlock the car, step into my fast food dump of an interior. The homeless couple throw their canvas bags into the back seat. The woman sits shotgun, the man behind me. I pull the white whale onto North 65 Highway, toward Louisburg, Urbana, and Preston, where I'll hook up with 54 and take the back way to 13.

It takes three minutes to leave the city of Buffalo. No one says anything. I turn on sports talk and ponder the land. Hills. Free rent. Cows. Ignorance. Barbwire fences. I turn left onto 54, get bored with listening to predictions of who's going to win the World Series this year.

"Going to share that pot," I ask, "or just sit on it?"

The woman turns around and says, "Go ahead Brenden."

I watch Brenden in the rearview digging through clothes in the duffel bag. He pulls out a sack half-full of pre-rolled joints. Whips out a lighter. We're silent until I toss the roach out my window.

"What?" Brenden asks. "No questions?"

"As in who are you really, since you're obviously not homeless?"

"Hillary and I are kind of homeless," Brenden says. "We don't like, have homes, you know, like right now. But we're not exactly hurting for the necessities either."

"Your name's Hillary?" I ask.

"What's wrong with my name?" she asks.

"What are you, from Connecticut?" I ask.

"Close," Brenden says. "We're from Rhode Island. Instead of using our graduation money for some European excursion, we decided to see America the real way. Nothing but the road to guide us. You know, like Kerouac."

“You guys are fucking with me right?” I ask. “I’d say you’re about 50 years too late there, Dean Moriarty. Kerouac. That’s hilarious.” I light a cigarette, roll my window down slightly.

“Took us a little under three weeks to get here from Hartford,” Hillary says.

“Hotel rooms, food, and money for supplies must make it a little easier,” I say.

“He’s pissed,” Brenden says to Hillary.

“That’s why you never break character,” Hillary replies back.

“I’m not pissed,” I say, “more astonished by your commitment and stupidity. No one volunteers to be homeless. Those days are over.”

“Awww,” Hillary says, turning around, speaking to Brenden, “we totally ruined his good deed buzz.”

“Shit,” Brenden says, “we totally did.”

“Where are you guys headed?” I ask.

“Wherever the fuck we want,” Hillary says, using index and pinky fingers as tiny devil horns and sticking her tongue out at me.

“California sounds about right,” Brenden says. “Or wherever the universe takes us. Like today. We’re going to Kansas City.”

I toss the cigarette out the window, turn the sports talk up and calm my disappointment. I wanted to help, do the right thing, the sort of bullshit that would help me forget, for at least a day, how little I’ve changed since high school, but I can’t shake the gnawing feeling, the serrated disappointment of being six years older but exactly the same.

“Hey man,” Brenden asks, “you hungry? I’m fucking starved.”

“Munchies,” Hillary says.

“Let us buy you something,” he says, “and pay for your gas. When we get to Kansas City, we’ll party. It’s on us. Really.”

“Great,” I say. “I know plenty of people I went to college with up there, plenty of good connections.”

I stop at a gas station in Hermitage, Highway 54’s charming lake community. I tell Brenden to grab me some potato wedges and a large Mountain Dew. They exit, leave their bags behind. I wait a few seconds. Pop outside, open the back door, take the duffel bags and throw them on the sidewalk. Jump back inside the car, pull it into reverse and head toward the highway. I wait until the homeless couple comes outside so I can see their surprised faces in the rearview.

They step outside, notice their bags on the sidewalk. Look toward the highway. I’m close enough to see their smiles. They wave goodbye and I shake my head in disgust.

Where’s the anger?

Luxuries We Can Ill Afford

Ray calculated an arsenal of sharpened bolts. One bolt, one tow fee, he said to each transformed fastener. You're 35, hi 70, hey 105, yeah 140, and you, you're 175 he muttered under his coffee-fueled morning reek, until he reached \$3,535 in pointy metal spears.

Satisfied, Ray sat the coffee cup on the work bench and rifled through the morning's delivery of bad news. Wood & Nut mortgage company, All-State Bank of America Insurance, Royal Shell Buffalo City Electric, Dow Chemical Buffalo Water and Sewage, and Wal-Mart City Trash Service.

Fuck your weekly payment plans, Ray said to the envelopes, bunch of fucking jackals.

The pill timer mounted next to the telephone wailed. Ray opened a drawer below the work bench and dislodged his seven-day pill container. Where's this weeks Lithium? he asked the seven squares of empty plastic. This is not the time for a game of hide and seek. Did I already take you? Would I remember if I had?

Closed the lid, returned the pill container to its proper spot in the work bench. Blew into his fat, ungloved hands, but failed to shake the sting of unheated garage. Snatched the hole-riddled pair of brown work gloves from the back pocket of his navy blue jumpsuit and slipped them on.

Fuck it's cold, he complained to the oil-stained concrete floor, slapping his hands together for want of something to do. Ray rotated slowly in the desk chair, gaze cascading over the organized garage. Eight-tier rolling tool boxes alphabetized and labeled. Air-jacks lubed and inspected. The tow truck gleamed; a sure sign of inactivity and backward prosperity.

Ray spent hours each day petitioning the telephone for work. Is the world suddenly empty of drunks? Where are my impounds, my pig parkers and my retarded drug smugglers? Where are the collection agencies howling for warm bodies with a Class E drivers license, for fleets of winches and pulleys to reclaim the unpaid property they'd entrusted to liars, cheats, and unemployed assholes without any goddamn fiscal sense?

When lord, Ray asked huskily, his glare crushing the telephone with hatred, when did misfortune stop turning a profit?

The phone cried out in relief. I live, it blared, I sing with answered prayers and salvation. Ray grumbled bullshit, and answered the phone.

Buckner Towing, what's your location?

Mr. Buckner, a familiar voice said, your delinquent son snuck into school again. Kindly do us the courtesy and collect him.

Did you call my wife? Ray asked. I'm working.

Mrs. Buckner hasn't answered the phone in three weeks. I might ask what you've done with her, Mr. Buckner.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, Ray said, I'll be there in a minute.

Make it quick, we don't have the staff for delinquents.

Ray hung up the phone, stared at it for a minute and finally said, you disappoint me telly, you disappoint me greatly.

The bolts jittered, jangled, sang songs of dings, pings, and creaks each time Ray drove over a pothole. How am I not getting any work out of these craters? he asked the decaying

streets. The bolts answered and Ray gushed like change from a slot machine. Laid his right hand on the bolts to quiet them down, to soothe their anxiousness.

The tires will wait, he said.

The bolts jangled back, We wait for no man. Release us. Reap the benefits of our fury.

Definitely didn't take the lithium, Ray concluded, waiting for the gateguard at Missouri Lottery Buffalo Elementary to wave him through.

Got in again? Tom asked, his mustache wet with coffee.

Ray nodded instead of opening his mouth and Tom nodded back in empathy. The fence opened and Ray parked the truck.

A security guard stood in front of the visitors entrance, hands on Jetson's shoulders. The eight-year-old cast his eyes on the cement steps. They flashed with quartz in the morning sun.

Come on Jet, Ray said, motioning with his hands, let's go.

Mr. Buckner, a voice squawked through a speaker attached to the security guard's chest, this can not continue to happen.

Won't happen again, Ray said.

That's what you Buckner's keep saying, the voice said, yet I'm wasting the school's resources on non-productive business. Are you aware people are trying to get an education Mr. Buckner? We do not appreciate the continued interruptions.

Jet moved toward his father, but the guard's grip tightened, and the boy stiffened in place.

He's a bright kid, Ray said. What do you want me to say?

This has nothing to do with Jetson's intelligence, the voice answered, and everything to do with your inability to sufficiently provide for your child. When you can afford the tuition, if

ever, we will gladly welcome Jetson back, but until that moment you would do us all a great service by keeping him under wraps.

Is there a special school where they train you people in the art of condescension, Ray asked, or is that how money talks nowadays?

The guard released Jetson and the boy rushed to his father's side, waving a middle finger at the guard. See you next time Mrs. Reagan, Jetson said.

A thousand pardons mam, my son and I must return to our hovel and clean lice off each other. Ever sense the water got shut off we've had to shower with soda pop.

Always-Save Lemon-Lime, Jetson chimed in. Cheaper than bottled water, right Dad?

That's right son, but the lice and bed bugs can't seem to get enough. Ray inspected his son's scalp, pretending to eat the faux lice he found. Looked up, pretend lice pinched between thumb and index finger, and realized no one was watching.

The bolts sat between Ray and Jetson, the metal musings stifled by the boy's tattered *She Hulk* back pack.

Suppose I should be yelling at you, Ray said, swerving between potholes on N. 65 McDonald's Highway.

I know, Jetson said.

We're gonna have to use the straps now.

Dad.

No arguments Jet. We either strap you down at night or take you into the woods and drop you off with all the other delinquent children in Winchester Gap.

Nuh uh, Jet said, pinching his father's right forearm and shielding himself from the quick response, you wouldn't do me like that.

Ray wormed his hand between the boys skinny arms and clawed at his belly. Gonna have to throw you out there with the wild boys, he hollered, tickling his son. I hear they raid campsites near the Niangua, slicing up tourists and surviving on human flesh. Is that what you want Jet, you got a hankering to be a wildling?

I'll sharpen my teeth, Jet shrieked with laughter, and everyone will fear me!

Fear only gets you so far, Ray said, before you have to prove you're worth fearing. Are you worth fearing, boy?

Jet snarled his face in a fearsome roar.

Now that's the face of a wildling king, Ray said, pulling back his hand and swinging the tow truck into the driveway.

The ranch style home drooped with the weight of seven-layer shingles, cried tears of brown flaky paint, and the right side sunk into the ground like a stocky man with one leg longer than the other.

Inside, a clutter-free living room, sparse, a couch with bad springs and lumpy cushions, a love seat with cat-shredded arms, and an entertainment center empty of entertainment. Ray flipped the lights on and yelled out Melinda's name. Jet hugged the *She Hulk* back pack to his chest and sat down at the kitchen table, north of the living room.

Wake up everybody, Ray yelled, walking down the east hallway, it's eleven o'clock in the goddamn morning, let's go. He turned right into his bedroom.

Blankets hung over the windows, blacking out any sign of daytime or life within. The door-sized shadow of sunlight swooped across his wife, who stared back at Ray with a look of glazed annoyance.

Why didn't you pick up when the school called? Ray asked.

I knew they'd call you, she said. Not like you're working.

I could've been.

Then shut the door and go back to work.

Why isn't Aurelia up yet?

What should I wake her up for? Melinda asked. To stare at the T.V. hole? To play outside? I don't trust these god damn neighbors.

School lessons, maybe, Ray said. We paid for that home schooling kit, be nice if you used it every now and then.

Pretty useless without a computer. Not that your kids listen to a damn thing I say.

Ray shut the door, waited ten seconds for his eyes to adjust. My wife, he thought, the blanket lump.

Have you seen my pills?

Sold 'em, she said without hesitation.

I actually need those, Ray said, rubbing his forehead in frustration. Where's the money?

Spent.

On what?

Oxycotin.

And why do you need . . .

For moments just like these Ray, she said, turning away from her husband.

Fine, he said, sleep for the rest of your fucking life, see if we care.

What the fuck do you think I'm trying to do?

Ray stomped back to the kitchen. Jet chewed on a piece of stale bread, lightly spread with yellowing margarine and a sprinkling of sugar from the packet he'd taken out of the school's cafeteria.

Is there anything to drink, Ray asked, knowing the answer by looking at the sink full of dishes.

Water, Jet said, eyeing his father's movements around the kitchen,

Ray opened the cabinet and cursed. My kingdom for a fucking clean cup.

Here dad, Jet said, smiling, you can have mine.

I think you mean I can have mine back, Ray said, sitting down at the table, grabbing the glass of water and draining it in one gulp.

Be outside at 1 a.m., Ray said, standing up to leave.

Where you going?

Back to work. What time do you need to be outside?

1 a.m.

Good boy, Ray said, slapping his gloved hands together. Bring your sister too.

The bolts laid out their argument: There's nothing left for you here, Ray, the voices echoed, 101 as one. You have us, the tow truck and a whole country to the north, west, east, and south. Think of the parking garages. All those cars waiting for a tow truck driver to change their

tires or patch them up. All those rich city folk having you drive them home with expensive luxury cars strapped to the bed of your tow truck. 30, 40, 50 mile round trips to the suburbs and back, Ray. Their's money in the cities. And when we get tired of one place, we'll move on to the next one, and the one after that, and the one after that, and the one after that, and the one after that, and the one after that, and 101 as one . . .

Enough, Ray said, threading his way around pot holes and the occasional deer carcass. We're. I'm not going anywhere.

They'll never pay, the bolts chimed, they don't have the money.

They'll pay or they won't drive, Ray said, shutting off his lights and pulling in his driveway.

Or they'll fix their own tires. People are broke, not helpless and stupid. Except for you Ray, you're all three, the voices echoed, 101 as one.

Ray stared down at the cardboard box full of bolts and picked it up, shaking the box, rattle rattle clink. This will work, he whispered.

We warned you, the echoes chanted. The prophecy fulfilled, the uprising begun.

You have no history, Ray said, you silly delusional thoughts.

Jetson and Aurelia emerged from the front door in pajamas. Aurelia clutched a Pocahontas blanket Melinda stitched together three years ago when times were better, before Missouri families picked between food stamps or free education.

Ray stepped out of the tow truck and opened the passenger door. Jetson climbed in, sat the cardboard ammunition dump on his lap and strapped himself into the middle seat. Aurelia raised her arms for Ray to pick her up. My poor girl, he thought, brown hair a tangled mess, face covered in chocolate and dirt.

You ready to go for a ride with daddy? he asked.

The girl nodded her head slowly, blank look of apathy on her face, a look that said mommy's been drugging me. Ray lifted his daughter into the passenger seat and secured the belt.

The girl snored, loudly, Pocahontas blanket tucked under her head as she leaned against the passenger window while Ray drove the tow truck toward Buffalo.

Dad, Jetson said.

Shh, Ray said, don't wake your sister.

Are we coming back? Jetson asked.

Yes, Ray said, tussling his son's black hair, quit worrying so much. We're going to get you guys back in school.

I don't need your help to break into the school.

Ray laughed and shook his head. What if you didn't have to break in?

When did we win the lottery? Jetson asked.

That box is the only lottery we need.

Jetson plunged a hand into the box, letting the two-and-a-quarter inch sharpened bolts slip through his fingers. I don't get it, he said.

Let me show you.

Ray pulled down Spruce street and parked the tow truck in an abandoned house gutted for scrap then used as a fire exercise for the All-Volunteer Buffalo Fire Department. Ray pocketed a handful of bolts, and locked the tow truck to protect sleeping Aurelia.

Father and son crept down the street, sticking to the shadows, avoiding the two streetlights not shot out by scrappers. Sunk low to the ground, the pair walked like chimpanzees

across the asphalt, hands pitted with welts from gravel and loose rocks. Ray pressed himself against the back of a minivan and yanked a bolt from his pocket.

Jet whispered, "What now?"

Ray plunged the bolt into the sidewall of the rear driver side tire and exhaled loudly at the satisfying hiss of dollar bills slapped against his palm. They made for the next driveway, thrust, stab, repeat. After the fifth deflation Jetson ran back to the tow truck.

You don't like working with your old man? Ray asked.

This is stupid, Jetson said, staring at his father's face. We should stop before you get hurt.

No one'll know.

You're the last tow truck in town, Jet said. Who will they look at when half the town has flat tires?

Delinquents or the unemployed, Ray said. And it's not like we've got cops to worry about anymore.

You're a stupid old man, Ray.

Jetson.

Stop it, Jetson screamed, pointing a finger in his father's face, just stop it and come home with us.

Ray covered the boys mouth and said, okay Jetson, I'll take you home.

And you'll stop using the bolts?

No, Ray said, I'm not done by a long shot.

You'd leave us with Melinda? Jetson asked.

The tow truck rattled home with bolts and little girl snores.

The bolts chose their own destinations. 22 of them sang out for the grocery store parking lot. 14 yelled gas station, gas station, lay us by the pumps. 12 howled, let us sink into alcoholic rubber, and Ray scattered them across the faded yellow lines of liquor store blacktop. Fast food, fast food, 29 echoes shrieked, and Ray spiked the drive-thru lane.

Shouldn't we be punishing the customers, he asked, and not the workers?

We go follow the money, the 29 said, now shut up and drive the truck. What is started can not be stopped.

Ray couldn't follow the logic. The remaining 19 bolts picked out driveways, side streets, dead ends, circle drives, and trailer parks at random. They dropped like seeds over Buffalo, money seeds with money needs. Ray planted the last bolt at the baptist church off Hickory street. Stood the bolt on its head, picturing its bloom through the front driver's side tire of the minister's 2015 Cadillac.

I'm saving my family, Ray said to the empty box. I did it.

He drove to the highest point he knew, a hill in the heart of Amish country three-and-a-half miles west of Buffalo. Parked the tow truck and sat on the hood listening to the harmonious trill of his seed's laughter reverberating through the Ozarks.

The bolt whimpered. My brothers and sisters, gone, leading the great uprising. Asphalt is cold, but each tire that rejects me expands my skin like frostbite swelling rotted flesh. I beg of you Great Father, make use of me, for I am a vessel of your vengeance . . .

. . . and when the tow truck's front passenger side tire enveloped the bolt in hardened rubber one of the 101 cried rust-colored tears of joy and said, hisssssssssssssssss, this is what happens when you tread on me.

Ray sang

My life is sunshine, lollipops and rainbows,

That's how this refrain goes, so come on, join in everybody!

after winching his third job of the day to the bed of his tow truck. Grinned like an idiot, belly bulging and swinging with each side-step and hip swivel, the heft of \$105 in his pocket. At the right frequency, with the right ears you could hear the hiss blend its song with Ray's ignorant bliss.

He headed south on 65 McDonald's highway to drop off job number three. *Sunshine, Rainbows, and Lollipops* blared through the tow truck's speakers, fingers drumming the beat against the steering wheel.

The bolt sang its own song of air and velocity, of being under

Pressure

pushing down on me

Pressing down on you no man ask for

Under pressure - that deflates a tire down

Splits a car in two

Puts people on streets

11 miles outside of Buffalo, just past the MO-38 Dollar General Hwy exit, Ray hit a pothole at 65 mph. The head of the bolt hammered deeper in, a gaping hole where tread used to be and a sudden loss of all tire pressure. Fishtailed, northbound lane, brakes slammed,

overcorrected steering, back across the southbound lane, the long three seconds of tip, sideways skid on the passenger side door in the southbound ditch. Job number three flung 90 yards back, resting on its roof.

Ray climbed out of the drivers side window, jumped down onto the loose black rocks and checked himself for cuts.

Blowout, he said to the exploded tire, fanfuckingtastic.

A road sign taunted him . . . Call 911 only in matters of life and death. Don't Waste Our Time. 911 deception punishable by up to two years in jail and a maximum \$5,000 fine.

Stood on the side of the road, hands clamped together behind his head. Waited for another car to happen by, for someone to rescue the rescuer, but no one commuted down 65 from Springfield to Buffalo anymore, and local traffic had avoided the crater road, as they called it, for months now.

Three hours later a tow truck out of Springfield passed Ray, waving politely, but never pausing, not for one second.

There goes the rest of my work, Ray said, no doubt about that. God damn scavenger.

The gasoline flowed easily out of the three gallon can. Rivulets streamed inside the cab and over the undercarriage. Tossed the gas can in the truck's cab. Ray lit his receipt book and flung it down the soaked hole of his truck cab. The flames rose, engulfed the vehicle, and Ray heard the familiar whine. SURRENDER, the bolt screamed in agony, SURRENDER NOTHING.

Your fight is over, Ray wailed to the fire, waiting for an echo.

Mr. Buckner, the insurance woman said, there will be no investigation, there will be no payment. You no longer have an active policy with All-State B.O.A.

I don't understand, Ray said, right hand gripping his dirty blonde hair, I've had a policy with you guys for thirteen years. Surely that trumps being one measly week late on a payment.

You signed the contract Mr. Buckner, the voice monotonously droned. You agreed to the weekly installment plan.

Like I had a choice in the matter.

Did you or did you not agree to the terms Mr. Buckner?

That's a rather cunt response, Ray said.

The customer service rep paused for a moment, flipped to the cunt response page, and then continued.

It was my understanding you people had a quiet dignity, she said.

I'm sorry, Ray said, I cunt hear you.

It was my understanding, the voice said louder, that you people had a quiet dignity.

Yeah, Ray asked, and what people would that be?

Surely Mr. Buckner, the voice stabbed, you know what you are.

Ray told the dial tone to go fuck itself, banged the phone into the cradle, and punched a hole in the shoddy kitchen drywall. The phone rang, he answered.

Hello? he asked.

This is a courtesy call, the mechanical voice intoned, from All-State Bank of America Insurance. How would you rate your experience?

Ray ripped the phone off the wall, threw it out the kitchen window. Slivers of glass covered the sink, the floor.

Kids, he yelled down the west hallway, put on some warm clothes. We're going out.

He'd methodically checked the minivan's tires, rolling the van backwards, inch by inch, marking each tract of tread with a white marker to ensure complete safety. Gathered the last of his tools in a canvas sack. Hatchet, screw driver, buck knife and flint, flashlight, and three boxes of matches. Pup tent, fishing pole, tackle box, first-aid kit, and 144 granola bars in the back of the van.

The kids asked questions, but Ray drove silently. South down US-65 McDonalds Hwy, east on MO-32 Save-A-Lot E, north on Fuddrucker's Co Rd 32-79, east on AT&T Co Rd K-161, stayed north on AT&T Co Rd K-161, west on Sonic Drive In's Missouri K, then south on Dale's Fireworks Co Rd K-143.

Parked the van at the end of road. The forest had already begun the arduous task of taking the road back.

You kids stay here, he said, while I unload the van.

Stacked the provisions outside the van. Walked to the edge of the forest, focus lost in the thicket of hardwood, wishing he could drift in, disappear. No trace. A smudge of nothing and nothing to no one. One as none.

Trudged back to the van, opened the passenger side doors and helped his daughter out of the car. Handed Jetson the canvas sack of tools and strapped the tent to the boys back. Gave Aurelia the box of granola bars.

Are we camping, daddy? she asked, and Ray knelt in front of his daughter, brushing her hair back from her face.

Yeah, baby, he said, you and Jetson are going to camp for a while.

Ray stood up, turned his back on his children and longed to hear their retreating footsteps.

Dad, Jetson asked, what are you doing?

Find the wild ones, Ray said, they can protect you better than I can.

Dad, Jetson said. Don't.

You're a luxury Jet, a selfish luxury. Now get out of here, both of you. Get. Don't you hear me, Ray said, chucking peppermints at his children. Hit Aurelia below the eye and her tears followed.

Jetson chucked a rock at Ray, hitting him in the right shoulder.

Surrender nothing, the boy said, isn't that what you always told me.

Ray threw the rock back at his son. The boy fell as the rock scraped his knee. Aurelia ran toward the van, but Ray swooped her up and stood over his son.

What did you say? Ray asked.

Jetson cooled in his father's shadow. Stared up, eyes welled with water, and said, Don't leave us.

This is why they shot old yeller, Ray said, crying, hugging his daughter close.

What the fuck is wrong with you, Jetson asked.

Ray leaned his forehead against his daughter's, and asked, How do you kids feel about adoption?

The Wild Boy King of the Ozarks

“You must be shapeless, formless, like water. When you pour water in a cup, it becomes the cup. When you pour water in a bottle, it becomes the bottle. When you pour water in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Water can drip and it can crash. Be water my friend.” Bruce Lee

Chapter 1

Stranger danger-Food, water, and guns-An agent of progress-The jerky son-Not so opposable anymore-Decisions, decisions-A piercing headache-The twiddler-Pistol whip-Trojan horse children

The four remaining adults in Buffalo, Mo., sat in silver folding chairs around a conference table inside the St. Williams rectory and listened to a stranger. Candle light flickered, dashed shadows across the man’s face. Perfect smile. Teeth that gleamed and taunted darkness to snuff out their light. Right eye a perfectly placed oval, but the left slanted diagonally toward the bridge of his nose and the pupil spilled into the iris like an oil slick polluting sea blue clarity. Heavily bearded. A rough pulchritude. Greased black hair past his ears, straight, stringy strands. Massive hands. Hardness covered in loose, black clothing.

“I get the thumbs,” the stranger said, “and you folks get a working farm, a steady supply of food and most importantly, protection.”

“You mean,” Stan said, lanky arms pressed into angular knees, “you get a base of operations and we get whatever scraps you deem us worthy of.”

“Those god-lovers have lived their whole lives without electricity,” Rich said. “This is nothing to them. They’re prepared. They’ve been prepared their whole lives. You heard what this man said. Food, water, and guns. When it comes down to it, it’s us or them.” Directed his gaze at Berry. The teary-eyed former Subway operator looked away. Persuasive tone. “We have the kids to think about,” Rich said. “We have to do what’s best for them.”

“I’ve never,” Berry mumbled, body hunched forward, hands clasped between her legs. She rocked back and forth in her cheap folding chair. “I couldn’t. Please. We don’t need saving.”

“Maybe we should join up with the Amish,” Nadine said, face a slab of taut granite, chipped away and craggy. “Take ‘em your corpse as a gift, let ‘em know what you and your people are up to.”

“They’d eat you alive woman,” the stranger said coldly. “I’ve been dealing with Amo’s for the last eight months in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. They think god has anointed them to repopulate the world and.” He paused, intertwined his hands and rested his arms on the table, leaning forward. “They have no tolerance for outsiders.”

“That makes two of us,” Nadine said.

“You ask too much,” Stan said. “Death will come soon enough without us rushing to it.”

“Too scared to move forward, to come out from your Catholic hovel?”

“And just who the fuck are you to be asking?” Nadine said.

“An agent of progress.”

“More like an agent of death,” Stan said, defiantly. “We will not follow.”

“Stupidity and stubbornness,” the stranger said. “You are truly a disciple of the old ways, Stan. Are you foolish enough to think you will survive here without help? Your principles will not stand in the way of progress, I assure you. Have you heard the saying, adapt or die?”

“Progress,” Stan said, spitting between his legs. “What world you living in? Most everyone’s dead and we might as well be living in the middle ages.” He paused, leaned forward and spoke slowly. “I think you have your answer. Are we clear?”

“I would hear from Rich and Nadine.”

“You speak real big for a man outnumbered,” Nadine said.

“Are you all deaf or just stupid?” Rich asked. “We’ve got maybe three weeks of food and water left and then what?”

“We keep scavenging,” Stan said, pointing a finger in Rich’s face. “We move on if we need to, find some place better supplied. What this man offers is no choice.”

Nadine pulled a plastic baggie of beef jerky from the inside pocket of her oversized pea coat. “We’ve done scavenged this town dry. Searched every house twice. Hell we ran out of pets to eat months ago.” She offered jerky around, smiling. The stranger reached across the table and took a piece.

“Keep that goddamn shit away from me,” Stan said.

“I’d take the easy way out,” Berry said, “if I didn’t think I’d end up in your plastic baggie.”

“It’s Rottweiler.”

“More like the last remnants of your boy,” she said.

“That’ll be the last time you make the implication-”

“Then where is he?”

“Berry,” Nadine said, pulling back her coat, revealing a hatchet, “do us a favor and ask me again.”

“Stop,” Rich yelled. “Everything that’s happened before this moment doesn’t matter. We’re being asked to choose between life and death and I sure as hell know what I’m choosing.”

“And the price?” Stan asked. “You okay with killing off a farm full of women and children?”

“Fuck ‘em,” Rich said. “It’s us or them.”

“There are other options,” Stan said, pounding his fist into the table.

“Can’t we just keep hiding?” Berry asked.

The stranger sunk a five inch spike through Berry’s left hand and into the wooden tabletop. Her screams cannoned, crashed the walls, ricocheted back. The other three tumbled, stumbled backwards, knocked chairs to the floor. A hook ripped into the webbing between Berry’s thumb and forefinger. Stranger yanked the hook with a grunt and a grin, body weight heft. Skin shredded, bone crackled. Blood splattered, fountained, stained the table. Screams battered, cascaded, wave after wave. Berry yanked backwards. Her body jerked like a dog on a chain’s end. The spike held, the hand pinned. Stan, Nadine, and Rich fumbled handguns from shoulder holsters and waistbands. Berry’s screams yielded to faint. Blood rushed down the table and onto the rectory carpet.

“Please,” Stan yelled, “stop.”

“I believe I have,” the stranger said, plucking the thumb off the table. Scraps of skin drooped red trickle. He reached under his tattered black sweater and pulled out a necklace of shriveled, blackened bits. Untied the leather string, sat it on the table. Pushed the point of his knife through the middle of Berry’s thumb then strung it through with leather.

“This,” the stranger said easily, retying the collection around his neck, “is what happens when people abide by morality.” Sat down. Crossed right leg over left, arms folded across his chest. Cheap metal chair groaned under his weight. “Adapt or die,” he said with a smile.

“Would you care to rethink my proposal?”

The guns trembled, slightly, the only answer given. Stan to the stranger’s left, Nadine in the middle, and Rich to the right.

“Why?” Stan yelled. “Why?”

“I have one thumb,” the stranger said, standing up. “I count seven more.”

“Fuck you,” Stan screamed, gripping the pistol with both hands when Nadine shot him. A retch of blood and brain spumed from Stan’s temple. He gasped inward, never exhaled. Head bounced off the table, body thumped onto the carpet. Stan chunks stuck to the wall, the ceiling, Nadine’s clothing, Berry’s back.

“Kill Berry and hand me their thumbs.” The stranger tossed Rich a pair of shears.

Muzzle flash. Echo. More blood. Scent of burnt hair, seared skin. Flesh and bone jelly clotted the pruning shears. Rich handed over three thumbs and their remover.

“Seems we can trust each other now,” the stranger said, wrapping the thumbs in a red cloth.

“We have your word?” Rich asked. “We do this for you and-”

“Every utopia” he said, stuffing the thumbs in a pocket, “is built on the bones of those who stood in its way.”

“What does that ev-”

“Three days.” Candle flames leaned left, then right, as the door shut behind the stranger.

Guns holstered, blood smeared onto jeans and sweaters. Nadine sat down in a folding chair and exhaled loudly. “A utopia is built,” she said in a mocking voice, “on vague words and empty promises.”

Rich laughed, pressed his fists into the small of his back and popped it. Rubbed his palms into his eyes, streaked his face pink. “I always did want to fuck Berry, ugly as she was.” Earnest eyes. “He didn’t have to make me kill her.”

“You wanna take her place?” Nadine asked.

“Maybe we can keep one of those Amish women alive?”

“Maybe,” Nadine said, leaning the chair back on two legs.

Rich sat down. Stared at the floor. Gallon blood puddles like Hawaiian Punch, splattered brain matter like chunky raspberry jam. Nadine whistled a tune, reminded him of a jingle for Peter Pan peanut butter. *This is no time for hunger*, he thought.

“What do you think his name is?” Rich asked.

“What’s it matter?”

“Guess it doesn’t.”

“The Twiddler,” Nadine said. Rich blank faced. Front legs of her chair hit the floor. She leaned forward, cupped Rich’s chin and said, “because of the thumbs. Get it?”

Rich smiled, said, “Yeah. Funny. Twiddles thumbs down to a nub when he slices them off.”

“That’s whittling.”

“Oh.”

Nadine stood up, pulled her gun out and began to pace, scratching her forehead with the muzzle. “Here’s what we’re gonna do Rich.”

“I thought we were going to kill the Amish.”

“Do me a favor and shut the fuck up.”

“Okay, sure, if you think-”

“What’d I just say?” Nadine asked. Rich nodded his head. “Good. You’re gonna dispose of these bodies, and I’m gonna break the news to our little Wild Boy King.”

“They’re gonna think we did it,” Rich said. “Those kids loved Berry and Sta-”

Nadine bashed the butt of her gun against Rich’s nose. Bloody tributaries down his face.

“Now,” she said, resuming to pace the rectory. “We can’t just show up out there, mow down a farm full of people and expect to live.”

“Som dove zem czar chiden,” Rich mumbled through the shirt soaked with blood from the bridge of his nose.

Nadine stopped, smiled at Rich and said, “No one would suspect an innocent little girl. Not even the Amish.”

“Zink zey twil coup it?” Rich asked.

“Yeah,” Nadine said, slathering Berry’s blood over her clothes, hands, and face, “they’ll do it. After they hear about the Amish man who killed Berry and Stan they’ll want revenge. That Jetson’s a murderous little fuck. Now. Punch me in the face.”

Chapter 2

Wild Silence-Decapitation of the Wooded Beast-It’s a rouse-A waste of meat-Who’s the boss-Sustainability-Twin offerings-Betty Davis eyes-Dark hearts, dark words-Mutiny-Death grip

Twin 6-year-old boys, Ronald and Donald, laid under blankets, giggling, whispering plot spoilers as Jetson performed their favorite bedtime story. The wiry 12-year-old raced across the empty kitchen, black hair stuck to his sweaty face. Leapt onto a formica countertop, back flipped, landed, ducked a claw swipe, swept a wooden leg and stood over his soon-to-be vanquished foe. Slowly slid Wild Silence from the scabbard tied to his back.

“We fear the wooded beast no longer,” Jetson screamed out, the twins raising their voices in response. “Any last words?”

“You wild boys will pay for this,” the twins squeaked in unison.

“In the name of vengeance,” Jetson said, silver gleaming in the shadowy candlelight, “I give you Wild Silence.” Faked the decapitation. Ribbons of sap squirting a rain of wood blood. Sheathed his sword. Smiled at the twins and said, “goodnight,” to the linoleum palleted lumps.

Jetson’s ten-year-old sister, Aurelia, burst from the shadows. Bare, wooden branches acted as arms, her head a bushel of green leaves from a branch down her back. “You wild boys can not kill me,” she squeaked. “I can never die.” She waved the branches wildly, knocking Jetson to the ground. He fell violently. Aurelia crept to the twins, her branch arms scraping the ground. “How do you boys want to die?”

The twins screamed in unison, covering their faces with the blanket.

Aurelia removed the branches from each arm and pulled the leafy branch from behind her back. Knelt down next to the twins and pulled the cover back from their faces.

“Were you scared?” she asked.

“There were leaves covering your face,” Donald said. “We didn’t know it was you.”

“I did,” Ronald said. “I knew it was you.”

“No need to worry my little ones, we’ll never let anyone harm you.” Aurelia kissed each boy on the forehead. “Now. What do we do before bed?”

“We say our words,” the twins said together.

Jetson took his place next to Aurelia and together the four of them spoke their nightly ritual. “Bless the love we have for each other, bless the light of another day, bless the food we continue to find, and bless the night and the safety of sleep.”

“Jetson?” Donald said. “Berry hasn’t told us goodnight yet.”

“She will,” he said before blowing out the candles and shutting the door.

Brother and sister turned right, fingertips tracing cinderblock walls in the dark hallway. Jetson counted footsteps. 14. Door to the left, the former sacristy and their bedroom.

“Jetson, Aurelia,” Nadine said. “I-”

Aurelia rushed to her side. “You’re bleeding. Jetson, she’s hurt.”

“It’s not my blood,” Nadine said.

“Aurelia to me,” Jetson said, touching the hilt of his sword. She slunk behind her brother’s back, peeking over his shoulder blades at Nadine.

“No need for suspicion,” Nadine said. “As you can see I’m lucky to be alive.”

“What happened?” Jetson asked.

“We had a visitor,” she said, “and . . . things didn’t go well. Stan and Berry are dead. Rich is burying them now.”

“That’s a waste of meat,” Jetson said.

Aurelia whimpered against her brother’s back, hands on his shoulders. He shook her off and told her to quiet.

“Berry and Stan took us in,” she hissed through tears, tiny fists bouncing off Jetson’s shoulders.

“Stop acting like a child,” he said.

“We need to leave,” Nadine said. “The Amish will return and finish the job their man started.”

“Aurelia,” Jetson said, still facing Nadine, “check on the twins.” The girl left, closing the door behind her. “The truth Nadine. What happened to Berry and Stan?”

“Awful cocky for a boy without a gun,” Nadine said. “Besides, you don’t really care that they’re dead.” She stood up. “I’m gonna let you keep the sword because I need you, but don’t

get any fucking ideas you have a say over what happens to you or your sister. You've no more Stan to protect you."

"What'd you give the Amish man to live?" Jetson asked.

"It's not what I gave him," she said, gap-toothed grin, "it's what you're gonna give him."

Jetson grabbed for the hilt of his sword. Nadine whipped out her pistol. The boy stopped.

"Seeing your daddy stomped to death by that mob sure made you a cold little fucker."

"Provoke me," Jetson said. "I would love that."

Nadine half-smiled, thin lips drawn tight against her sunken cheeks. "I mean to have their farm, and you're gonna take me there. You know those woods, or is the Wild Boy King of the Ozarks all myth?"

"We are only three," Jetson said.

"What choice do we have? There's nothing left here. The farm offers sustainability. Do you know what that word means, sustainability?"

Jetson clinched his jaw, popped his knuckles. "Say your words."

"It means food and water at our fingertips," Nadine said. "Meat, vegetables, a basement stocked with preserves. When was the last time you slept on a full belly?"

"We'll all die."

"Your sister will take out the gate guards and lead the rest of their men to us. No one will suspect a little girl. You and I will take care of the rest."

"No," Jetson said quickly.

"We can't send you to take out the guards, now can we? Everyone knows the Wild Boy King with jet black hair. Even the Amish."

“You can’t have her,” Jetson said, “no. Use the twins instead.”

“Humpty and Dumpty? No thank you. She does it or we kill the bunch of you. What do I want with four mouths won’t do any hard work?” Nadine aimed the gun at Jetson’s head and said, “Move out of my way.”

He backed against the wall as Nadine circled past him, opening the door, brushing Aurelia. Jetson shut the door.

“I don’t want to go back to the woods,” she said.

“There’s no time for wishes,” Jetson said softly. “We leave in the morning. All of us.”

“Even Rich and Nadine?”

“We will say our words now,” he said, stepping to her, grasping her hands in his.

“What’s the most important thing?”

“Survival,” she said quickly, meekly, avoiding his stare.

“And after that?”

“There is nothing else.”

“What are Rich and Nadine to you?”

“Nothing,” she said, turning away.

“Give me your eyes,” he said. “Face me.”

“They’re nothing.”

“And the twins?”

“No, Jetson. Don’t.”

“The twins.”

“Not tonight,” she pleaded, “not with Berry and Stan gone. We are all they have.”

“We will speak our words,” he said. “What are the twins to you?”

“They are life,” she whispered. “They are memories and sweetness. They are happiness.”

“Would you die to see them live?”

“No,” she said quietly, imploring the floor to drop from beneath her, to swallow her in darkness and silence.

“Aurelia,” he said, thumbing a tear away from a splotchy red cheek, lifting her chin to his eyes. “There is only you and I,” and he kissed her, lightly on each closed eyelid. He told her the plan, the deal he’d make with the Amish, how they’d stop running, how Nadine and Rich would die. She made him promise to protect the twins. Later, after he’d whittled her down to a nub of resistance, they slept face-to-face under the table on crated foam and woolen blanket scraps, held tight in each other’s clutch.

Chapter 3

Spring Break '19 or '20-The Lottery Food Massacre-The decline of western education-Lunch-Dog Town Bridge-The twiddler's victim-Navel gazing-Cherry popped-The Squatter Massacre of Dog Town-Prepare the trojan horse

They left at daybreak. The sun ruptured through haze and fog, an exploded fragment guarded by smoke. A moist chill to the air. No one bothered to keep a calendar anymore but Rich thought it early April 2019 or '20. Dressed for winter in flannel rags, sweat pants, mismatched gloves, knitted caps, and ratty jackets. Camp packs like humps on Nadine and Rich’s backs. A shovel and tarp tied together around Rich’s blue pack. The children wore backpacks over jackets, woolen blankets tied around Ronald and Donalds’ shoulders.

“After the Lottery people closed the schools,” Rich said, pointing out the Buffalo Prairie Middle School, “a group of us tried to stop them from trucking the food out. The guards must’ve killed 20, 30 people that day. You should’ve seen the whole town go crazy, burning up anything

bigger than a shack. Didn't pay to be rich that night." Rich laughed, a memory-tugged smile on his face. "Used to be a house right over by here I helped burn up that night. It was empty of course, most of the houses were empty, even then."

"Did you know my dad?" Aurelia asked

"Shut up," Nadine said. "This isn't memory lane we're walking down." The slap of twelve feet against gravelly pavement the only response.

Decay clung to their noses, wafting in the wind. Brown overgrowth cropped from ditches, neglected yards and blackened foundations. Dirty brown waves of grain, like the gold had been sucked out of each stalk, grew on top of luscious green turf. Two houses remained from after the Lottery Riots, from after the school closings; they were the only two to rebuild in this part of town.

The school continued to rot. Tan stucco building turning to black, dirty-white underneath where people had hammered off the stucco facade from anger or boredom or both. Crumpled football stands, twisted metal ruined by storms from years past. The field a hundred yard square of prairie grass, tall ivory wildflowers, purple clover, thistle weeds, and dead stems gestating black pods; a rectangle circled by a moat of red mud and concrete curbs.

Fold-N-Stuff Locust turned into Meeks Co-Rd. 38-48. The pot holes got bigger. The road smaller. Years of run-off and neglect eroding the two-lane road down to a one-way country lane full of hazards. They stepped around craters, careful to keep the twins in the middle, Aurelia their tether.

They reached a crossroads and stopped for lunch of beef jerky and bottled water. The twins begged to rest longer, complained their feet hurt, that their shoes were too tight. Aurelia stroked their mittened hands and nodded her head in agreement, but said nothing, and soon

Nadine announced it was time. Jetson walked in front, kids in the middle, Rich and Nadine in the rear. They turned west down Tyson Chicken F highway.

Three miles or so of yellow line marching before they came to a barb-wired trench where a bridge once spanned a creek bed. Broken slabs of concrete jutted mini-mountains of crossed rebar and carefully placed pikes. Vines from black crevices reached for light; saplings and gnarled guardrails. Water trickled somewhere below.

“Someone sure went to a lot of trouble to keep us out,” Rich said, touching a barb with his fingertip.

“How the fuck you ever live this long?” Nadine asked.

“What’s that mean?”

“It means we cross west of here,” Jetson said.

They stepped through fields of dead grass that bristled and stuck against their clothes. Tiny burrs coated their gloves and jackets. Aurelia and the twins made a game out of picking the burrs off, throwing them at one another until Nadine said stop. Refilled their empty plastic bottles in the creek and continued west, parallel to the road.

In a grove of hickory, oak, and blazing purple red buds they came upon a man tied to a tree. His free hand slapped like a useless flipper at something tied to his belt. His thumbs had been ripped off, his mouth taped shut. The thumb stumps had been cauterized.

Jetson eyed the closed straight razor tied to a string that dangled from the man’s belt buckle. Blood caked the string and the homespun black slacks he wore. Jetson watched as the man tried to pick at the string with his four fingers, pressing the razor against himself, but without a thumb . . .

Rich approached first and fell backwards when the man screamed against the tape over his mouth, straining his face red until he passed out.

Jetson drew his sword. Nadine her gun. Rich scrambled to his feet and looked back for guidance.

The twins clung to Aurelia. She covered their eyes and glared at the bound man, thinking *I wish someone would cover my eyes.*

“He’s been here,” Rich said in a hushed voice.

“Shut your fucking mouth,” Nadine hissed back.

“Who did this?” Jetson asked, hiding the fear from his voice. “And where are his thumbs?”

“What’s one less Amish in the world?” Nadine said. “Be cruel to keep him alive, pitiful creature that he is. Put him out of his misery Jetson.”

Wind bristled through leaves. Branches shook. Jetson clenched his jaw.

“One of his god-fearing brethren could find him,” Nadine said, “and raise an alarm before we get there. Surprise is the only advantage we got. Well, the only advantage Aurelia’s got. And if I’ve heard right, this wouldn’t be the first man the Wild Boy King of the Ozarks has put down to protect his sister. Did I hear right, Jetson? You a killer, boy?”

Jetson crept toward the unconscious man. Aurelia stared at the sun until brightness blocked her vision. Manipulated the purple, green, and blinding white shapes into death scenes. Her father crushed by neighbors and friends. Her mother curled up in a flannel bedspread, pale blue lips. Her golden retriever, Emma, spilling blood from her throat, the spit she roasted on, the crackle of her skin, the dripping grease feeding the fire; the taste. Aurelia imagined Jetson

piercing Nadine's heart, sliding the blade in gently, caressing it with tender nudges. Imagined the cruel twist, the scream, the death. A muffled agony turned her head.

Wild Silence stuck through the man's belly button, angled down. Jetson backed away, slowly. The man swatted at the sword with his free hand, beat it like fire licking at his navel, helping it slip from his stomach. Nadine cackled laughter.

"Thought you was a killer," she said. "Instead of putting a man out of his misery by cutting his throat you stab him through the belly button."

Jetson lifted the sword, faced her. Gripped the blood coated blade in his right hand. Tears welled his eyes. His head trembled, a machine of perpetual tiny earthquakes. He stepped away from the man, turned, then sprinted the seven step distance, jamming Wild Silence into the man's chest with both hands. Felt the sponginess of muscle and fat, the hard redirection of bone, the deflation, the dullness of his sword stopping halfway through the man. Eyes closed. Jetson speared again, and again, and again, and again until he heard Aurelia whispering in his ear, "This is nothing. He is nothing. There is only you and I." The twins screamed. Rich quickly covered their mouths and picked them up, carrying them past the body. Nadine grabbed Aurelia by the collar and directed her past the body. Jetson tasted the man's blood. Cut the straight razor free and pocketed it.

The group stopped a mile from the Amish farm in a spot where the Amo's had slaughtered a squatter camp. Large bones like ivory clubs half submerged in the terra. Chipped-off pieces of bone crunched underfoot. Turf covered scraps of canvas, spindly fiberglass roots sticking out of the ground and everywhere, tent stakes. Infant skulls picked clean and hung from branches like ornamental decorations.

They drank water, ate beef jerky and two spoonfuls of cold pork 'n beans apiece. The twins pretended to sleep under scratchy, woolen blankets while the others loaded the spare guns, pocketed ammunition clips.

Jetson unwound string from the straight razor, practiced opening and closing the blade. Tested the sharpness by shaving off arm hair.

Nadine prepped Aurelia, forcing her to pull the firearm from behind her back again and again until the little girl seemed deadly on the draw.

“You tell them you’re being chased by two men,” Nadine said, “and if that don’t work, kill ‘em, then run back to Jetson and I.”

Aurelia rubbed the outline of Jetson’s note in her left pocket. He swore the note would protect her, that the guards would gladly capture the Wild Boy King of the Ozarks.

“Poise,” Jetson said, hands on her shoulders, “and calmness, like water dear sister, be calm like water.”

Aurelia brushed past her brother, knelt down next to the twins and kissed them both on the forehead. “Bless the love we have for each other, bless the light of another day, bless the food we continue to find, and bless the night and the safety of sleep.”

“Rich,” Nadine said, the group’s one rifle strapped to her shoulder, “stay with the twins. We’ll be back when everybody’s dead.”

Chapter 4

*Through the looking glass-Jeb's dead baby-New to the ways of death-How to start a lawnmower-
Scoping things out-Cruel patience-Fire starter-From the mouths of babes-The day's receipts*

The stranger spied them approaching the man he'd introduced to backward evolution hours before. Handed the looking glass to the shriveled, rail-thin Amish man next to him. "Is that the boy?"

The man peered through the lens and signaled yes.

"How can you be sure?"

The old man looked again. "It's him. I'd know his face. Two years ago I took a wagon of lumber to our brothers in Winchester Gap. Three miles or so from the homestead the boy there and his group ambushed us. Killed my brother Jeb, stole my horses, and the tools I had with me. Told me to tell everyone those roads belonged to the Wild Boys now and they would have their toll. About the most ridiculous thing I ever-

"Who killed Jeb?"

"The wild boys did," he said nervously, spitting the words out at a ridiculous pace. "Died of a heart attack right there in the buggy. Scared him to death they did."

"You sure this is the Wild Boy King?" the stranger asked again, watching Jetson butcher the thumbless man. "Seems new to the ways of death."

"They say he's responsible for the death of 30 men, though I think the number's exaggerated myself. Only one I know of is my brother Jeb."

"No need to act when words deliver fear for you," the stranger said, ripping into the old man's throat with his hook. Yanked hard, like starting a lawnmower. Windpipe and trachea; red snakes vomiting thick jets of blood.

He followed the group's progress through the woods south of the farm. Snacked on misshaped bars of oat and honey he'd carried with him from Illinois. Laid a red cloth embroidered with his group's motto, 'Adapt or Die,' over a bare patch of dirt and disassembled his rifle when the group stopped at the Dog Town massacre site. Cleaned the weapon in between peeks through the looking glass. "Who are you little girl?" he asked himself, ramrodding a cloth through the rifle's bore. "Who are you to our little boy king?" Reassembled the weapon. Loaded it. Stashed ammunition in strategic pockets.

He watched Nadine and the two children leave Rich and the two younger boys behind. They headed due west toward the setting sun. The stranger circled south around the threesome through a grove of hickory, oak, and walnut. Found the tree he'd marked a week ago, an X carved into bark, 54 yards due east of the posted guards; solid men in beaver hats, white button-up shirts, suspenders, and rough black slacks, armed with pump-action shotguns. He positioned the rifle's stock against the bark, monitoring the gate through his high-powered scope, dialing in a head shot.

Blood orange plunged into the horizon, coloring everything above with a tint of lurid darkness. Shadows crept past the gate toward the woods' edge, encroaching upon daytime; the switch had already been flipped.

The guards pumped their shotguns and ran toward the woods. The stranger spotted the girl through crosshairs. She emerged running, crying out for help. Collapsed at their feet. Blond hair spilled from the hood thrown off her head by the guard to her left.

He couldn't make out the words, but saw her lips move.

They jerked her to her feet by her jacket. The guards said something to her. She reached into her pocket, pulled out a note. The men huddled, exchanged looks. Seconds passed. They motioned for the girl to lay flat on the ground. She pressed herself into the ankle-high grass.

A woman's scream tore out of the woods. The guards sprinted toward the sound.

The stranger smiled and asked, "What are you up to my little boy king?" as he shot one man through the cheek, felling him with one practiced squeeze. Caught the other one through the forehead as he bent down to check his friend's exploded face.

The girl stood up, looking back, noticing men pouring out of the farmhouse like moths drawn to a flame. She rushed to the woods. "See you soon," the stranger said. Cruel patience, waiting for the men to congregate over their fallen brothers. Exhaled slowly, squeezed the trigger, commenced counting seconds, 27, and men, 13, killed. Reloaded. Picked off the one's who'd survived his first shots. God it was a butchery.

He materialized out of the woods, rifle slung over his shoulder, running with a handgun. He progressed unchecked to the back of the house.

Found four cans of gasoline in a shed. Brought two out, gun tucked in his waist. Emptied the cans on the screened in porch, splashing gas off wooden furniture, soaking dusty planks clean. He stood 15 feet from the house in short grass, watching the flames probing, engulfing, melting screen mesh, when a woman fired a musket ball from a second floor window, but missed. She watched him raise his handgun, stunned, unable to move, until the bullet pushed her backward, thumped her to the floor. Children bellowed, bawled, indecipherable wails. The fire climbed, fed, overindulged as fires are want to do. The stranger struck another match, lit a hand-rolled cigarette and headed toward the woods and the receipts he'd need to collect before the days end.

Chapter 5

A real tearjerker-Not quite off with her head-Promises kept-Rich goes half blind-Game night with Agent Lewandowski-A Wild Silence smile-Sing me a song before we bury our dead

Nadine leaned her rifle against a tree trunk. Took Aurelia's face in her hands, kneeled down, eye level with the girl. Slapped her hard across the face, saying, "Do you want to fucking die. You must cry and the tears must be real." A tear rolled down the girl's left cheek. "These men will kill you," Nadine said, pulling the girl's hair toward the ground, "unless your tears are real. Force them to see how scared you are." Nadine released her grip. Aurelia set the tears free and rushed toward the gate guards.

Nadine dropped to the ground, sighting the men through her scope. Jetson stood to her left, sword unsheathed at the ready in his right hand. They watched Aurelia fall in front of the guards, heard her rehearsed cries for help, saw her desperate clambering for their attention. The men jerked Aurelia to her feet.

"What's she doing? What's she handing them?" Nadine turned to ask Jetson when Wild Silence sliced through half her neck and stuck there like an ax in wood. She screamed. Jetson yanked back on the blade, releasing it from Nadine's neck, flinging her life blood across his face. Raised the sword in both hands above his head. Swift cut, same spot. The sword stuck again, but the scream ceased. Jetson wiggled Wild Silence up and down, left and right, Nadine's head bobbing like some child's toy. The dry ground sucked at her blood greedily, roots drinking up the sustenance.

Jetson heard the shots, saw the two men fall dead to the ground. Aurelia stood up, looked behind her, saw the Amish coming from the farmhouse. Run, he thought, run Aurelia. Scanned the fields and woods for a possible shooter, a gleam off a rifle barrel, but saw nothing. He

counted seconds, 27, and men chasing her, 13, until finally, Aurelia hurled herself into his arms crying and out of breath. Each gasp of air, short, stunted. Red face, salty tears.

“We can’t stay here,” Jetson said, “someone else is killing the Amish.”

“The twins,” Aurelia wheezed out, hands on her knees, “you promised.”

Shots echoed across the field. Bearded men bellowed.

Jetson turned Aurelia by the shoulders and hissed, “See those men dying? There is no time. We have to save ourselves.”

“Then I’ll go without you,” Aurelia said, weakly, pulling the handgun from behind her back. She started back to the camp.

“Aurelia,” Jetson said, running after her, “we can’t save everyone, but we can save ourselves.”

“You promised you would save the twins.”

“I’d say anything to save you,” he said, walking backward, face to face with his sister.

“I know.”

“Stop,” he said. “Give me the gun.”

“No,” she said, pushing him down and sprinting away. He ran her down seconds later, jumping on her back, shoving her to the ground. She rolled onto her back, looking up at her brother, pointing the gun at his face.

“I’ll kill Rich,” he said, “you gather supplies and ready the twins. We don’t have much time. Whoever’s killed those men won’t be far behind.”

She handed him the gun and they raced for the campsite.

Rich stood up when they came into view. “Jetson, what hap-” was all he got out before a bullet ripped through his left eye. The twins scrambled to their feet, whimpering for Aurelia.

She quickly covered their mouths, whispering into their ears, “You must be quiet, there are bad men in the woods.”

She hurried through Rich’s backpack, tossing the shovel, keeping the tarp. Emptied his clothes from the bag, shoving the twins’s backpacks in and zipping it up.

Jetson straddled Rich, rummaging through his pockets. A handful of jerky, three clips of ammunition, and a heart-shaped locket Berry wore around her neck.

“Jetson Buckner,” a voice said, “it is a pleasure to finally meet you. Drop the gun.” Jetson sat the handgun on Rich’s chest. “Good. Now take off that dull little blade of yours.” He slid the scabbard over his head and dropped Wild Silence to the ground. “Very good. Stand up, hands over your head.” Raised his arms and slowly stood up. “Turn around please.”

A rough man in black clutched Aurelia to his chest, gun against her temple. The twins sat on the ground next to Rich’s backpack gripping each other in fear.

“Let her go,” Jetson said. “Take me instead.”

“Perhaps I will,” the man said, “but first, we shall have a little fun. Do you enjoy games Jetson?”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Agent Lewandowski.”

“An agent of what?” Jetson asked.

“An agent of progress,” Lewandowski said. “I belong to a group that helped create this world and I will see it shaped into something worthy of human life. We destroy the past to create the future. Do you know what the future holds Jetson?”

“Would you like an answer?”

“The game will provide all the answers I need. Pick up the sword.”

Jetson bent down, left hand still in the air, and picked up the sheathed sword.

“Remove the scabbard.” The boy did so. “I had expected something more impressive, but I suppose your second-hand katana will have to do.”

“Let her go,” Jetson said, “please.”

“You can save her boy, I assure you, but only if you play the game.”

“I don’t und-”

“What would you do to save her?”

“I will take her place.”

“What else do you have to trade for this girl’s life?”

“Nothing but my own.”

“And the two young boys there, what of them?”

Aurelia screamed out no, and the man shut her with his massive left hand. Jetson stood frozen in place.

“Kill them,” Agent Lewandowski said, “and see the girl freed.”

Ronald was on his feet tugging at his brother’s jacket sleeve, dragging him slowly across the grass. Donald a useless shell. Jetson his mirror image.

“Hurry,” Agent Lewandowski said. “If they live the girl dies.”

Jetson stood in place, sword at his side, tears rolling down his face. “Please,” he said. “Take me instead.”

“Do you refuse to play?”

Donald struggled to his feet. The twins broke for the woods.

“Bring me their thumbs,” Agent Lewandowski said. “Or see the girl dead.”

Jetson walked slowly, each stride bringing him closer to the twins. Ronald fell to the ground, scuttling backward like a crab. Jetson heard Aurelia struggling against her restrainer. Shut the sound out of his mind. Kicked Donald in the back, knocking him to the ground. This is nothing, Jetson thought, holding Donald down, Wild Silence over the boy's throat. This is nothing, Jetson said out loud, the blade eating into the boy's throat, a slit opening, blood oozing, breath shortening, the bubbling blood. There is only I, Jetson said, closing Donald's eyes.

Ronald had scampered to the woods' edge, bristling past undergrowth and tree limbs. Jetson ran him down, tilting the boy's head up by a fistful of hair. Gave him a Wild Silence smile. Jetson repeated his mantra, the words rolling from his mouth like a mutter of breath at the end of a sermon. Sawed the thumbs off, dropped them in his right jacket pocket. Remembered the straight razor. Opened it, blood slick on his hands, and hid it with his left jacket sleeve.

Collected his receipts from Donald, the dull blade struggling with the bone, the straight razor pressing into his palm as he leaned into Donald's chest, needing the leverage to separate thumb from hand. Joined Donald with Ronald in his right pocket.

"Drop the sword," the agent said, standing behind Jetson, "and turn around."

Jetson did as he was told, faced the agent.

"Do you feel that surge of energy, that life force coursing through your veins. That feeling is survival, the knowledge that you live while others perish because you are willing to do anything to ensure your own life. You are evolution incarnate my dear boy. You will make a fine apprentice."

"I did as you asked," Jetson said, "now do as you promised."

The stranger dropped Aurelia quickly, her feet thudding against the ground, knees buckling. She rushed to Donald, quietly sobbing over his body, her fingers tracing the jagged wound, dyeing her hands a dark red.

“She will get you killed,” Lewandowski said, “but the truth may save you yet. Would you like to know the truth my little Wild Boy King? Of course you do. The truth is we are alone in a world of chaos, upheaval, and disorder. We tried to cover up the truth, to keep the lid shut tight. So many years of false progress, each step forward another step away from the truth and into the falsehood of civilization. Yet here we are, you and I, closer to the truth than anyone has been in a long time. The old ways are gone and death is the only way to free yourself from the yoke of the past, from the tyranny of family, love, and order.”

“Take your thumbs,” Jetson said, covering the four tiny digits in his right fist, left arm dangling at his side.

“You can not protect her.”

“If you want her dead,” Jetson said, “you’ll have to kill me first.”

The agent laughed, tucking the gun behind his back. “They were right about you,” he said. “I will leave you alive, but the girl will die.”

Jetson threw the thumbs at the agent’s face. He batted them away with his left hand, punching at the advancing Jetson with his massive right fist. Jetson ducked the blow, leapt into the man’s chest and stabbed the straight razor into the stranger’s stubbled neck, burying the straight razor two inches deep. Surprise on the agent’s face, blood gushing from his throat, coating massive hands fumbling to remove the blade. Death came quickly.

Jetson touched his sister’s shoulder. She stood, turned to him, red face a mess of tears, snot, and anger. Slapped her brother, marked him with red fingerprints.

“Remember our words,” Jetson said. “Survival is the only thing that matters.”

“No,” she said, sternly. “Survival no longer matters to me. Sing me a song instead.”

“Our words are our song.”

“I will hear you sing a different song,” she said. “I will never say your words again.”

“Aurelia, please. Our words. Now more than ever.”

“Everyone’s dead,” she said. “Your prayer has been answered. There is only you and I. Your words are of no more use to anyone.”

“The twins were nothing,” he said. “They had to die so that we could live.”

“They weren’t nothing, they were love. They were the last reminders of how things used to be, of how sweet and beautiful life could be. They were the only thing keeping me alive.”

“I had to kill them,” he said meekly, “for you.”

“You did it for yourself.”

“I would do it again,” he said, reaching out for her. She backed away. “Do you not love me anymore?”

“How does one love death?” she asked.

“Aurelia.”

“You are death,” she said. “You are more death than flesh.”

“If I must be death to protect you then death I will continue to be,” Jetson said. “We must say our words to remember what’s important. Now more than ever we must be as one.”

“No,” Aurelia screamed. “Your words mean nothing to me, you mean nothing to me. We will dig two holes and you will sing me a song while we bury our dead.”

“And after that?” Jetson asked, picking up the shovel.

“I will walk the way of death,” she said, watching Jetson split the ground.

VITA

Matthew Stuart Pachmayr was born on February 8, 1982, in Springfield, Missouri. He was educated in Buffalo, Missouri, public school system, and graduated in 2000. He received a presidential scholarship to attend the University of Missouri-Kansas City, from which he graduated with a B.A. in Political Science in 2005.

After failing to talk himself into law school, he spent the next four years playing music and working a variety of unfulfilling jobs, such as: gas station clerk, data entry clerk, law office clerk, warehouse lackey, and customer service representative. Upon realizing one can never depend on musicians, and that low paying clerk jobs will always be available, he decided to apply to MFA programs.

He returned in 2010 to begin working on an MFA in Creative Writing and Media Arts at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. He has received the Gary William Barger Memorial Scholarship for his work.

His writing has appeared in South85 and the St. Louis Sinner.