

THE SURVIVING PARTIES

A THESIS IN
Creative Writing and Media Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the University
of Missouri-Kansas City in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

by
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Columbia College, 2007

Kansas City, Missouri
2017

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a collection of short stories that were written and re-written between my time as an undergraduate at Columbia College and my time as a Graduate Student at UMKC. These stories were picked out from many fictional works because they each present a youthful perspective through a unique lens. These stories are meant to offer different points of view from protagonists who are all on their way somewhere, for better or worse. The goal of this thesis was to take these budding protagonists and bundle them together into some sort of cohesive unit.

The characters in these stories all struggle with family members, substances and authority figures who offer which gives them each an individualized take on the world around them. There is a sense of suburban dread that inhabits a lot of the peace, and I several of these characters want nothing more than to break out of their current setting. What ultimately unites these characters though, none of whom will ever meet one another, is their struggle to exist in places where they are told they cannot exist. This collection is about fitting into a world that doesn't want you, and how no one's past can dictate anyone else's future.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “The Survival Parties,” presented by Benedict E. Biersmith, Candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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Critical Introduction

At the beginning of the summer of 2016, I began my journey to create this thesis. The first hurdle I could see was that I had no idea what I would be writing about. This is almost always the trouble with designing works of fiction, and though I have plenty of tricks that can inspire writing, I decided I would try to use my time to simply write, rather than extensively plan. A friend who completed the program last year gave me some good advice, “don’t overthink it.” Of course, this is almost always good advice, because the moment you’ve overdone anything, it’s usually ruined. So, I decided to proceed with casual caution.

As the fall semester began, I met Professor Pritchett, my thesis advisor. I admitted to him at the time that while I had a lot of material to offer, I was not quite sure what I wanted my thesis to be yet or if any of the material was good enough. I gave him all my nonfiction and fiction work that I had at the time. It was somewhere around ninety pages of material, I believe. When we met again, Professor Pritchett gave me extensive edits and advice on the fiction and nonfiction pieces I had turned in, but also informed me that a lot of the material would need some work if it were to be included.

At that point, I took a step back and looked at everything I had written in the last nine months. While I cherished my nonfiction for its personality, I also knew that it was a new field for me. I decided to discard most of the nonfiction and focus on a mostly fictional thesis. I started to separate the art forms a little more, and I remembered that I’d been to a similar crossing once before.

One night in 2003, as struggling Poetry major in Chicago, I decided to visit a friend. I traveled north forty minutes from my apartment in sheets of pure white blizzard to Rogers Park to sip some whiskey with him. I sat and told him about my woes with my art form at the time.

“I just don’t think I’m any good,” I said.

“So...change it,” he said. The words eased me with their simplicity, and I started to look around a little more. I think that was when I began to open up to what was around me. I would ask myself, ‘What do you really love about language?’ I knew I loved words on a fundamental level. Words were the key to happiness, health and love. Words were always going to be there. Words are everlasting. We can continually create with words. I just didn’t know what words to put in what order or why. My friend gave me a very important book that night.

“You like any sad bastard writing?” he asked.

“I like Kerouac,” I said.

“This is Carver,” he said, taking a swig, “he’s a real sad bastard.”

The cover said, “Raymond Carver, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love, Stories,*” and had a drawing of a woman smoking on a bed. I spent the train ride home entranced. The twisting white tornados outside the L car were like faint, whispering ghosts to me. I couldn’t be bothered. I had never truly considered such a work as what I was consuming that evening. Such a perfect collection of short stories. A *short* story. Each piece of the puzzle had individual meaning as well as to the greater whole. The writing was so simple, beautiful and menacing all at once. Characters seemed like sketches that were imagined so purely that there was no way they couldn’t really exist. Sure, its fiction to us readers, but Carver wrote them so real that they seemed to be tangible. This is what I wanted to do. Make a collection of short stories, plain and simple. I changed my major to Fiction Writing in the fall of 2004 and I have never looked back.

My writing, however, would not directly benefit from my introduction into the wonderful world of fiction. I don’t feel that I’ve become a decent writer until the last year or so. I believe

this to be the sole work of the professors I've had here at UMKC for the past three years and the myriad of literary knowledge I have attained at their hands. When I decided back in the late fall of '16 to make this an entirely fictional thesis, I went full force into my work. I knew that the clock was ticking. When revising the work, I had turned in to Professor Pritchett for this thesis, I looked specifically at what was missing.

The story "Defcon Five," was written for my springtime workshop class. The draft I turned into Professor Pritchett dealt with a mentally ill, alcoholic protagonist in a crumbling marriage with two imaginary friends or voices who tend to guide his decision-making process. The draft contained a lot of creative and vivid language to describe the narrator's slow descent into madness at the hands of himself, but the voices were too disembodied to seem real. I began by going through and examining every line of dialogue either voice had. For Horace, I would work on sketching more of a personality into his voice by adding better descriptors like "hoarse chuckle" and "vile echo," (1). For the other voice, Mary Frances, I added "braced teeth, sloshing every 's.'" (1). These small edits give both characters a simultaneously menacing and childlike quality. As I continued to edit, I began to focus more on the disembodied voices as the wheels of the story, each one playfully indicating what the main character should be doing. In true Carver fashion, I wanted the piece to look like change could be possible for the protagonist, but it's not happening on this particular night. My workshop found this ending confusing, but when I asked Professor Pritchett. "So, change it," he said, "...if you want." I thought the ending worked well as it was, so I left it but I included the line "I felt the sleeping birds and squirrels, the couples loving all around me, the babies sleeping, the cars crashing," so we knew that this husk of a man can find some sense of empathy in the future.

“Pogo,” was a story that originated from a workshop exercise I had at Columbia College, where I had my first taste of workshop as an undergraduate. It was called a steeplechase. In the exercise, the author was meant to change literary styles in some way every two pages. I had decided to reflect on my own experiences in the music world, and the result was a kind of Hunter S. Thompson meets Michael Azzerad’s nonfiction. When editing, I took out a lot of the meaningless banter between bandmates and tried to focus more on maintaining a voice for the story. I took out a lot of the less-than inspired imagery and tacky stereotypes that tend to surface in my initial drafts as well. I decided to keep the varying tones in voice present because it helps the story’s pacing.

“The Harpy and The Shrew,” was another piece that originated as something entirely different from an undergraduate workshop class. This piece originally had a scene where the girls do heroin, which was too obvious and severe. In the interest of making something original, I decided to focus on the two girls as budding socialites whose downfall would ultimately be how ‘cool,’ they think they are. By the end of the story, I’d implemented a small twist by insinuating that the girls are responsible for several crimes that may be much worse than the one they just committed.

“Ten Sleep,” came out of a workshop in spring of ’16. The piece had a strong introduction but tended to lean more towards the absurd by the end of the original, fifteen-page draft. Professor Pritchett indicated to me that this may be a case of a story that is trying to do too much. I took his advice and cut out an entire subplot with a sex dungeon and some characters which the narrator’s father had kidnapped. I ended it somewhat ambiguously with the supposed friend and sometimes antagonist waving to the narrator from a departing vehicle. This ending seemed more open to interpretation and stylistically, it seemed to fit.

“Mal Content and The Birds at No-Name Lake,” was also originally constructed in my spring ’16 workshop class. This piece takes a lot of turns, but what needed to change the most from the initial draft was some of the overwrought language and seemingly unnecessary character plots. I was going for my first lengthy piece here, and it does a good job of holding the attention throughout. I cut out a few flashbacks that seemed superfluous and tried to make the focus more about vivid descriptions of sonic ideas mixed with the feeling of social ineptitude that comes along with becoming an adult.

“Evening Eyes,” came from a story I’ve had for years called “Zombie Time,” which was about a mother who has no idea that she is abusing her children because she does it when she is always sleepwalking. The story was short at the time, so I added some more vivid imagery, cut some unnecessary scenes and added some more compelling dialogue. The essential arc of the story remains from the original, but I stretched scenes out by making them more suspenseful, and by toning down some of the needless violence. I also added the subplot of the Santa Claus neighbor to give a little more illustration to what may have happened to the boys’ father.

“The Ice Cream King,” originated as a much shorter piece called “Hide and Seek,” which was centered around the protagonist discovering that his friend may be a victim of domestic assault at the hands of his father. I framed the original scene with some background on the protagonist, filling out other characters and the setting. Once I had established a decent place for my story to begin, I moved straight to the conflict. I had originally had Mr. L holding Jamie’s hand to a burner flame in the kitchen, but this was too severe and was revised as a grab on the wrist. I also had a note at the end of the story from Mrs. F that explained everything a little too nicely. I removed it, putting the focus on Jamie’s letter, which is what is really important to the scene.

“Sylvia,” was a spontaneous exercise that stemmed from an old prompt I learned in my undergraduate program. That prompt was simply, “Character, verb, character.” This piece stemmed from “Girl slaps woman.” Originally, Sylvia ends up being so demonic that she hits the narrator, sending her crashing down the steps. This action was deemed too violent for the mostly lighthearted piece, so I made the implication that Sylvia was the boss of the household a bit subtler, by making her threats verbal. I toned down some character actions in the final scene and then it felt like it was much more plausible.

“Free Lunch” was the one piece from my nonfiction that I thought was worthy enough to be a part of this thesis. The piece was originally told as a quasi-eulogy. Upon revision, I expanded areas that were merely mentioned in the final section of the first draft. By adding clearer descriptions to these bullet points, I gave a more realistic version of my relationship with my father from both an external and internal viewpoint.

“Black Buffalo,” is my most lengthy and ambitious piece in this thesis. At this stage, it is still being edited and completed. However, upon revising the first half, I noticed that there were unnecessarily violent scenes and patches of dialogue that need to be toned down a bit. I tried to pull back on racial and societal stereotypes. I originally intended this piece to end in a blaze of glory, but the ending is much more subdued, which is what works for this story.

This university has made me into the best writer I’ve ever been. If it were not for what I’ve learned in my workshops, the authors I’ve had the privilege of reading, and the professors who have guided me, I would simply not be where I am today. I have a future now because I believed I could do this. Raymond Carver was the real gateway. Hubert Selby was my conductor, Toni Morrison was sitting next to me on the train and David Foster Wallace served us drinks. None of us are worthy of our heroes, but we know what we can learn from them. We

know where they can take us. This thesis started out as loosely defined and unsure of its self. Once I remembered what I wanted it to be, though, it became genuine. A real collection of short stories.

Defcon Five

She said that she had finally filed the papers. The day before Christmas eve. Two thousand eight. She said that she could no longer “carry a boozed-up schizoid who was off his meds,” that she was leaving and I could kiss my house goodbye as soon as she spoke to her lawyer. Some of us believed that she was serious.

“It’s a good riddance, T. You don’t need the stress,” Horace said, his hoarse chuckle cutting the air, it’s vile echo pasting the inside of my eyelids.

“She’ll probably just be at her mother’s, T. Don’t worry. It’s only a few miles away,” Mary Frances offered, her braced teeth sloshing every “s.”

I dripped on our leather sectional. I noticed my dim reflection in the dark flat screen. I tore at some misguided cowlick of graying nonsense on the side of my head. Here is where I would rot. I would pinpoint a spot in the middle distance, an imperceptible sphere just above the fifty-five-inch screen and prod at it with my brain. Nothing ever happened though. My wife’s cracked voice sent a distant, haunting stream of curses towards me from our bedroom like the horrible song of a rabbit in a bear trap. A trap that I had set with perceptive skill some fifteen years before this horrible morning in a downtown bar where we first met.

I was twenty-one. A friend and I, far too drunk to be in public, even for St. Patrick’s Day, stumbled into a dive to avoid the parade. The dense air of the joint was laced with fluorescent heat, smoke-soaked desperation and the body odor of brooding hulks sipping yellow Budweiser. She was behind the bar. My memory of her face is blocked. It was the strangest thing, people all seemed like warped ghosts in a wormhole to me. I’m sure this was my fault. I’ve always had a toxic nature about me, I know that. I was always getting my snout into the

most rancid slop. But when faces start disappearing you know you are really into something heavier. Something is deeply wrong there. That's my black hole stuff.

My memory is my worst enemy. It tells me now that she was Kim Cattrall or Debbie Harry. But when I think about it, I can't remember her face at all. I always just see paint being mixed at the hardware store. Brown, white and gray swirling until reaching that perfect shade in the middle. Paint. You put it on a wooden fence. It moves, even seems to breathe a bit, but then it dries. Hers had dried over a skull now twisted and fraught with the menace of marriage. Her eyes were cobras buried deep in a swirling white desert. She would glare at me blazingly. I could feel this stuff. Sitting in the kitchen while I watch Sports Center in the living room. Shooting her venom through the walls. I could see the contemptuous wrinkles that I had given her. The fresh veins that I had coaxed out of her. I couldn't tell what exactly I had done to change her...but she was no longer my Kim, my Debbie. Her beauty no longer sang to me.

Our brand-new TiVo came soaring into the living room and struck the Spanish cedar frame surrounding the front door. It exploded, clattering into a plastic mass of slick black shards on the floor next to our chrome and leather magazine rack. I remember realizing then that I had slept six hours in four days.

"Baby-" I yelled across the house from the couch. My voice, hoarse and liquored brown, a ghost's echo over the egg-shelled walls and deeply stained hardwood floors. "Lemme at least say this...can I just say-" I paused as a strip of drool took a dive from my lower lip and onto my denim thigh. "My jeans..." I tried to stand, but the left leg was still sleeping and I was introduced to the north-east corner of our mahogany coffee table.

"What was that," she sort of cared from the bedroom, frantically packing clothes into large black carpenter's trash bags. Her grunts and sighs.

“Real nice, look at that, T.” Horace said, *“She could give two shits about us,”*

“I actually think she could not give two shits, right?” Mary Frances said.

“I don’t know. I don’t think we’re using the expression correctly,” Horace said.

“Guys,” I said. “It’s all good. I’ve got my Defcon Five.” I pushed myself up from the coffee table and wiped my mouth.

“What is that, like your doomsday plan, T?” Horace asked with a chuckle, *“Never figured you for one of those loons with the bomb shelters and aluminum hats.”* Deep purple blood from my lip smeared across the top of my hand.

“My blood doesn’t look good,” I said.

“Can it look bad? It’s fine, man.” Horace assured me.

“It just looks faded,” I said.

“You need more water,” Mary Frances said.

“I should see my blood guy,” I said.

“Mmmm,” said both.

“Never mind, though....ssss’all good, cause I got the...the...theeeee...!” I stammered, searching my pockets.

“T,” Mary Frances said, *“you know that you can’t just buy back her love, you have to offer yourself to her completely. Show her that you love her, make her see-”*

“T,” Horace cut in. *“Come on, man, “Say Anything is played out. You need to cut all ties, man. In fact, we need to start gettin’ all her stuff out of here. Liquidation. Everything must go!”*

“Nah, nah nah nah it’s all good, man,” I slurred, stumbling a bit and attempting to steady myself against the glass dining room table. My left leg then blacked out again and I

found myself face down on the hand-knotted oriental area rug that I bought at an oriental rug dealership (I know! I didn't even think they existed until I moved out here) from a very tall, pretty woman with "adult" braces (they're still just kid braces on an adult, though right?) who, at least I think, had a yearning for something other than the ol' checkbook, if you know what I mean. Her smile was bright, tucked slightly into the left cheek and excited by arched eyebrows and a furrowed brow. Very Laura Dern. I was into that. Maybe it was the Enya Muzak. Maybe it was the heavy and elegant scent of fine oriental wool (straight from the Orient!). Whatever the case, there was something between me and this brunette Laura Dern going on in this little shop downtown. Something had been planted. I think her name tag said something whimsical...like "Meeghan," or "Star Wisp."

"You're on the floor again, T!" Horace said gleefully.

He was right. I stared into a red fibrous desert, I inhaled deep and sharp. The scent of manufactured liquid pine. "Three thousand, four hundred forty-eight dollars and fifty-three cents," I wheezed, drooling a bit more, "—'s a pretty good rug, right hon? Had our honeymoon on this rug."

"Pull it together! She's already at the door!" Mary Frances' high-pitched wail ripped across my airplane hangar'd skull.

"Honey," I rolled on my back, "I'm gonna fix it!" I proclaimed with slitted eyes. Then a belch erupted like a dry hot spring from my throat. Thick, filthy air discharged from my lungs and arched upward against the dining room ceiling. The front door slammed so loud that the sound of the steel hinges snapping shut buzzed in my brain for the next forty minutes. A bitter victory siren.

"Well, she's gone," Horace said.

I rose to my knees. My head was a pallet of bricks on broomstick. I stretched lobotomized arms towards the wet bar in the corner. I lurched until the floor stopped spinning and I met the black walnut bar with a resounding clang from the glasses and bottles of liquor within. I reached down and opened the cabinet. Made a move for the Talisker. Missed it. Too many labels. Then it looked like we were headed for the LaPhroaig. Got it. Greedy fingers snatched us up a tumbler. Nerves shook my forearm as I poured. The Scotch cut the glass with fiery fury, igniting translucent walls with crests of bright, golden grit and pungent, acidic vigor.

“How many is that now, T?” Mary Frances asked.

“What. Drinks?” I seemed to ask no one, bulleting my gaze to the bottom of the tumbler. *“She means, you know...d-words,”* Horace chuckled.

“They’re both d-words, Horace. Aren’t we all adults here? We can say the word,” Mary Frances said.

“Yeah, but-” Horace started.

“Ninth drink,” I sipped. “Third d-word.”

I slumped against the wall and slowly slid to the floor. I tried to re-fixate on the floating sphere. I found it just below the glass dining room table, hovering above one of the chairs. Then I started hearing him again. Way in the back. A deadened transmission slicing through stratified static.

“Do you hear him?” I ask them.

“Who?” asks Horace, *“Oh, him again?”*

“Just block him out,” Mary Frances said.

“He’s getting louder,” I said, rubbing my eyes.

“You know he’s got nothing new to say,” Mary Frances said, *“Let’s just turn on some*

music, drown him out.”

“I’m thinking Van Halen, ‘Running With the Devil!’” Horace elated.

“That’s the one, H-town,” I said, laughing and jumping to my feet. I flung myself across the room towards the sound system like a mannequin in a monsoon. My right hip collided with the waist-high record shelf, sending a few records spilling onto the floor. I driveled over the covers like a leaking blimp. Dad’s copy of The Moody Blues’ *Days of Future Past*. I had found it in college when I was pilfering Ma’s collection.

God, to have met on a commune. What a strange existence. Maybe that’s where I could meet the mother of *my* kids. I could see her at the bin by the corn field scrubbing beat stains out of an apron on a washboard. Her sinewed muscles and coarse fingers pulsed intently. Maybe he was drawn in by her beautiful features: wild curly red hair and porcelain skin. Maybe he thought she looked easy because she didn’t wear a bra. Maybe he respected her as a woman and as a person. Maybe he loved her until I showed up—

“*Bom...Bom...Bom...Bom...Bom...Bom...Bom...Bom,*” Horace thumped, imitating Michael Anthony’s percussive bass.

“Ahaha!” I laughed, “How quick I have forgot! Good call, H-bomb,” I said, swiftly yanking myself out of my black hole, stooping above cracking knees and scanning our LP’s. “Let’s sssee... *Sannana, Steevie Wunner, Tawkin’ Hezz,*...ah, here we go!” I said, spraying simmering saliva over calloused lips. I located *Van Halen*, grabbed the sleeve, plopped the thin sheet of vinyl on the turntable and dropped the arm. Echoing feedback gave way to the pulsating bass line. The guitar slipped in like dripping electric icicles. The band swung like a sparkling cleaver into a crimson flank.

Horace and I bellowed along with Diamond Dave in unison, “Ain’t got no love, no love you’d call real. Aint got nobody waiting at *hoome!*” I stomped around the hardwood floors, shaking the bar and the chandelier. I jumped and screamed, spilling Scotch on the floors.

“*Get used to this, T!*” Horace yelled, “*We got nothin’ but time! It’s just us now!*”

As the song faded out, the doorbell rang. As I turned to walk to the front door, I felt that damn leg give out on me again. Pins and needles, pins and needles. Sinking in quicksand. A sharp and sudden absence of all light followed. Then, the beautiful black void. I used to sit and stare for hours at the swirling cosmos of the inside. Where the factory finally shuts down for the night. When you’ve locked them all in their rooms for the night. When you know that there will be silence. When you get to be the protector. The watcher.

* * *

Then came Mary Frances’ timid voice. “*May the Lord protect you, serve you and keep you in peace, Amen,*” she squeaked.

My eyes slitted open and white light began to paint the inside of my skull. Shapes began to appear. An I.V. pumping something in or out of me. A television on a rack in the corner playing an episode of Matlock. Bright heat from torqued bulbs above me. Multiple machines beeping arrhythmically. St. Jude’s, I think. A young male nurse entered the room.

“Ah ha, someone’s up!” he said cheerily, “and how are we doing, sir?”

I attempted to respond but my tongue was numb and the teeth surrounding it felt like they were made of cork. I spat up a little, wiped my chin and shook my head.

He began checking the tube going into my right arm. His skin was tan and healthy. He wore a crew cut and wire framed glasses. His smile was warm.

“It’s morphine,” he said, “for the nerve damage.”

“Lord, have mercy!” Mary Frances yelled. My eyes widened. I spat up a little bit more and wiped what was probably partially digested apple sauce from my chin.

He calmly put his hand on my forearm. He wore latex gloves, but his touch was healing in a way. I calmed down, tried to look at my body. Everything was covered in tubes and cotton gowns and sheets.

“The doctors are bringing in a neurologist this afternoon,” he said. “Your chart says that you are prescribed to an antipsychotic. Prolixin? But...you didn’t have any in your system when you came in. Did you go off your meds recently, sir?”

“Don’t tell her, T,” Mary Frances said. *“They’ll put you back on that stuff. We need to get out of here, and quick!”*

“Hav’lin,” I told him. “Sorry, sir?” he said.

“Hav’lin, in aba fabru,” I said.

I shook my head at the nurse. I turned and stared at Matlock.

“Well, you’d best get some more rest,” the nurse said. “The neurologist should be on the way up soon.”

As he left the room I noticed my medical charts sitting at the end of the bed. My muscles felt like wet clay. I attempted to lean forward and felt a cinderblock on my lungs. I grimaced and shoved it down, reaching to my feet for the clipboard.

“4/23/15: Ruer, Timothy 41 y WM. 165 lbs. Admitted unconscious by his wife Diane at 1:30PM. Multiple head wounds. Nerve damage suspected. Diagnosed Schizophrenic at 23 Y.O.. Prescribed to Prolixin, to be taken once daily and refilled once monthly. None found in system. Administering Cat Scan.”

“She saved us!” Mary Frances proclaimed. *“God is so good, T! Don’t you see This was all part of his plan. Come on, we’ve got to get out of here and go see her.”*

“Oh, come on, Mary,” Horace laughed, *“You really think this was a divine intervention of some kind? Who would want things this messed up in the first place?”*

She must have come back for something and found me on the floor. My flesh began to tingle, I couldn’t feel my heart but I knew I had to listen to Mary. Once she had an idea in her head there was no shutting her up. I gave myself a few breaths and slowly rose to my feet. I found my clothes. The clock on the wall said eight. I ducked out and found an elevator. I jumped on a bus and headed towards her Mom’s place, Mary Frances singing us “Hallelujah” the whole way.

I remember when all of it started. When they first showed up. I was just out of film school, penniless and desperate for work. I survived on bad wine and street tacos. I slept in a sleeping bag in an otherwise empty studio apartment. One night, as I laid there in the darkness, they just started speaking.

“Hey there,” came a thick, gruff tone, *“I’m Horace,”*

I licked my lips, rubbed my forehead.

“Hi, Horace,” I said out loud into the darkness.

“So, uh...how are you doing with everything, man?” he asked. I sat up on my elbow and spoke to the drywall.

“I guess I’m doing ok with it,” I said.

“You know what I mean, though, right?” he said through a smile.

“I—I don’t know,” I said. I sat up in my sleeping bag and looked around the apartment.

Silence and darkness permeated the space surrounding me. A pitch-black sauna of sweaty fear began to permeate my pores and seep into my consciousness.

"I'm talking about the doubt," he said.

"Oh," I said. "That."

"You'll never escape it!" a woman's voice, tight and shrill, piped up from the back of my skull somewhere. "The only way out is through God's love!"

"Don't start feeding him that line, Mary," Horace said, "The boy's got enough on his shoulders as it is. He needs a different kind of relief. A man's got certain needs that can't exactly be taken care of at Church!"

"You'd send him to those tramps down at those whack off clubs, wouldn't ya, Horace? You think that's where a young man needs to be spending his time?" Mary said tauntingly.

"At least a man knows what he can get at a whack off club, Mary!" Horace shot back, "He's sure, in fact. No guessing, no wondering, no searching about it. That boy's gonna have a good time, and no one's gonna judge him for it!"

"Except the only judge that matters," Mary Frances replied.

"Well, I suppose you're right about that one," Horace chuckled to himself, "He sure does love to see his kids screw everything up, doesn't he? Lucky him, he can just step in any time and take care of things if he chooses. Or he can massacre entire towns with disease, torture innocents and cause global disasters of all kinds. With power like that, you'd have to be insane."

"You lack the capacity to understand God's love," Mary replied, "only those who understand that will be allowed into his world."

"And what about Earth? Who knew about him before they got here?" Horace asked.

"This isn't Earth," she said, "It's Purgatory, everyone knows that," Mary Frances said. Horace

cackled.

“Oh man,” he said, “you sure do know how to tell ‘em, MF.”

I laid back and slid under my sleeping bag. The cold floorboards creaked beneath me. My spine felt like it was braced with steel. Every muscle ached.

* * *

As I approached her Mother’s house, the clay had seeped out of my arms and legs and I could walk easier. I sighed and knocked on the front door. Her mother approached, noticed me and turned around. I sighed and knocked again. Diane came down the front steps, stopped short when she saw me and slowly approached the door. She opened it. From inside I could hear her mother, “I’m calling them! Right now!”

“Mom! Stop!” she shouted back, “Just give him a minute.”

She looked at me. I saw her with sober eyes for the first time in months. She was so beautiful and hurt standing there behind the door chain. Peering out at me like I was already a prisoner on the other side of the glass.

“Are you ok?” she asked, her face stained with tears, flush and tense.

“I’m fine,” I said, “feeling better. I just want you to know that I’ve got a plan. And you don’t have to believe me or even consider this as anything other than one of my rambling, incoherent promises, but I am finally going to do it.”

“Do what?” she asked.

I sighed. This was it. All in.

“I’ll go back to Amity, finish treatment,” I said.

She stared at me.

“What, you mean rehab?” she said.

“Yeah,” I said, “I mean, I had a great start there. And I met some really important people, and I can meet more if I go back. I just- I know that the drinking is such a huge source of trouble for us, for-for *me*, and I want it to stop. I don’t want to be that guy you had to take to the hospital today.”

She looked at me from far away. She was on the lighthouse deck and I was out in the middle of the ocean, watching back but not seeing anything.

“It’s just not that easy, Terry,” she said, “It’s so much bigger than the drinking. I’m sorry but I just can’t do it.” She shut the door.

I stood on her porch and swayed in the evening wind. Bones aching. Head swelling. Suddenly, the door swung back open. She slowly stepped onto the porch and handed me an orange pill bottle. My meds.

“Went and dug them out when I found you,” she said.

“Right,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Take care, T,” she said, shutting the door.

I put the pills in my pocket and walked back towards the bus stop.

“Don’t sweat it, pal,” Horace said, “You gave it a shot. If a broad isn’t gonna go for it when you’re on Defcon Five like us, it’s time to pull the plug!”

“He’s always listening, T,” Mary Frances said, “especially now. Prayer is free! It’s never too late to be born anew.”

“Forget that, let’s party!” Horace said. “There’s a seven eleven right up the street. Let’s get some forties and hit the glory holes! You know that’s a good time, T!”

“Yeah,” I said. “Let’s do that.”

I walked down the empty city sidewalks, tinted yellow and orange with night light and evening blue, all swirling together with the hard-bricked monoliths, metallic fortresses and corporate castles. I felt my body work again. I felt muscles suddenly spring back to life. I sipped my forty ounce of malt liquor. Some swill with a bear on the label. I sighed with satisfaction. I stopped at a stop light and pulled out my meds.

“What are you thinkin’ here, boss?” Horace asked.

“Thinkin’...I don’t know...just thinkin’ I guess,” I said. *“We’ve been down that road, T,”* Mary Frances said, *“it’s really not for us. Plus, you know it will only bring him back.”*

“You think he wants to see that guy?” Horace scoffed, *“After what he put him through? The boss-man here isn’t one for lookin’ back. He’s got his eyes on this prize. Aint that right, T?”*

“No,” I said.

“No?” they said in unison.

“No,” I repeated. “He’s already back. Been here since I got out of the hospital.”

“You gotta be kidding me,” Horace said.

“T,” said Mary Frances, *“you can’t be serious! He’s not good for you! He’s the worst of all of us!”*

“He’s me,” I said.

“No, no, no,” Horace corrected, *“he’s you before.”*

“Me before?” I asked, *“Before what? Before you came along?”*

“He’s the weak you,” said Horace, *“the one who was sleeping on Hollywood Boulevard in a studio apartment. Wasting his life away like he’s just another L.A. douchebag with a story to tell. He was bullshit. You would never have made money without us. Star Catchers? When the River Was Young? The Murdered Man? Any of those ringin’ a bell, T? Maybe not, because*

we were blasted out of our minds for so long that we just sailed right through the shit! We're Hollywood, brother. For life!"

"You made it because of God and you know it, T," Mary Frances said, "if we pray now we can still save you. I'll start. Hail Mary, Full of Grace, Hollow be Thy Name..."

I sighed and smiled. I opened the bottle and took out a pill, swallowing with a sip of Big Bear. I felt the moon's love shine down, the city's discordant harmony sucking me up and spitting me out at the same time. I felt the sleeping birds and squirrels, the couples loving all around me, the babies sleeping, the cars crashing. All of this life that I had forgotten about when I went inside myself was suddenly right in front of me. I walked in cherished silence back towards home.

Pogo

They grew up together in the slums of the Hollywood Hills. Pogo taught Cory about punk rock, sniffing glue, and girls. Cory had started calling him Pogo when they got into punk rock. Back when they were fifteen, all they really cared about were girls. Girls and getting their attention. One day, when walking down Hollywood Boulevard, Pogo, or Matt, as he was known then, met a girl on the street, handing out flyers for a punk show. He was stunned. She was all of seventeen, with a bright pink tri-hawk.

“Did you see that hair, man?” Matt asked, “She was gorgeous!”

“Yeah, she was hot,” said Cory, “I got this flier from her before we left. I think it’s for a weird concert or something.”

Matt grabbed it out of Cory’s hand. It read: “FRIDAY NIGHT. THE SHATZ. THE BOWELLS. PEPTO BIZ-MAUL. SKID MARKZ—AT THE PLEASURE DOME. HOLLYWOOD.”

“Oh man,” said Matt, “Do you know what this means?”

“Sounds like a bunch of bands who like shitting,” Cory said.

“Wrong. Well...Maybe. But the point is—we’re going. I’m gonna talk to that girl and we’re gonna look good,” said Pogo, crumpling up the flier in excitement.

Cory looked down at his outfit. He wore brown corduroys and a Pearl Jam tee shirt. Matt wore the same but with gray corduroys and a Beastie Boys shirt.

“Don’t we already look good?” asked Cory.

Our first show was a bust. We didn’t shower for a week before hand to try and at least smell “punk,” but with our rich-kid haircuts and Gap jean jackets they saw us coming from a mile away. We had made homemade shirts with the punkest band names we could think of

written on them. I tried to get creative, making a band up out of thin air, “THE JESUS STRANGLERS.” I scrawled it in magic marker across one of my white button up shirts. Matt’s shirt said “GREEN DAY.”

The glares were evasive, stretching at us from every corner of the darkened club. It was so dark we couldn’t even see their faces, but we could feel the contempt. I started coughing from all the cigarette smoke and had to run to the bathroom to get some water. Some girls in leather jackets and torn fishnets laughed at me.

There was no bathroom door, but there was a nearly translucent shower curtain. I pushed it back and stepped in. It was somehow darker in there than it was in the show area. There was a red light bulb that sputtered on and off occasionally, and I made out a sink on the far wall. Still coughing, I turned on the faucet. What came out was pure black sludge. Not watery in the slightest. I was now coughing so hard that I instantly vomited in the sink and ran out of the bathroom, terrified. I stopped to lean against a vending machine and catch my breath. The club was playing something that I’m sure now was music, but sounded like radio static at that time.

I found Matt by a table where someone with long black hair was selling tee shirts and records. I started running towards him, but slowed down to a cool jog when I felt the eyes staring at me again.

“Dude,” I said, catching my breath, “This place is creepin’ me out...how long are we gonna stay here? I can barely breathe.”

“Be cool, man,” he said, “You’ll get used to it. Check this out!” he held up a record by a band called The Cleveland Steamers. “They’re on tour—can you guess where they’re from?”

“Shut up, dude,” I said. I looked at the guy behind the table. He seemed to be the friendliest face I’d seen there. He had a pair of drum sticks and was beating them mercilessly against the table.

“Hey man!” Matt shouted. The guy stopped immediately, dropped the sticks on the cement ground, and pushed the black hair from out of his eyes.

“What’s up, dude?” he asked.

Matt smiled and held out a ten-dollar bill. “The Cleveland Steamers better rule. I’m buyin’ this.”

That turned out to be the first time we met Pervez. He was a latino kid from Cleveland. Always talked about how much he hated it there. After that show, we didn’t see him until three months later when he moved to Hollywood. We spent all that time continuing to go to shows around the city. We even started to like the music. I mean, the Cleveland Steamers were bad, but bands like The Shatz and the Orgies were a lot of fun to watch and mosh.

Since we were always grounded, we constantly had to sneak out of our parent’s houses to go to shows. The shows happened everywhere in the city, and we used Matt’s beat up Honda Accord to get there. Matt called me at around 6:30, saying he’d be there in ten minutes. By this time, dressing grungy was pretty much my regular style, so I didn’t have to worry about not showering to fit in at a show.

Within ten minutes, two loud honks came from the driveway outside. I sprinted from my bedroom outside, ignoring the questions from my parents in the living room. We stopped and got fast food on the way, but instead of buying anything to eat we bought the biggest sodas we could afford, slurping them down fast to get as much caffeine in our blood steams as possible.

We parked the car blocks away from the club in a neighborhood where it wouldn't be stolen and walked. Once we entered the venue and paid the five-dollar fee with mostly change, we were inside. We usually showed up just as the first band was starting. They were kids we knew by then, playing as hard as they could. We loved starting circle pits. People would also jump up and down in time to the music, which was called "Pogoing." Matt was the only one who brought his little sister's pogo stick to the shows, though. He bounded around the floor with this slimy grin spread across his face. Once, his Pogo stick landed rather ungracefully on a large skinhead's foot. That's the night Matt became Pogo and lost his front tooth.

After the show, we would stick around and talk to as many people as we could. It turned out that what was had thought of as coldness from the other people at the shows was just a mutual confusion about people. Pogo and I finally fit in perfectly.

Mr. Brawney was our History teacher at the prestigious Englewood High School for Boys. He had thick hands. He held them behind his back as he paced around the front of the bleak, fluorescent-lit classroom. Occasionally, when he felt the need to make a point, he leaned forward on his desk imposingly, resting on the pointer and middle fingers of each hand.

One day, Pogo felt the full force of those terrible, course hands when he corrected Mr. Brawney.

"The bubonic plague killed and ravaged nearly half of Europe..." said Mr. Brawney. Pogo smirked, sitting across the aisle to the left of me, and shot up his hand. I shook my head and pretended not to know him.

"Um, Mr. Brawney?" he asked. "Wasn't it one *third* of Europe that was so horribly ravaged and killed by the plague?"

Brawley's pocked, bearded cheeks turned crimson.

“No, Rawlings, you must be thinking of *The Crusades*,” he said, cracking his knuckles.

“But, sir...” Pogo said. “It says here on page ninety-three— ‘The Bubonic Plague killed nearly one third of Europe.’ A *third*. Not half.”

Mr. Brawney frowned, crossing the room to Pogo’s desk.

“Show me exactly where it says that, Rawlings.”

“Right here, sir...” Pogo said, pointing to a line of text about halfway down the page.

Brawney let out a high-pitched war-cry and quickly grabbed the hardback book, slamming it on Pogo’s finger. Pogo yelped uncontrollably and writhed in his seat. Brawney leaned down on the book with all his weight, crushing Pogo’s index finger like a worm in between the pages.

Brawney then grabbed Pogo by his long hair and pulled his head up to make eye contact.

“What was the first thing I said to you in this classroom, Rawlings?” he said. The girls in the class were screaming, some even started for the door. “Sit down!” he yelled. Then, turning back to Pogo, said, “Well, Rawlings?”

Pogo bit his lip, not wanting to give away the upper hand, and tried to hold back his tears. “‘Shut up,’ sir?”

Brawney pulled harder on Pogo’s hair, causing him to flinch, and pushed harder on the text book.

“Did you just tell me to ‘Shut up,’ Rawlings? I’ll cut off your arms and mail them to Zimbabwe! Then you’ll wish *you* had the plague!” said Brawney.

“No...No...” Pogo was scared now, but refused to cry. “You told us to shut up and that we should always trust our elders.”

“Exactly!” Brawny said, releasing Pogo from his torture. “So, when an elder, like me, says that half of Europe is dead, you better damn well believe them!”

I didn't even think. My hand just shot up. "Is there a newer plague we need to know about sir? Death certificate. Pogo, shaking his fingers from the pain, shot me a terrified and impressed look.

"Wentz? You choose *now* to speak? You sit in the back of my class all year, twiddling your thumbs and jerking it under the desk and now you choose this exact moment to ask a question?"

"Well...yeah. You said half of Europe *is* dead. I find that very interesting. I hadn't heard that. Is there some sort of shot we need to get? I mean, with all this advanced technology we gotta be able to do a lot better than crummy old Medieval Europe, right?"

I guess I lucked out, no physical pain. Pogo and I both got out of school suspension for an entire week. We didn't mind.

One night, after a show, Pogo and I were sitting with Pervez in a booth at a club in East Hollywood called the Lonely Boy. We were watching all the kids drain out but were not wanting to go home yet.

"Hey Pervez," Pogo asked. "You ever huff?"

Pervez, never without his drumsticks, stopped beating on his thighs immediately, threw the sticks on the ground and looked right at Pogo with a serious stare. "No, man. Never."

"Cory, tell him about the first time you did it," he slapped Pervez on the shoulder and said, "You'll love this shit, man."

I sighed and started the story, "I remember last summer, following Pogo to his parent's garage. The summer sun gave his Mohawk a bright shimmer. He held a plastic grocery bag full of Aerosol cans..."

“You’re gonna *fly*, man...,” he said, lifting the garage door.

“Isn’t this what junkies do, man? “I asked, shutting the door behind me.

“No, you idiot, junkies smoke *dope*,” he said, taking off his sleeveless shirt and crumpling it up in his hands.

“It just seems like it’d be a lot cheaper for junkies to buy...is that whipped cream?”

“Yeah man, I swiped it from the drug store, ‘he said. “Just hold it up under this shirt, squirt it, and prepare to blast off.”

“Now you just *sound* like a junkie,” I said.

“Just do it,” he said, handing me the shirt and the whipped cream. I noticed him take a few steps back and cross his arms, that slimy grin once again spreading across his face, exposing his gold replacement tooth.

“What’s this gonna do to me, man? Are you fuckin’ with me?” I asked.

He laughed and waved his arms, saying, "No, no...it’s awesome. I’m just excited for you, man.”

I sighed and lifted the shirt up to my nose and mouth. It reeked of body odor and gasoline.

“This smells like your mother,” I said.

“Shut the fuck up and do it,” he said, becoming impatient.

I made sure to cover my nose and mouth with the shirt and lifted the can under the shirt. I pressed on the nozzle and took a deep breath. The effect wasn’t what I expected. My hands, chest and chin were soon covered in whipped cream. I choked and threw the shirt and can to the ground. Pogo fell to his knees laughing.

I spit the creamy goo out of my mouth and shook it off my hands, swearing at him, “this is how you party, man?! I’d rather smoke dandelions.”

He was laughing so hard that he had to hunch over. His voice was muffled by his crotch. “It’s just whipped cream, you idiot!”

Pervez listened to the story intently and remained stone faced throughout. “So, did you ever really huff anything?” he asked us.

“No, dude. Pogo’s stupid ass just pulled a prank and I was dumb enough to fall for it.”

“Oh,” he said, reaching for his drum sticks on the ground. “I huffed gas once or twice...” He continued hitting his thighs with the sticks.

“Wait— “I began.

“Dude,” Pogo interrupted. “Don’t even try with this kid.”

In the summer of ’92 we were asked by our friend Tommy Schmolla to be on his brother’s public access show. Pogo and Pervez split a case of Blatz on the van ride over. The broadcast went out live on a Wednesday night.

(Camera 1)

Host: Hello and welcome to News Stew! I’m your host Gary Hoff. Today we’ll be discussing an interesting underground phenomenon—PUNK ROCK. We’re lucky enough to have some of the members of the L.A. “scene’s” most popular bands, Gentle Swastika! Gentlemen, please introduce yourself and tell us what you do in the band.

(Camera 2)

Guest 1: I’m Pogo, I play bass and screech.

Guest 2: Cory, guitar.

Guest 3: Pervez, drums and drugs.

(Camera 1)

Host: Well, punk rock certainly is an interesting craze. Haha...drugs. Wow. Anyway, my first question is about the band's name...Is this some sort of statement?

(Camera 2)

Guest 1: Look, we're not racists, Gary. God, I'm so sick of explaining this. The swastika is gentle, right? I mean it says that right there in the stupid name. So, like...Hitler, he was not gentle, you know? He totally killed like half of Europe or whatever, and like, what we're saying is that we're not Nazis.

Host: You're saying that you're not Nazis *because* you have the word swastika in your name?

Guest 1: Exactly.

Host: And you're the singer, right?

Guest 1: Yeah.

Host: You write all the lyrics too? Guest 1: Yeah, man. Why?

(Camera 1)

Host: Just checking. Now, you have put out a record recently on your own label, Dick Records.

It's called "Lay Your Hands On My Gentle Swastika," is that right?

(Camera 2)

Guest 1: Yeah, it's a concept record about...

Guest 3: Drugs?

Guest 2: I think it's more a concept record about when you're taking the trash out, and there's

that trash water that drips out...you know?

Guest 1: It's about corruption in general, I guess. We're going on tour next week.

(Camera 1)

Host: Well, I'm afraid that's all the time we have, gentlemen. Thank you for your wonderful, eye-opening look into the world of punk rock. I'm sure your contemporaries will appreciate your candor. Catch Gentle Swastika in a town near you to pick up their brand-new record!

(fade to black)

We drove relentlessly around the West coast, and then into the Midwest. We took Pervez's van and played in every city we could. Often when Pervez and Pogo were drunk, I had to drive. They would sit up all night having conversations about everything from tampons to how terrible of an actor Kevin Costner was. We were eighteen. We were idiots. Still, it was entertaining enough to keep me awake on the road.

"Pervez, do you believe in capitalism?" Pogo asked.

"No. But I believe you're a capitalist."

"What makes you say that?"

"You're an American, dude. You're white. All white boys are capitalists."

"And I suppose that since you're Latino, you're exempt?"

"Exactly, man. I wasn't born here. As a matter of fact, I should have stayed in Mexico."

"But Pervez, don't you realize why we're out here on the road? Don't you know?"

"You probably do, huh."

"We're out here to spread our message, man."

"Really? Because haven't we just been wasted this whole time? I mean...I think I was

sober for like five minutes at that Taco Bell back there, but I don't even know what state that was in..."

"Utah, dude," I interjected.

"Thank you. Thank you, Cory. The voice of reason," said Pogo. "Give me a kiss, baby," he said, leaning over and licking the side of my face. I retaliated with a titty twister that almost took us off the road.

"Look, Pervez. We're in a punk band. We might change some shit, we might not, but at least we're doing it. Please tell me we're all doing it for the same reason..."

"Drugs?"

"Fucking *fun*, man! I don't ever want to be my Dad. I don't want to succeed by anyone else's reasoning. I just want to be eighteen, man. Responsibility can eat shit," said Pogo.

"Very realistic, man," said Pervez, taking a swig from a bottle of vodka, "But I gotta say...until you get me over the boarder I'm stuck with ya, so we might as well have some fun."

The same morning that this conversation occurred, I was still driving the van. The sun was rising and creeping above the hillside like a dark messenger rather than a bringer of light. Pervez and Pogo were both in the back of the van, each lying on a different amplifier. The guard rail to my left started to widen steadily until it encompassed my entire periphery.

The impact was hard and fast but I didn't feel anything. Suddenly my hands were no longer on the wheel and the hood was scraping against the guard rail. I couldn't hear anything. I was primarily concerned with the sparks shooting off the hood. They cascaded off the windshield and I felt like I could reach out and grab every single one of them.

Then there was nothing. For a very long time all I could smell was the burning tires. Pogo was screaming somewhere, but I couldn't move. I felt very calm.

“Pogo?” I whispered and tried to move.

“FUCK!” he screamed.

I found myself standing in a ditch. The van was totaled. I looked at my hands. They were covered in thousands of very tiny scratches, but none were bleeding. I looked at the wreckage. The van was in pieces. I could hear Pogo somewhere, but I couldn’t see him.

“Cory!” his voice came from somewhere further down the embankment.

“I’m coming!” I yelled, and ran down the hill away from the wreck. The ground leveled out at a small creek. There was Pogo, lying by the water. I remember thinking he looked so hopeless. His hair, glued up into several large spikes, now hung limply and dangled in the water. He laid on his back, and there was a large wound in the middle of his abdomen. The blood was pouring out from under him and mixing into the water. He had been impaled by some piece of metal in the crash and pulled it out himself, stumbling down to the creek for water.

“Way to watch the road, man...” he said, blood pouring out of his mouth and onto his lips, “I’m *fucked*.”

“Pogo...I...I didn’t know...”

“Don’t worry about it, man,” he whispered. “...Look, just try and find Pervez.”

“I’m fine,” said Pervez from behind me, “looks like you got the worst of it, Pogo...some trucker up there called an ambulance, though.”

Pogo looked down at his wound and spread his slimy grin exposing his blood-soaked teeth.

“Cool,” said Pogo, his arms falling limply to the ground, his fingers melding with the water.

* * *

The hallway was dark. Six in the morning. I stopped to look at the wallpaper. Flower design. The same I'd seen every day, growing up.

"Daddy," I said, "why do we live with dead people?"

He chuckled a little, leaning back in his chair at the breakfast table and cleaning his teeth with his tongue. "Well, Cor—" he said, "we live *above* dead people. And it's my job to clean them up so their families will think of them in a more pleasant light before they get put in the ground..."

"Like a beautician?"

"It's a *Mortician*, Cor."

The ground was freshly carpeted. I walked briskly down the dark hallway, then into the chapel. The coffin. I opened it and looked at him. Pure white. Black hair to his shoulders.

I shed no tears for him or for what I have did. I closed the lid, and wheeled the coffin out of the chapel. Outside. Driveway. Hearse. I opened the back gate and pushed him in.

Above me, the sun began to rise. Birds. I walked back inside. 6:30 AM. Time to go. First, down to the basement. The Bottle.

My Mother: "Cory, we're so proud of you for choosing not to disgrace yourself with that awful substance..."

Father: "Oh, don't play into his trap, Sarah. The boy's a faggot and he's already showing us that."

Mother: "But Dan, he's just being his own- "

Father: "Look, you little asshole...I get it if you don't want to play sports. I get it if you don't want to be class president. I even get it that you don't drink. You could be the exact opposite of me in every way possible. But...this faggot shit? The spiky hair? The ripped jeans? Pretending

you're a musician? What are you, high? You either tone it down or you get the hell out of my house..."

Dad's gin felt warm in my hands. I tossed the liter back and forth in my hands. I considered smashing it against the wall. Cut out the part of me that let him down. I cracked the bottle. Took a whiff.

It was my first drink. It felt like liquid copper being forced down my throat. I wanted to throw up. I drank again. Easier now. I gulped down a bigger swig. Much easier. Back upstairs. 6:45AM. Time to go. I grabbed the keys to the hearse. I took another swig. It's time to wake up. I have to bury Pogo.

I sped drunk and drinking behind the wheel of the hearse. The interstate stretched out wide open ahead of me, the early morning traffic was sparse at best. Palm trees towered above me and loomed beautifully on the median to my left.

As I sped towards the rising sun, I would take a shot of gin for every ten miles I went over the speed limit. One at 70. Another at 80. Another at 90.

"Slow down, man," Pogo's voice echoed from the back of the hearse.

My reaction was slow. I slowly took my foot off the gas and glanced in the rearview mirror. Pogo's familiar pale face loomed forward, leaning over the front seat and whispering into my ear, "you're gonna kill us."

"Fuck!" I screamed, swerving in and out of lanes. "Pogo?! What? How?!"

Pogo laughed. "Chill out, dude. I'm sure you're just imagining this. When'd you start drinking?"

"Pogo, you're dead—how are you talking to me?"

He lifted himself into the front seat, pulling the visor down to look in the mirror.

“Aw, man...did my Mom do this?” he plucked at his hair. It was worn down to his shoulders instead of spiked up, the way he preferred. “I look like a priest. What is this butt-cut shit?” He ran his fingers through it maniacally, resulting in a much more frazzled look. “We should stop and get some glue before you dump me off the pier.”

I felt myself grow pale. The car started going even slower.

“Whoa, man...pick it up. The speed limit’s fifty-five, not thirty,” Pogo said, still concerned with his hair.

“I must be fuckin’ *wasted*...” Cory said, slapping his cheeks. Pogo looked down at the liter of Gin and grabbed it, taking a long swig.

“You *are* wasted, man,” he said, dropping the bottle between his legs and twisting his hair into spikes.

“Pogo...” I gulped. “Why’d it happen?”

“What? Me?” he asked.

“Well...yeah...”

“It just seemed like the right time, that’s all. Everyone’s gotta go sometime, man,” he said, smiling into the mirror.

“Yeah, but...you were only eighteen. And me...my whole life is ruined now...” I said.

“Don’t sweat it, kid. It was an accident. Get off here, this is our exit!”

Whatever he was, he lead me to the pier. I hadn’t set out with any sort of plan. I knew I wanted to get him as far away from that chapel as I could. That was a place full of respect, denial, and peace. No place for Pogo.

“You ready?” he asked, taking another swig and handing the gin back to me.

“Yeah,” I said.

“Okay...Now, they’ve probably figured out that you took me by now, so we only got about ten minutes before someone spots this hearse and calls the cops. What you need to do is wheel the coffin over the edge, get it as close to the railing as you can, and then open it and dump me in.”

“Why don’t I just throw the whole cart and coffin with you in it into the ocean?”

“Look man, I’m just looking out for you. After this, our families are going to have a major falling out. Not that a couple of bible-banging morticians like your folks would ever get along with some blue collar racists like mine, but...whatever. If the coffin is still intact they can probably get their money back. So, don’t fuck it up, okay?”

“Okay, man...” I said, taking another pull off the bottle. The sun had completely risen. On the boardwalk behind us, people were beginning to gather and ask each other questions. No doubt regarding the large hearse parked at the end of the pier. “We’d better get this over with,” I said.

All the sudden I was alone.

“Pogo?” I said, looking around the hearse. He was gone. I heard sirens. “Shit.”

I quickly got out of the hearse and ran to the back gate. There were three police motorcycles quickly racing up the pier towards me. I pulled the gate open and stood the coffin up on its cart and quickly wheeled it over to the railing. I opened the lid. Pogo was still there. Pale and with his black hair to his shoulders.

“I’m sorry I fucked everything up, man,” I said, and tipped the coffin over the rail. His body glided out swiftly and disappeared into the murky blue beneath me. I saw his black boots being slowly dragged out with the current. As I felt the hot fists on the back of my neck, I fell to

my knees, smiled and cried. The handcuffs were cool and brought a certain calm, sobering effect. I had to smile. I had freed Pogo.

The Harpy and The Shrew

Cassie was the shit. She did it. She partied. Everybody knew her. She had attended Crestwood Preparatory High School for Girls in Westchester, NY for three years. In that time, she had managed to elevate her social status from a faceless glee club member to flawless homecoming queen. Her golden, feathered hair and expert make up were applied every morning with steady hands and confident grace. Cassie was budding. Cassie was popular. She wasn't afraid to go there. Cassie drank Arbor Mist and stole her Mom's skinny cigarettes. Cassie was the *shit*.

Morgan worried about Cassie. Almost every second of every day. When she hadn't seen Cassie in over three hours, she began to wonder if she had taken her birth control today, if she was feeling nauseous or if she needed a ride somewhere. She and Cassie had grown up together. Soccer teams. Choirs. Debate squads. Through every lunch lost or heart broken, there would be Morgan, rubbing her shoulders and making sure she had a bucket to spit in. Her fairer complexion, brunette hair and modest fashion sense made her the perfect "BFF" accessory for Cassie. The Lacrosse team called her "Olive Oyl" because of her slender frame and lanky limbs. Morgan didn't hear them, she just watched Cassie and worried.

One afternoon, toward the end of the spring semester, Cassie caught Morgan in Crestwood's court yard between classes. There was a cobble-stone circle directly in the middle of the yard, and as the other Crestwood girls stampeded around them like gazelles, all flashes of white skin and blond hair, they caught their breath. Cassie had tears streaming down her face, dragging her mascara with them like crooked rivers.

Morgan's eyes darted around the stampede in a fevered panic. She quickly pulled a tissue from her jumper pocket and asked, "What's wrong, Cassie? Did Ms. Herson catch you sticking the chameleon up your skirt again?" Morgan dabbed Cassie's pale cheeks with the tissue.

"No," Cassie said, sobbing, "It's worse. Dean Alvey wants to expel me!"

"Oh my God, why?" Morgan gasped.

"They think I have a drug problem because I keep nodding off in Biology, but I can't help it. I was up all night with Jason fooling around. Next thing I know, Ms. Laughlin's saggy ass is dragging me to the Dean's office by my ear!" Cassie blew her nose into the tissue and sobbed.

"They think you're on drugs?" Morgan quipped, "Why, I've never seen you high at school..."

"I know," Cassie said, "but ever since the pervs started turning up last week they've been cracking down hardcore on *everyone*. They found my sister's addies in my locker, but I'm like, *are you kidding?* Half the girls at this school eat speed for breakfast like, every day. Plus, if I had taken them today, I would *not*. Be. Sleeping."

"So, what are you going to do?" Morgan asked.

Cassie smiled, showing tight teeth. Her skin, tanned to perfection, scented sweetly and moisturized daily, draped her delicate frame thinly. She was nearly translucent in the sunlight. "Greenpoint sounds nice."

"You mean, like the city?" Morgan inhaled sharply. Silent. "I've always wanted to go."

"We could see a show...see the sights," Cassie counted on her fingers, "...and I want to do a dude with a man bun."

"Cassie," said Morgan, "...Gross."

Cassie laughed and punched Morgan's shoulder playfully.

"Come *on*, Morgan!" She yelled through high-pitched giggles, "we need to get the *hell* out of Westchester! Everyone here is either dead or dying and we don't want to be the last ones left, right?"

"Cassie," Morgan started, "we have no money, no car, no-

"What did I call you back in seventh? Remember when we had homeroom with Herr Schlieben?" Cassie cut her off.

"In seventh?" Morgan asked. Cassie sighed.

"In English class, we were reading Shakespeare. Remember? Old Man Schofield's class. Remember *The Taming of the Shrew*?"

Morgan seized with laughter and covered her crimson face.

"I forgot to wear underwear and accidentally mooned the class?" she said through her hands.

"Morgan, you couldn't see him," Cassie said, "he was hyperventilating. *'Uh, Ms. Ravine? Did someone forget her panties this morning?'* What a fucking pig," she spat.

"Oh, my God," said Morgan, "I had to stay home for weeks. Everybody called me Margo Butts."

"Not even creative. At least my nickname stuck," said Cassie.

"Shelly Krasky told me her sister had Schofield and he got fired for kiddie porn. No one's seen him in months," said Morgan.

Cassie nodded into the wind with an even grin. "I've never seen a senior citizen turn so red. Oh my God, Morgan. You had him hot and bothered. Old Man Schofield definitely would have made the list."

Wind rattled through the bare, buzzing branches above them. Brought with it the familiar and nagging scent that had been making its way around town as of late. Perhaps it matched the sour scent of spoiled flesh from a dog food rendering plant or a foul waft of seasoned tires burning in the junkyard. Though no such filth was in miles of Westchester. People around here fought to keep what they thought of as “poisonous elements” like industry and waste far away from this place. Yet the stench had been noticeable, no doubt. Like a dried-up riverbed only airborne. Whenever you stepped outside it seemed to bounce off the tree trunks and rain down on you from these branches. Morgan cleared her throat.

“Remember when I got an I.S.S. after *defending* you against that jock prick, Derrick Kutler?” Cassie said, cutting the silence.

“Of course! ‘*Margo Butts, Margo Butts, Margo Butts-gimme your sandwich. Is your mama pretty?*’ and then you dumped your pudding on his head...and then the food fight! Mrs. Vernon was about to take a shit in the middle of the cafeteria. So pissed at you. You cackled like a fucking harpy all the way back to the office. I swear you’re still echoing in those halls. They still tell stories about you, Cassie.” said Morgan.

“Nobody fucks with my girl,” Cassie said with a smile.

“I still can’t believe you took an I.S.S. for me,” said Morgan, “Your Dad was *pissed*. I didn’t see you for weeks!”

“Worth every second, boo thang,” she playfully slapped Morgan’s thigh, “—And if you ever learned to *live a little* you’d be one the first bus out of this dump with me. Come on, Margo,” Cassie slid her hands down the sides of Morgan’s frame and tucked her fingers under the edge of her skirt, “Don’t you want all those city boys to see what you got?”

Morgan became lost for a moment in Cassie's eyes. Dark crystals buried in cascading desert sands. Deep pits of gorgeous, pulsing menace. Alive. Curious. Twitching. Grasping for manipulation. A new host. Or the same old host. Morgan couldn't tell what she was to Cassie sometimes. Even the slightest touch from her sent shockwaves through Morgan's psyche. Like adrenaline entering the bloodstream. Warm. Invited.

"Sounds fun," said Morgan with a sly smile, "when do we leave?"

The afternoon stench lingered in the aching air and the sky opened to reveal slowly spinning looms of circling clouds. Morgan suddenly recalled being a small child. Mouth food-smear. Wild-eyed and curious, she would dangle her legs off the big chairs in the waiting room at Dr. Tanner's dental office. The sun was always in her eyes. Dr. Tanner, would call her back into the chair from her mother's arms, opening the waiting room door and the door and bending down in front of her, smiling. His gray eyes were kind and when he smiled his wrinkles would scrunch up underneath them in three or four rows.

"We'll just put this on your nose and you'll get real sleepy," he said, placing the nozzle up to her face.

She would cross her arms and shake her head.

"No way!"

"Oh Morgan, don't be scared." *"I'm not scared!"*

She was always scared though. Ever since that moment, in fact. Every time she woke up in the dark. Ever since she was a little girl. Still scared. What made the shadows on the wall so haunting? Why was this refracted absence of light so upsetting to her? The wall had been there all day and it wasn't scary at all then. Morgan clenched her jaw.

They walked into Pete's Malt Shoppe on the corner of 4th St. and Pennsylvania around 1PM. The shop had a simple layout. Teal walls, a long bar that stretched to the back on the left and several booths stretching down the right side. A few customers sat at the bar and a couple sat towards the back. The girls picked a booth and sat down. They each ordered a cherry malt. Suddenly, the Shoppe's entry bell rang twice more.

"Oh, Jesus," said Cassie under her breath, "its Smiley."

Morgan quickly turned and saw Smiley entering the shoppe. A crooked smile hung on the side of his pocked face. Cassie's "sometime" boy toy. Not from the wrong side, but born on the tracks. He was a traveler kid who stopped through town every six months or so. Cassie met him at a haunted house last year. They made out in the parking lot. She said he smelled and tasted like river water. He would skip into town every few months with a new companion and the two of them would disappear for days. Morgan never knew his real name, but he called himself "Smiley" because he carried around a heavy padlock attached to a bandana that he would use to fend off miscreants and thieves on the road. Apparently, it could 'rip a smile across your face,' if flung just right. With the right amount of passion. Adrenaline. Menace. Cassie had never talked about Smiley to Morgan until she got tested last month and found out that she had transmitted herpes from him. *"Fucking river trash! Never again!"*

Smiley approached their booth with a day drunk confidence, fully aware that his odorous stench of cheap wine, stale tobacco and stratified filth was beginning to permeate the establishment and apparently reveling in the awkward scene he was creating.

"Ladies," he tipped the curled-up bill of his duct-taped Yankee's hat, "this is Freedom Marcher,"

Smiley's companion, skeletally thin and noticeably lacking bodily fluids, extended a decaying hand holding what appeared to be a skinny, unlit joint.

"Can we party in here?"

Cassie smiled and quickly looked around. Mr. Flaherty, the owner of the Shoppe, stood behind the counter drying pitchers. He frowned and shook his head at her.

"Probably have to step outside for that one, Freedom Marcher," said Smiley.

Outside again, the birds sang sweetly in the distance. Their calls were soon lost in the thick smog of cars and busses. Freedom Marcher sparked the joint.

"So, where'd you get your name?" Cassie asked him.

"We all call him that—" Smiley answered for him. "He's been out here longer than me, if you can believe it. How long, Freedom?"

"Nine years," said the decaying man, uncontrollably coughing and exhaling a violent, hot cloud of smoke which engulfed them. Morgan and Cassie coughed and politely fanned the smoke away. Smiley smiled.

"Out here since the age of nine and you still smoke like a little bitch, huh Freedom?" taunted Smiley.

Freedom Marcher spat a syrupy strip to the pavement and posed like a body builder. His under bitten jaw protruded and his toothless mouth became exposed. Morgan shot a concerned look to Cassie, who was more focused on Smiley. She watched him jump, clap and laugh like a five-year-old at his companion's antics. More analytical than smitten. More calculating than infatuated.

"Where ya headin' next?" Cassie said, taking a small puff from the joint.

Smiley heard her, dismissed her and looked back at her again. Apparently encountering a familiar tone from Cassie, he took a second to process her words. His sly smile disappeared momentarily but quickly re-emerged on the opposite side of his face.

“Wherever the wind takes me, mama,” he said.

Cassie smiled sweetly at him.

“You boys got time to take me on a walk?” she giggled.

Morgan’s heart skipped and then returned to its regularly scheduled programming. Had she heard her correctly?

“Cassie—” Morgan said, grabbing her wrist and whispering in her ear.

“Take it easy,” said Cassie, pulling her wrist away. “I just want to show them something.”

Fifteen minutes later, back inside the Shoppe, Morgan started opening sugar packets and separating the contents into several lines. She remembered some loft party Cassie had snuck them into downtown last summer. The first time she had ever actually seen lines of cocaine before. It wasn’t like the movies, less exciting. People huddled around a coffee table, staring at this strange powder. Cassie was always getting them into places like that. Morgan never knew how she did it, but she knew better than to ask.

A man who had been sitting at the counter when they walked in got up and came over to the table. Morgan sipped her cherry malt.

“Where’d your friend go?” came the man’s husky voice.

Morgan didn’t make eye contact. She turned and looked at a picture on the wall of Pete’s on its opening day in the sixties. Mr. Flaherty and his father standing proudly outside the Shoppe’s freshly colored storefront. Excited. Happy. Smiling.

“She’s getting our boyfriends,” said Morgan.

“Oh yeah? That so?” said the man, stooping to enter the booth. Seeing that Morgan’s feet were on the bench, he lightly lifted them up and put them on the ground. She sighed and readjusted, her cotton skirt squeaking across the vinyl-covered bench.

The man was young but had lived beyond his years. Morgan could be by his sandy skin and dirty work clothes that he was in construction. Like her Uncle Robby. Always drunk and tired. This man seemed awake, though. He smiled warmly. It was a nice smile, but Morgan sensed something else there. His eyes were pale blue and vaguely bloodshot. A Marlboro Red burned between his fingers. Ash from the tip slipped from the tip and landed gracefully on the table.

“Those boys in here earlier? They your boyfriends?” he said, smirking and exposing tobacco-tanned teeth.

“No,” Morgan said, “those were just some drifters. Our boyfriends play football. They’re like, *huge*. Should be here any minute. Maybe you can meet them! They’d really like you. Darren can bench 250, so he’s pretty much the sh—”

The Shoppe bell rang again. Cassie walked in and smiled, reaching the table and putting a hand on her hip.

“Well, who’s this, Morgan? You makin’ friends?” she squealed cutely. “Where’s Darren?” said the man.

Cassie paused. “Who the fuck is Darren?”

The man chuckled. “You know, I know these folks,” he said, motioning towards the back of the Shoppe. “The Flaherty’s? Me and Old Man Pete’s Son went to school together. These folks practically raised me. You know what Old Pete said to me when you two walked in? *Whores*. I said, ‘Now, hold on, Pete. You don’t know anything about these young ladies. They

look like proper young ladies to me. Then he says anyone who dresses like you two and they aint in a school is a *God. Damned. Whore.*”

“Well that’s not very nice at all,” said Cassie, sitting down next to Morgan. “I never said a bad thing about him my whole life,” she said with a smile.

The man scoffed and took a drag of his cigarette. He noticed the ash on the table and wiped it away.

“There’s bodies turning’ up, girls. I know you’ve heard of ‘em. That one two weeks ago they found in Ried Park. Two more in a station wagon under Watts Bridge. Nobody knows what’s going on these days. It’s just not a good time to be out and about on your own, even out here in Westchester. Especially dressed like *that*,” he said, pointing to their school uniforms and standing. “Now, Pete and I think it’s best if you let me give you girls a ride home.”

“Oh no, we have to—” Morgan started but was quickly cut off by Cassie’s alarmingly tight grasp around her wrist.

“Sounds great! We definitely need one, thank you so much! Oh, my god, what’s your name?” she beamed.

“Let’s call me Sal,” he said with a light laugh.

“Oh, my god, thank you so much, Sal! We so owe you!”

The scent suddenly ribboned up Morgan’s nostrils once again. She inhaled it quickly, like a bump. The three of them piled into a small pickup truck and Sal started the engine. They rolled out of the parking lot slowly and pulled onto the main strip of Pennsylvania.

“Uh, so...” he said, “Where do ya’ll live?”

“Could we just go back to your place? I’m getting kind of sleepy,” Cassie said, reaching over and lightly dragging her fingers across his thigh. Morgan let out an involuntary and audible sigh that permeated the cab.

“Well, uh...” Sal snorted, “Sure,” he said, laughing. “Your friend over there know how to relax?”

“She’s cool,” Cassie said, turning to Morgan, “She’s just shy.”

Morgan watched through her window as they drove. House after house that she knew became less and less and less familiar. Houses she had grown up in, houses with giant porches and swings that she used to sleep on all afternoon soon became vacant apartments and liquor stores.

Sal stopped the car on a block full of low-rent housing. He pointed out his window. “This is me...” he said, stepping out of the truck.

The girls hopped out of the truck and walked towards the house. It was a modest one story with vinyl siding. It had a porch, but the front of the house was obstructed by a large amount of scrap metal and junk. There were bumpers, frames of trucks, and broken arcade games strewn all over the porch, leaving only a small entry way that lead to the front door. As Sal limped up to the porch, he turned around and motioned them to come in. “Come on, girls, I won’t bite!”

“Okay!” Cassie said, starting towards the house.

Morgan quickly grabbed her arm and said, “Cassie, we have to get out of here—this place looks like a skeezy junkyard.”

“Don’t worry about it, Margo,” she said, pinching Morgan’s ass, “it’s going to be a party!”

Cassie ran up to the house like a five-year-old to an ice cream truck. Morgan dimly followed. Inside the house was much like the porch. In fact, it seemed that it didn't matter where Terry kept his junk, because it was strewn about all over the property indiscriminately. Old neon signs from bars were thrown around like pillows. Some were shattered and some were still flickering. Old clothes seemed to fill every crack between the sprawling smorgasbord of scrap. There were car engines lining the walls and the place reeked of steel and rust. There was a small living room, a dining room which had two doorways, one leading into a bedroom and another leading into the kitchen. In the living room, there was a small love seat in facing a television.

Morgan sat down on an exposed cushion of a dingy, faded orange couch, expecting Cassie to do the same. Instead, Cassie opted to remain standing, remove her shirt and throw it to Morgan. Sal and Cassie began to kiss. He was about a foot and a half taller than she was and had to stoop down quite a bit. They stumbled backwards, narrowly avoiding a large popcorn machine, and went into the next room.

Morgan heard them in the bedroom. Quiet whispers, familiar moans and unhinged shrieks. Soon, the only sound from Cassie came in the form of quiet, controlled whimpers. The sound of a coal miner chipping away at a particularly unforgiving section of rock.

She looked around the darkened room. Finding no solace in the old television or the buzzing refrigerator in the distance, she closed her eyes. She was suddenly in the gym at their school. This was a volleyball game against Crestwood's arch-rivals, the girls from Woodside Hills. After taking a seat towards the top of the bleachers, Morgan suddenly heard Cassie's familiar rubs and the moans of a pleased Lacrosse player coming from underneath the bleachers. She quickly ran to the side and went under the bleachers, careful not to be seen. As she crept towards the moans the loud cheers of the fans rippled above, and their feet stomped on the

bleachers, sending dust and cobwebs cascading downward. Morgan saw the back of Cassie's head towards the end of the bleachers. She approached and saw that Cassie was vigorously rubbing Todd McGrath. Tears welled up in Morgan's eyes at the sight of this, because she had always told Cassie how much of a crush she had on Todd. Morgan became infuriated and rushed the two, shoving Cassie to the ground and slapping Todd in the face. "You bitch!" Morgan yelled at Cassie, who was crouched in the shadows. "How could you do this to me, Cassie?!" Morgan screamed. The fans stopped clapping and the feet stopped stomping.

Everyone was listening to them. Cassie stood and moved into the light. What Morgan saw appeared to be Cassie's face, but she had aged significantly. Her blonde hair had streaks of gray and all the youth in her face was gone, replaced by strands of weathered wrinkles. As she opened her mouth to speak, her teeth began to fall out, as she said, "I've been doing this to you for years, Morgan,"

Suddenly, she was wrenched from her sleep. Cassie was yelling to her from somewhere far away. She lunged up from the couch.

"Morgan! Morgan, he's got me!" she yelled from the bedroom. "Shut the fuck up!" came Sal's muffled command.

Morgan quickly looked around the room.

"My purse!" yelled Cassie. Morgan saw Cassie's purse and dumped its contents onto the couch. There, among her possessions, was the answer. Smiley's Smiley. The blue bandana soaked dark red. The padlock stained. She quickly seized it and ran to the bedroom, kicking the door open and swinging the weapon in wide circles. Sal had Cassie by the wrists, and was holding a knife to her throat. One swing from the smiley put a dent in the back of his head. He dropped the knife, fell to his knees and emitted a hoarse gasp.

“Cut me loose,” said Cassie. She was shirtless, panting and pulsing from the adrenaline. “He must have given us something, Margo,” she said. “I passed out and I woke up and he was on top of me with the knife. Fucking pig!”

Morgan picked up the knife and cut through the plastic wrap around Cassie’s wrists. Cassie quickly stood and wobbled over to where Terry was slumped in the corner. She delivered a sharp kick to the back of his head.

“Didn’t even give me a chance to shoot down his weird shit,” said Cassie, dropping to the ground. “These pervs, Margo. I can’t even-” She found her blouse and began to button it up.

“So, Greenpoint?” she laughed.

Ten Sleep

At first, I didn't hear the Sheriff. It was probably about three in the afternoon. I remember listening to a Heart record, Dreamboat Annie, sitting on a footstool in my bedroom and painting my toe nails. As side one faded out, I heard three loud thumps on our front door downstairs. It had the authoritative delivery and impending urgency of a narc knock. Who knocked anyway? Nobody even came up the hill, usually.

I heard Mama yelling from the kitchen, "Who in the hell is-" then breaking glass, "Marla!" I bit my lip. I got up and tiptoed into the hallway to the top of the steps, crouching down quietly. Mama came to the front door and opened it, cursing to herself. Her feet and ankles, taut, wiry and slippered in dirty flannel, stood and faced the Sheriff's jet black, polished Chippewa Patrol Boots. Mama pushed the screen door open.

"Hiya, there, Laura-Beth..." the Sheriff said, tapping his toes at the sight of her and taking a few steps back. The old, wooden porch creaked beneath his lanky frame.

Mama put her left hand on her hip and leaned against the door frame, lightly stroking our patterned, light-blue wall paper inside the entryway with the right. "Hey Earl," she said, initially acknowledging him like her regulars down at Big Boy's, but then with the fondness of an old flame, "what you needin', Sugar?"

"Uh, well..." The Sheriff stammered slightly and jiggled his knees below his pleated tan trousers. "Sorry to bother ya, LB, I know you've got a ranch to run here," he said, taking off his hat in a show of respect. "It's actually concernin' a couple things...is Ralph home?"

Mama twisted her hips a bit, ignoring the serious nature of the question and stating foxily, "Not at the moment, Earl."

“You two still gettin’ on?” The Sheriff begged.

Mama let out a cackled bolt of laughter, dropping her chin to her chest and punching the Sheriff playfully. “Ralph’s my baby’s daddy, Earl. You know we always gettin’ on,” she said.

“Oh- I see.,” he said, a little disappointed. He let out an unnecessary cough. “Just, uh, tryin’ to get a figure on his whereabouts...See, uh, your neighbors? Up on Barker over there? The Porters?” he asked.

“Who- Rita and Lou?” Mama asked, “What about ‘em?”

“Well,” The Sheriff paused, putting his hat back on and placing his hands on his belt, “The Frey folks up the road there found Lou’s Suburban stickin’ ass-up outta Old Buzzard Pond this mornin’. Nobody inside. Found some sets of boot tracks leadin’ back up to I-25, but not much else. They’re draggin’ the pond right now.”

Mama was silent.

“...and uh,” The Sheriff continued uncomfortably, “...checked up there at the Porter house but uh...”

“But what, Earl? Are they ok?” Mama said somewhat impatiently.

“Welp...saw the smoke from Watchahee Road before I even got up there. Whole place was lit up. Had to call Fritz and them volunteer boys to come out there. Took ‘em a couple hours, but they got it out. Whole place is torched. No sign of Lou or Rita. State boys got wind of it and they’re headin’ up from HQ now. Should be in town in a few hours. Just figured I’d stop by here before they come askin’. No word from Ralph today, then?”

Mama breathed sharply through her nose and shifted her weight to her left side. Her voice dropped down a few octaves and her speech came out flat. “He’s been out on the road for six weeks or so now. Ozz-Fest,” she lied.

“Ozz-fest...I see,” the Sheriff said, chuckling a bit. “Now, I’ve always wondered...how much does a roadie make on a gig like that?”

Mama ignored the question, appearing to notice something. She slowly knelt down in front of the Sheriff, peering into his gleaming Chippewa boots. “Earl,” she said, “You’d better be shinin’ these here boots.” She smudged at the surface of his right toe, “folks might start callin’ you lazy,” she said through a soft grin.

Mama told me once that the Sheriff was her first. She said they went steady in high school and that she only broke up with him because Pop drove a T-Bird. The Sheriff was the real catch, though.

Class president, a good Christian and what Mama called “McQueen’s face, Redford’s hair and Newman’s butt.” That always made me cringe a little. He told her he would be true until marriage, but prom night and a pint of Rumple Minze spun a different tale. She said they spent the night in the back of his truck up on Valley View Ridge and that it was “true blue beautiful.” They kept it up for a few months, goin’ to parties and movies together and the like. Then she met Pop and seemed to just forget about the Sheriff altogether. Never seemed to forget that she had him wrapped around her finger, though, even twenty-five years later.

Mama being who she was to him, and looking how she did that day, all pretty and angry and staring up at him like that seemed to send jolts of electricity through the Sheriff’s body. He nervously stepped backward from her, guiding her back to her feet by her shoulders.

The Sheriff chuckled a little, nervously ignoring Mama’s advance. “Ozz-fest?” he cleared his throat, “Aint that not ‘til April this year?”

There was a long silence and Mama took a few slow steps back from the Sheriff. She began shrugging indifferently, and her voice returned to that bitter register from before. “Well,

shit. That's where he said he went, Earl. I never know the difference anyhow! Everybody in town knows he's always takin' off on me! Weeks at a time. Months! Whores here, strippers there. Who the hell knows? It's Ralph fuckin' Rosewater. The man's got shit in his skull and the cock of an eleven-year-old! Did you check in all the urinals and ash trays at Deja Vu?! Or...the jerk-booths at The Phoenix!? Yeah, that's where you can find him. You know he's got a runnin' tab at every titty bar in Ten Sleep, for fuck's sake!"

"Sorry, LB, didn't mean any-" The Sheriff said, stepping back defensively, "Look, just wanted to know if ol' Ralphie and the gang been out lately...at night..."

"Don't call him 'Ralphie,' Earl. We aint fifteen, we damn sure aint at Garfield no more, and like I said, I aint seen him in weeks!" Mama hissed.

The Sheriff paused again. He seemed very put off by Mama's change in demeanor. "How 'bout them other boys? Terry? Hog Leg? They been around?" The Sheriff pleaded, noticing Mama was beginning to shut the door.

"Aint seen 'em. Now fuck off, Earl," she said, closing the door. There was a brief silence outside followed by the Sheriff's Chippewa's softly plodding down the porch steps. Mama shuttered quietly to herself in the dark, then turned and walked to the base of the steps, taking notice of me. Shafts of light from the window behind me illuminated her face. The fluorescent lights and hovering tobacco clouds at Big Boy's may not have done her skin any favors over the years, but her beauty remained, stoic and eternal. Her face was rounded smoothly and was framed stunningly by her dark black hair, thick and wild in the hallway light. At forty, Linda Ronstadt looked it. But Mama at forty looked like Linda at twenty- five: wild, free and intensely alluring. Mama wiped the tears from her eyes, deep black lagoons surrounded by thin tendrils of

blood. She looked up at me, “You best be lettin’ me mention it to your Daddy.” Thick tears streamed down her cheeks.

I stood up and started to walk down the steps towards her. She put her hand up and I stopped. I put my hand on the wallpaper and grazed the surface for a moment. “You think he still loves you, Mama?” I asked.

“Oh, Marla,” she said, “what the fuck do you know about it anyway?” She walked back into the kitchen.

I looked down at my toes. Fresh neon green polish beamed back at me. I noticed the tattoo of a tiger lillie on the outer arch of my right foot that I hated now. I remembered the day I snuck into town to get it. It was two years ago, I was fourteen. The shop smelled like cat food and the tattoo artist’s name was Fang. He was quite good, and very sweet to me. I wrapped my toes over the lip of the step, closed my eyes and took a deep breath. As I exhaled I opened my eyes and looked to my right, noticing an old framed picture on the wall of Mama and Pop when they first started dating. They were standing in the yard by Grandpa’s tire swing, wearing matching 38 Special “Special Delivery ‘78” t-shirts, his hand on her ass, her laugh beaming audibly, his gap-toothed grin settling in slyly. I sighed and went back to my room.

* * *

At about four-thirty I heard Pop pulling’ up the gravel drive in his old F150. As the truck approached the ranch, I heard something that sounded like horrible, wet concrete blasting out of the cab. Pantera, maybe. Then, as Pop screeched to a halt and slammed the truck into park, several overlapping, incoherent Jaeger-yells, whiskey- “whoops” and bourbon burps erupted into the dusking sky. I looked out my bedroom window. Hog Leg, burly as a brown bear and wide as a doublewide, hopped out of the truck bed. His snakeskin boots left massive divots in the mud

beneath. Then Terry, a malnourished snake of a man, constantly wincing and wheezing, popped his head up from out of the cab. Then came Pop. He slammed his door hard, neglecting to turn off the engine, and stumbled quickly into the house. Terry lit up a smoke and chuckled. “Walk on home, boy...” *Pantera* proclaimed from the blown-out speakers to the cascading corn fields surrounding us.

“Laura!” Pop called to her, the screen door slamming shut, “Laura-Beth! Where the fuck are you?!”

“Basement,” came Mama’s muffled call from below. Pop had the door open by the second syllable, his steel-toed Caterpillars thumping mercilessly down the thin softwood planks to the dirt floor below. I struggled to make out what Pop was saying through the two sets of floorboards. It sounded like he kept saying “Darrel.” Darrel who? Mama had talked about a Father Darrel from church, but I didn’t know what Pop could possibly want with him. Mama wasn’t saying anything back, from what I could tell. I couldn’t tell much with that dang radio on outside.

I went back to the window and looked down at the boys. Hog smoked and Terry chewed and spat in the mud. *Pantera* gave way to Seger’s “Katmandu.” |A very odd transition. Hog Leg noticed this and went back into the cab to change the radio station. Terry looked up and noticed me. He pushed a strip of black tobacco through his teeth at the mud and let loose with a sleazy whistle. “Hey there, Marla the Mouse! How’s about you come down and party with us?”

“Shut the fuck up, Terry,” Hog said from inside the cab. He stopped the tuner at Living Colour’s “Cult of Personality” and turned it up.

Mama and Pop were upstairs and in the kitchen now. I stooped by the vent in my room to hear them better.

“Well, what the fuck did he say?!” Pop demanded. “Just...askin’ about you and them,” Mama replied. “What about them?” he yelled.

“Just, if you was out huntin’ is all. I told him you was on the road,” said Mama, slightly annoyed.

“Bullshit. You told him. I know you still got it for Earl,” he said.

“I didn’t tell him shit, Ralph. You know I got no reason to rat on you,”

“How long ago? Where’d he go?” Pop asked angrily.

“An hour or so? Didn’t say where he was headed. Probably went up to talk to Lester up the way. Aint no one gonna find ‘em, babe, there’s no one for miles-”

“What about the fucking state cops? You said-”

“He said they was comin’ but they aint here yet. He doesn’t know anything, Ralph, I’m tellin’ you. Look, why don’t you just take ‘em up somewhere quiet, Red Tail Lake or Bearville or somewheres? Somewhere no one goes. Just dump ‘em and head back.”

There was silence for a while. “Cult of Personality” faded out and Pink Floyd’s “Another Brick in the Wall.” Pop must have been thinking. Probably fixing his eyes on the black and white linoleum clashing with the olive-green cabinets. Maybe looking around the room, thinking of what he could use to bash Mama’s skull in. A single bead of sweat cascaded down my spine. Something didn’t sound right down there.

“I know you told someone else, Laura-Beth,” came Pop’s hollow, cold voice. “You called Maggie or Lester or told one of them cunts down at the diner. Terry said Jagfish was askin’ about it-” “Ralph, it aint surprisin’-” Mom cut him off, “there aint but 1500 people in town. Word’s gonna spread.” “If Jagfish knows, everyone knows,” Pop fired back. “He’s a

fuckin' meth goat! He don't even live in the same world as us! He aint got no friends. Who the hell would be talkin' to Jagfish?"

"I don't know...fuckin' Terry, for one, said so yourself," she said. I heard Mama's lighter igniting her tenth Salem of the day. She exhaled deeply.

"Terry's not-" Pop started, then stopped himself. "This aint how this should be goin' down, Laura-Beth. Terry and Hog was with me all night-"

"Where you been, by the way?" Mama cut in again, "Bubba's? The Holy Diver? Earl's goin' after your ass, that's for sure."

"Mention that cunt again and they'll find you in that pond," Pop jabbed. "Real nice, Ralph," said Mama.

More silence. I could feel the air changing in the house. Darkness suddenly began to consume every wire, piece of drywall and light bulb. I could feel every bathroom tile and mirror shatter and every floorboard begin to char. I knew he was about to do it, but I could do nothing. There were no chains holding me back. I did not have feet made of cement. No unseen force was holding me there in my room. I had every muscle available, every young, healthy bone that could have been used to save her. I had the unbending will of a mother myself, something she had taught me at a very young age. Perhaps because she thought that I could save her from him. But, she must have known that he was much too powerful for that.

There was a brief scuffling sound, a dish falling to the floor and the table rubbing harshly against the linoleum. I heard Mama yell, "Don't you-" and then an incalculable block of black silence. Then there was Pops boots on the basement steps again. Slow, deliberate. I heard him moving things around in the basement, then the horrible creaking sound of the hinges to that ancient crawl space door grinding against each other. I heard a soft whimper, maybe Rita, and

then Pop tellin' it to "shut the fuck up." The door shut again. Then he was back up the steps, bounding through the hall and back out to the front drive. Outside, Pop slurred loudly over the Guess Who's "American Woman," "Let's fuck this shit up, boys! Goin' to Lester's!" Whistles and whoops, doors slamming and tires skidding followed. As they pulled out, Hog looked up at me from the truck bed and waved. I closed my eyes.

Mal Content and the Birds at No-Name Lake

The void never openly presents itself. There are never any pre- texts or warning flares from the void. It just shows up one day like a drunk dad or a census worker knocking down your door. When it's in the room it's the biggest, ugliest sonofabitch you've ever seen in your life. And it always sticks around. Like the daytime drunks down at Whitey Pete's. Flesh funnels for water beer and flash fried starch. Perched on groaning bar stools with shoulder blades jutting, gray lungs wheezing, dead eyes televisioning. No purpose. No wants. Needs. Grinning parasites who stick around purely to bum you out. Bum your cigarettes. Bum the fucking day away.

Today was Friday. August Twelfth, two thousand nine. Today, the void had presented itself to me in the form of a shattered windshield on a silver 1979 Mercedes Benz 450 SL. I sat at my desk and sipped lukewarm Folger's from a tanned mug that read "My Boss is An Asshole" in black bold lettering. The dim shop hummed. It smelled like the motor oil that stained the floors, the green mold that surrounded the leaking hole in the ceiling and Virgil's old McDonald's from last week that he left in the minifridge. I examined the windshield. Spider-webbed. Something big had collided with the front of this thing. The look of the shatter spread suggested it happened at a high speed as well. Shop phone rang three times.

"You've have reached Bledsoe Auto Glass & Tire," Virgil's rum- soaked voice buzzed from the answering machine, *"Open Monnay to Fridee, eight a' seven. This August, sss'thousand and nine, all winnshield replacements will be half off for new cussomers. God be with ya. Thanks."*

I was up to my eyeballs in shattered safety glass. Twenty new customers in one week. Two employees. I hadn't been back home to Ma and Dan's in days. I'd had nothing to eat but coffee and coffee cake. My bowels were crumbling buildings. I had reached a familiar point of

depression that I have labeled “Can’t Stop Envisioning My Funeral,” where I try to cycle through everyone who would stumble up to my coffin and what they would say. How many could there possibly be? I mean, I wasn’t going to make the headlines or anything. What, “Thirty-Four-Year-Old Auto Detailer Quietly Slips into the Void?” “Washed up Noise Musician Might as Well Have Been Dead Already?” “Schlubby Nihilist Ceases to Exist, World Persists in Not Giving a Fuck?”

What God would they pretend to pray to? What God would they pray to? Which Throbbing Gristle Record would I want to be playing? Would my corpse have a face? Would I be so weird as to request an open casket if I had died losing my face? It would be funny, sure, but only to me, and I wouldn’t really be around.

The answering machine beeped. *“Mal, it’s Virgil, I’ll be in in twenty. Got into some shit last night. I’ll see ya soon.”*

“Some shit” for Virgil usually meant: “1. coke 2. stripper 3. screaming,” in that order but this sounded like it could be more like, “1. stripper 2. skydiving 3. where’s the stripper?”

I stood and walked over to the Benz. I looked closely at the point of impact. In the center of the web I could see a few wispy threads. I plucked them out. Brown, black and white feathers. We’d seen shields with bird collisions in here before but never a fragmenting this widespread. Someone must have hit a hawk on the highway. Probably scared some yuppie shitless. I started to go about removing the shield by cutting it out of the pinch well with my urethane cut out knife.

I never saw myself in this moment. It is one of the most important moments of my life, but I could never possibly realize it until much later. I was Saul on the road to Dumbasscus before this exact point in time. And I can pinpoint it because everything was the same for so long

before this moment. I had been visionless for decades. Swimming around inside a water tower somewhere in Montana screaming into echoed blackness. Strung out on just about anything someone would hand me. Micro dosing LSD daily. Shrooms for an afternoon snack. Molly for dessert. Everything had been leading up to this moment.

After I was done cutting around the shield I noticed something sitting in the front seat: a Korg twelve track digital recorder. The same kind I had used when the band was still active. I could remember spending hours in Ma and Dan's basement recording hideous demos of Dan's power tools all mixed over each other, looped over each other in a constant stream of muddled madness.

"She's pregnant, Mal!" Virgil yelled as he entered the shop. "There. Fuck it. I told ya. Where's the Lamb's?"

I turned from the Benz, "On your desk. Who?"

Virgil stormed across the greasy shop from the front door to the desk, his balding head glistening beneath the dangling white hot fluorescent shop lights.

"Who? What?" he said, grabbing the bottle from the desk and spinning the top off impatiently.

"Who's pregnant?" I asked.

"Y...y..." he started, pouring the golden-brown rum into his black coffee mug, dropping the bottle and sipping nervously.

"It's...Michelle,"

"Michelle? That the uh...Librarian lady?" I asked.

"Nah, the waitress lady. It's your Mom...Michelle," he said, sipping and soaking rum into his bushy blonde mustache.

I felt all the blood in my arms and legs suddenly gather into my face. My brain began to boil. I struggled to remember the last drug I had consumed and what effects it could be having on me. Ate the last cap at three. I looked at the digital clock on my desk. Four fifteen.

“Look, Mal,” Virgil said, “she and Dan have been goin’ through some shit, and, she came by looking for you one night when you were up at Whitey’s and— “

I threw the cut-out knife on the shop floor and walked to the passenger side door of the Benz. I opened the door and pulled out the D12.

“What are you doing with that, Mal?” Virgil yelled, “That belongs to a customer! You don’t know who’s that is!”

“Whoever the fuck it belongs to, tell ‘em you’re paying for it. Fuck you, Virgil. I quit.” I said, and exited the shop.

* * *

I planned to leave for No-Name that night. Waited outside Ma and Dan’s until I saw her leave for her night shift at Whitey’s. Virgil. Fucking *Virgil, Mom?* How in the hell did she land on him? The crooked teeth, the eczema, the gas, the inevitable hemorrhoids, “Barb-zilla, the ex from hell,” all the bacne, the horrible tufts of unnecessary hair peeking out of his shorts, the blisters, the bleeding, those fucking short-sleeve dress shirts, the sores, the sweat, the glass, the shop, the boss. My boss. Me.

I watched her exit the little ranch house and get into her green Dodge Neon. A pretty, puffy, pale brunette. Sad in the face but still happy in her memories. Fifty-five and feeling it. Now pregnant with her second mistake. I looked at my eyes in the rearview. Slits revealing bloodshot pools. Strands of silver woven with crow black on top of a cro-magg’d skull. Sunken eyes, heavy black and white beard, my big fucking nose. The gap in my front teeth that never got

fixed. I took my braces off with pliers one summer. I wanted to kiss girls. I ended up kissing some boys instead but it was all very interesting. I watched Ma reverse and drive away. I got out of my Jeep and approached the house. It looked like Dan's truck was nowhere to be seen. Probably flew the coop. He wouldn't be Dan if he didn't.

I entered the house through the side door and walked down the basement steps to my room. I gathered all the clothes I could find on the floor and shoved them into trash bags. A large vinyl tent and sleeping bag. Then I grabbed some of Dan's power tools. He probably wouldn't be missing any of his stuff too much from the champagne room at Chesty's, anyway. A Milwaukee M18 cordless drill. A Craftsman C3 sawzall. A Porter Cable six point five-inch circular saw. Two halogen work lamps with stands. A six by six piece of sheet metal. Then I got the most important piece I needed: Dan's Champion dual fuel generator, able to run for eight hours on one tank of gas. I went upstairs to the kitchen and raided the pantry for food, taking all the canned goods I could. Filled up three large plastic jugs of drinking water. Then, back down stairs to grab my microphones, pedals, keyboards, guitar, processors, my PA equipment and all the Adderall I could find on my dresser drawers. I loaded everything into the Jeep and peeled out of the neighborhood.

I drove west through Browning on I89, twisting through the dusk air to the dark rhythms and sounds of Bauhaus. I began to forget that I was even running. Psilocybin pulsed through my brain cavities. Bright orange cracks suddenly cascaded across my windshield. I didn't stop, I could see everything perfectly. A fiery blue phoenix erupted from the dashboard and cut the windshield into a dried up, cracked canyon floor. The stereo speakers buzzed warmly as Peter Murphy crooned vacantly, *"He's a God in an Alcove/Take in view his empty stool/What's left is*

satin cool.” I took a deep breath and stared out at the sun dipping down behind the western Montana Mountainside.

Mal Content, the band, started when I was in high school with these weird noise collages I would make. I started where everyone else did at my age. The radio. I loved Zeppelin, CCR and Bowie at first. Then, when I was fifteen, thanks to the discovery of Miles Davis, I moved into the more obscure: Coltrane, Hancock, Howlin’ Wolf and then into full-on avant-garde: Lou Reed, Beefheart and Philip Glass. I tried to take up guitar but struggled to grasp it as something other than a weapon of sound. I tried drums but they were the same.

Despite my lack of natural skill, though, I still had a strong desire to make something musical. I desired undesirable and experimental sounds from traditional instruments. I began to see how much is left in the in between spaces. The whited out, forgotten haunts of sound. I began to crave the sound of creative chaos. One day I forgot that Lou Reed’s *Machine Metal Music* was on in my bedroom and I went into the living room to turn on Zeppelin’s *Houses of the Holy*. When I walked to the bathroom I could hear both records equally from their respective rooms in the house. A vibrant, jagged sheen projected over a deeply driving drumbeat. Vocals deemed inaudible above the chaotic server of the music. Guitars and borrowed machine sounds all mixing together in chaotic unity in between two perfectly dense layers of sound. This is the music that I had always wanted to make. Unexpected, original and pure.

I had Ma’s JVC Boom box, which I would use to record the radio off the home stereo in our living room. I would then play that recording over a different radio station, creating a chaotic jumble of jingles and advertising, music and reporting. I would then record that mess with a Panasonic cassette recorder I had found at a local thrift store. Sometimes I would gargle

nonsense over it until I either passed out under the endless loop or the batteries would run out on the recorder. I made my first demo under the name Mal Content in two thousand. The demo tape was called *Faceless Feces*. I duplicated, printed and packaged two hundred and fifty cassettes myself and started shopping them around to all the weird record stores, venues and magazines I could find. No stranger to piss-soaked basement shows or bombed out, illegal bonfires during that time, I tended to be more familiar with Browning's freakier side. Duster huffers. Train kids. Drunk punks. Drug punks.

Then came Vicky. Vicky the Vex. We met at *Hardcore Ralph's Going Away Bash* at Gutbusters up in Browning back in two thousand one. She was completely stunning. Her head was half shaved, half neon purple and black electric eel. Heavy dark eye shadow, a nose ring and porcelain skin. She wore a leather mini skirt, torn fishnets and a Circle One Germs shirt. I instinctively reached into my pocket for a copy of my demo and started towards her. Suddenly, the music playing over the PA, *Suicide's* "Frankie Teardrop" stopped abruptly, and she started walking up towards the stage. A lanky, shirtless bass player gave her a hand up and she was suddenly behind a drum kit. The bass amp on stage rumbled to life and she clicked her sticks together three times, starting the song on an unexpected four beat. I was hooked instantly. The two-piece rumbled through six instrumental, bass-driven rock songs unlike anything I'd ever heard before. After their set, I saw her sitting at the bar and approached her.

"This is my tape," I said, shoving it towards her like an idiot.

She smiled uncomfortably and took the tape, "Right...thanks," she said, placing it on the bar with disinterest.

I started an odd cycle of body language that I had adapted as a young man when speaking to someone of the opposite sex who I found incredibly attractive. There was the counting of

conversation holes, the uncomfortable shifting of weight from leg to leg, all the sighing. Where are you supposed to look? Directly into the eyes? Isn't that a bit jarring? Does that looking at the eyebrows thing work? Let's try that. I finally made another attempt at breaking the ice.

"Yeah, it's just like eight movements I composed at my Mom's house. Not gonna lie, it does lack melody. But, having' just seen you up there in—" I waited.

"Oh," she said, "we're called *Lamb Chop*,"

I laughed. "Wait, seriously?"

She smiled back, "High school band," she said shrugging.

"Oh right, I totally get that. My band name was my AOL screen name. My real name is Malachai."

She suddenly stopped and picked the demo tape backup. "Holy shit," she said. Her eyes lit up. "*You're Mal Content? I actually love your shit, dude!*"

"Oh yeah?" I asked, ego catapulted to the heavens.

"Yeah, totally," she said, pushing back the bright, violet slash of hair behind her ear and turning the cassette over. "You're totally like all over college rock radio right now, man. I mean, really, they are *pumping your stuff*, dude!"

"W—wait," I said, "are you serious?" I remembered handing out about thirty tapes over the last few weeks. Not that many, but hey, maybe I was just *that good*. Sure, I wouldn't call it commercial, accessible or even "enjoyable," but it's got its moments. Cobain came from *somewhere*, man.

"Oh yeah, *totally*, dude," Vicky said. "What's the first song? "Fistfucker?" Yep, KJHX is totally blasting that one on heavy rotation, man. Oh, and... "Dog Pissing on Cat Pissing?" Yeah,

that's a deep cut for sure, I bet you can't wait until the suits get ahold of that one, huh? Feel-good hit of the summer! *Fistfucker!*" she faked the chorus, revealing a sparkling gold incisor.

"Alright," I said, feeling the blood in my face, "I get it. You've never heard of me."

She laughed. "No. No man, I have not. I have not heard of Mal Content, or Roostercock or even Half-Fucked Corpse Cadaver yet. I don't get out that much."

"Yeah, that's cool." I said, "Me either. Not much of a scene guy. I do dig HFCC though. The name's a little redundant, sure, but this one time? I saw those guys clear a packed house at the Belfry in just *two* songs. There's something' there, I'm tellin' ya."

She laughed again. "Alright, Mal. I'll listen to it, Promise."

Two weeks later she called and asked if I needed a drummer. So, there we were. A band. It went well too, for a while. A compilation album. A tour with *Grievance*, this huge black metal band from Helena. A residency at a local art bar, *Faggot*. We had six solid months before I A-bombed the whole thing to shit. Death, destroyer of worlds.

* * *

"Ok, Vic, I know you hate me. I know that. I know you've got nothing to say to me and I might as well be yelling at a brick wall on the other side of this door, but I need you to hear me right now. I didn't do it. I would never have done that to you knowingly. Look, we're a team. We were great together. Think of all the money we used to make at Three Headed Thursdays down at the Merrimac! Enough to pay your rent and buy us enough—" I paused, glancing around the apartment hallway and lowering my voice to a whisper, "*acid* to put us on *the moon* for *weeks*. Think of all the shit we can do! Just give me a tape machine and you a drum kit and we could go forever. Come on, Vic. You must believe me. I'd never steal from the band. Never in a million years."

Silence. Easily thirty seconds of silence.

“But George up at Merrimac said he paid you last time, Mal,” she said from behind the door, sounding muffled and hurt. “And I asked you and you said you didn’t have shit. I had to pay my phone bill with plasma money, dude! You know I fucking hate needles!”

“Vic, I’m sorry. You stormed out before I had a chance to tell you,” I said, “and you’ve been so pissed at me ever since. Not returning texts, emails. Fine, fuck it. I gave it to my Ma, ok? I should have told you. You’re right. But she’s *sick*, Vic. Her insomnia meds...they’re through the roof and you know Whitey’s doesn’t exactly offer the best healthcare plan. Maybe a first aid kit under a urinal. You know how hard she works, but she was a little short last month so I helped her out, that’s all. She said not to tell anyone. You know how she can get when money’s involved.”

Thirty more seconds.

“Is she ok?” her hidden voice asked the carpet.

“Yeah,” I said, “well, I don’t know. She’s pregnant, Vic. It’s fucking Terry’s...and...I don’t know, that’s kind of why I came to see you. I want us to get the band back together. Let’s just do something crazy and head out west to No Name and just record something! We can just make it all up! We were never huge writers anyway. What do you think? You know I’m nothing without you,” I bit my lip until it wanted to bleed and stared out at the popcorn ceiling’d hallway. The papered walls dripped with waxy fog and a nicotine-stained awareness. Then the door opened.

She stood in the entryway wearing a black two-piece swimsuit underneath a shredded-up Huey Lewis and the News “Sports” shirt. Her head was now clean-shaven. I had not seen her in weeks. Her tattoos, scattered but bold in design, were aligned along her calves and thighs with a

careful fascination. An upside-down cross that would appear face up to her was just above her knee. A beetle's antenna could be seen wrapping around her lower thigh. A cluster of cartoon stars ran up and down to her left ankle. Mal could see her at every age she got tattooed. Eighteen, at her best friend Nora's house, bawling uncontrollable tears and downing Fuzzy Navel Boone's Farm to endure a stick-and-poke silhouette of a crow on her right ankle. At twenty, trying not to cry in front of some burly troll with braided facial hair and a *Zakk Wylde* shirt tracing an etching she made of her Mother's face into her calf with a hydraulic, ink filled tattoo gun. Twenty-eight, not batting an eye as that same troll injected 'Snake' in bold gothic type on the inside of the other calf.

"Snake?" I remember asking her over Happy Hour cheese fries and High Life's at Whitey's one day. "Please tell me this was a relative — "

"We used to fuck," she said, laughing and slurping up a strip of mozzarella.

Or her at thirty, having it removed with a laser for five times what it cost in the first place. No tears shed.

"I'm ready," she said, shutting her apartment door behind her. "Don't you want pants?" I warned, "It's the fucking woods, Vic. I don't know how long we'll be out there."

"It's cool," she said, "I got my bug spray."

* * *

About forty miles west of Browning on 89, past Two Medicine Campground, nestled in the Rising Wolf Mountain Range sits No Name Lake. A serene blue pool surrounded by lush greenery and boney brown rock. It was only reachable by a frontage road which lead to an uncharted service road. Ma took us up there all the time when I was a kid, before Dad found out about Dan. He would drive us up there, stick the two of us in a boat with a few rods and push us

out onto the lake, waving bon voyage and then laying out on the shore for hours. He'd sleep off the drunk from the drive and wake up to a late afternoon breakfast of tequila and sardines. Ma and I would sit on the lake for hours. Hooks dangling beneath the surface un-baited. Walleye scoffing at our laziness as they circled the bed of the lake. Ma, young then, lying in the little chipping red fishing boat under rose-tinted frames, sweating sweetly in jean shorts and a "Mello Yello" tank top. Wild, unhinged sunlight danced down onto her walnut-blond singed hair. She'd lie there while I swatted at mosquitoes and ask me about my girlfriends, my music, school. I never told her the whole truth about any of it. That there were no girlfriends, just nerdy boys under the bleachers. That my music was just a projection of my deranged mentality. I'd dodge her questions easier than the dragonflies that looped above us, but I never did have the guts to ask Ma about her life. I was so disinterested in her then. Utterly selfish. Hopelessly jaded.

Eighteen.

We arrived just after the sun had set. I pulled to the side of the service road as soon as I could spot the center of the lake. We took trips hauling the gear and then we set up our tent right near the shore. I filled the generator with gas, primed the engine switch and started it up. Vic set up the halogen lights while I started with the gear. When I die, one third of my life will have been spent sleeping, one third eating, and the last assembling expensive musical equipment. Usually stolen or borrowed. Often, inside of a condemned basement in the worst part of town to foist my nonmusical expression onto a few, or zero, unsuspecting shoe-gazers. Forty-five minutes of preparation for fifteen minutes of chaos. I was used to it. I welcomed it. This was what I craved. What I dreamed about as I stared at shattered shields all day, rotting inside Bledsoe, Terry yawning on about conservative conspiracies.

Vic started setting up her drums, then started hanging her cymbals on their stands. I looked up from my pedal board set up and noticed the moon hanging above us. Chalked vibrantly onto the blackened obsidian sky beneath. A sphere of oscillating ivory looming above us. The conductor.

“Wow,” I said, “I can’t believe I’m gonna say this, but I think we need to take more acid.”

“Yeah, I was gonna ask about that,” Vic said, “but you’re clearly already tripping pretty hard. You swerved at like eight invisible raccoons on the drive up here.”

I laughed. “Alright, maybe you’re right. But let’s take some anyway.” I pulled a ten strip from my pocket, placed a tab on my tongue, and gave one to Vic. She giggled gleefully.

“We are totally night swimming later” she said. I smiled up at the moon.

I plugged two mics into the D12 recorder and turned it on. I started a new file and hit record. The generator’s tinny, smoldering hum was our canvas. I started with a low-key tone from my Roland, synthetically imitating a pointed, electric cello. Vic broke in instinctively with an uneven beat on the snare and hi-hat, somewhere between three four and four four time. I began to bend my tone slightly with the pitch-shifter, but never ceasing with my original key. I then picked up my microphone, activating my delay and vibrato pedals to alter the sound of my voice. My distorted, splintered wail, at first a monotone gasp, then a garbled wreck of polluted language ripped out of the P.A. speakers and across the moonlit lake. “Phantasmal man in a Whole Foods/W-W-W-What’s he got in him/ Mmmmmmaybe a trick/Yeah, yeah this may be a trick.”

Vic’s beat was an undulating, varied tempo pulsating with an untold, spontaneous rhythm. Her wooden drumsticks snapped against the pearly white Mylar drum heads. Glowing

bubbles popping brightly in a river of toxic waste. I twisted the knobs on my sequencer, mutating my coarse block of broken tone into a writhing cobra, hissing and fizzling bright with anger. Then, I pulled the plug entirely, blacking out my tone entirely, leaving Vic's bare, throbbing thump. I then picked up the sawzall and the piece of sheet metal. I held the metal up to the mic and started the saw, instantly tearing through the sheet with a silvery slice. I dropped the Sawzall and took up the power drill, puncturing the sheet repeatedly. I saw my twisted face reflected in the trembling aluminum. A tripping jester about to peak. I spun the microphone around to face the lake and marched around the shore with the circular saw pulsating un-rhythmically, screaming off mic, "*Permeating poison/Pure meat/Pure meat/Pure meat.*" We were free. This was the plateau. What we strived for. No shattered windshields up here. No Virgil. No Ma. I drooled heavenward.

And then I saw them. At first like an amorphous mass in the distant moonlight, hovering above the lake like a shroud. Then, closer, sharper, more defined. I held my hand up to stop Vic's drums but she was already slowing down. The circular saw buzzed for a few seconds, my finger held white-tight over the trigger. I released it. The blade decelerated into dark silence. A dark brood was at the far end of the lake, soaring over the water, headed directly towards us.

"Void," I said under my breath.

"Wait," Vic said, "You see that too? What the fuck is it?" She stood up and dropped her drum sticks. "We need to get the fuck out of here, Mal."

The shadowy horde reached the middle of the lake and became fully illuminated under the light. Hawks. Forty hawks at least.

"Get in the tent," I yelled, dropping the saw and running to Vic. "Fuck the tent," she said, "We need to get to the jeep!"

“We don’t have time, Vic!” I said, grabbing her arm and bolting over to our tent. We both ducked inside and I zipped up the flap. We gasped in deep, panicked snorts and wheezes.

“Hold your breath,” I said, “I can hear them.”

We both inhaled sharply. An infinite scream crept up above the generator’s hum, and then completely enveloped it. An air raid of stealth bombers was suddenly upon us. Suddenly, one collided with the side of the tent, grazing its talons across the nylon fabric. Then again, closer to Vic. She screamed. Then dents from all sides, their screaming intensified, the talons were on us now, sinking in our skin and tearing at our flesh. I felt a beak on my nose, sinking into my eyebrow, one in my mouth. Vic’s screams died out and we were buried in a painful swarm of feathery brown and white. And then the void swallowed us whole. A flawless wall of blackness.

Then, a kick in the dick. I lurch upright and grab for my throbbing crotch. Dan stood above me, laughing from outside the tent.

“Sorry to ruin the party, dumb-fuck,” he said. “Needed my tools.”

I fell back, closed my eyes and fought through bursting black dots of pain. Then it died down. I heard Dan’s laugh trailing off. I looked to my left. Vic. There she was. Completely unharmed. I looked at my arms, not a scratch. I felt my face, nothing.

“Jesus fucking fuck,” I said, rubbing my forehead, “too much acid.”

Vic mumbled in her sleep and turned away from me. I struggled to my feet and teeter out of the tent. The bright, mid-July sun was unforgiving to such a chemically laden cortex, but I felt reborn in it. Like a fawn. I vomited next to the tent.

“You know,” Dan said, turning the switch on the generator, “I didn’t mean anything by not comin’ home. Your Ma and I been goin’ through some stuff is all, and I aint had many drywall gigs lately so she’s fairly pissed.”

I put my hands on my knees and looked up at him. Dirty brown hair hidden under a plaster-speckled Forty-Niners hat. Black crow’s feet on dusty trail.

“You guys talk?” I asked.

He stared at me for a second. Unsurprised.

“Oh yeah,” he said, bending to pick up his Sawzall. “We talked. I heard.”

“What’re you gonna do?”

Dan wound the power cord around the base of the Sawzall and smiled. “Only thing I can do, I guess. Move on.”

He started to walk his tools back to his truck.

“Here, let me give you a hand,” I said, picking up the drill and the saw.

As we approached the access road I saw a man standing next to Dan’s truck. Tall, mid-forties. Aviator’d, suited and bolo’d. Next to Dan’s truck and my Jeep sat a very familiar looking Mercedes. My stomach sank. I bit my lip and approached him.

“Who’s....this?” I said as Dan and I reached the truck.

The man leaned against the hood of Dan’s red F-150, twirling a leaf between his fingers and smiling coolly.

“You mean you don’t recognize him?” Dan asked. “Shit, Mal,” he said, “you should have seen us last night. Your Ma came up there to Chesty’s in a fright, talkin’ bout ‘Mal *stole your tools! Mal stole your tools! We gotta go find him!*’ So, I’m runnin’ around with Virgil of all people lookin’ for your ass. Drivin’ all through downtown Browning. Up through Whitey’s,

didn't see ya. Then down to the quarry. Nothin. Finally figured this was the only place you had left to go. Then Virgil sicks this fella' on to me, says you stole somethin' of his outta the shop."

"Virgil can go fuck himself, Dan." I said, slamming the truck gate. I looked at the man. He remained silent facing the lake with his back to us. "Hang on a second. You are being way too cool about all of this. Did you know about Ma and Virgil already? How long's *that* been goin' on? And why aren't you more pissed about your tools? Last time I took them to a gig you threatened to castrate my unborn son."

Dan shrugged. "Your Ma and me always been open. She's always been sweet on Virgil, I knew it, sure. If nothin' else, this baby may just be a sign that the Mandango's gotta keep movin' on. Shoot, you know this beast can't be tamed! Fuck the tools, son. I sure wasn't usin' em. It's your art, and 'sides, I think that boy up there might have some news for ya."

I walked to the front of the truck. The man stared calmly at the lake. The sun reflected brightly against his mirrored frames.

"Hi," I started, "look, I'm sorry about the D12, it's totally fine, I'll run and grab it" "Keep it," he said with a cool smile, "I have many more." I paused and waited for the fuck you, but it never came.

"Y-you're serious?" I said, "That's uh...a pretty expensive..."

"You're the Mal Content kid, right?" he asked, pulling a cassette from his jacket pocket, "*Faceless Feces*, right?"

"Holy shit," I beamed, still horrified. "I..I am, yes. That's uh, that's my tape right there."

"My name is Reed, I own Merchant."

"No," I stopped him and stared in disbelief. It couldn't have been. "You're Lester Reed? Fucking Merchant Records? You guys put out the Residents reissues, right?"

“Ah, yes, among many others, my man,” he laughed. “And now we want to do this,” he pointed to my demo. “Well, not this exactly. We’ll need some new material,”

“Already got it. Recorded it last night. Out there.” I said, pointing to the shore.

He paused, looked at me and smiled. “Out here? No shit. I’m gonna have to hear this. You know, I was pissed when I went into that glass shop this morning and my brand new D12 recorder was missing, sure. But then you’re boss...what is it...Virgil? He gave you up, sure, but he also gave me your demo. Said you wouldn’t have taken anything if it didn’t benefit your art. I liked that. Reminded me of myself when I started the label. It takes guts to go against the grain. And ya know? It never would have happened if I hadn’t hit that hawk on the fuckin’ high way. Scared the shit outta me, let me tell ya.”

I took a deep breath. It felt like the first breath I honestly wanted to take in a very long time. I felt like I’d thrown some dirt in the hole. I also felt completely out of my god damned head. All of it swirled together like a mass of garbage out in the ocean somewhere. I gathered my thoughts, put them into the right places. Calmed myself. I allowed my life to occur. I took the good with the bad and just kept going, even when stopping made the most sense.

Evening Eyes

My mother staggered blindly from the foot of the stairs and into the living room. Her arms were nailed to her sides and drool was settling in a small pool on the collar of her nightgown. She crept towards us rigidly, my father's leather belt wrapped around her knuckles and dangling from her right hand. Thomas and I were sitting on our old plaid couch, our young jaws in bowls of ice cream. Weekday evening television programming was beaming from the T.V. The episode of 'Married with Children' where Kelly gets a nose ring.

This wasn't the first time we'd seen her like that. We were thirteen and eleven then but we'd known about her walking' for some time at that point. Too many late nights up and down the stairs for no reason not to notice. She never seemed to get anywhere though. This was the first time we'd seen her face to face in that state, though, and we could hardly believe our little eyeballs.

She was all twisted up in the face and muscles we had never seen her flex were popping through her skin. I'd told her before about how we'd see her walking'. She'd tell me to shut up, swerve the car off the road and ask what the hell I was talking' about. Ma had always been erratic like that. Angry, upfront, but wholeheartedly loving and loyal at her core. She was a sweetheart if you caught her on a good day. You wouldn't ever want to her cut her in line at the hardware store though. You might end up with a nail in the foot. Then I'd consider those, sleepless, bloodshot eyes. I'd say, "you really don't know?" She'd huff back at me indignantly. I'd smell the black morning coffee.

The stale cigarettes. The deeply hidden horror at the words I'd spoken. All her not wanting it to be true. All of her knowing that it could not be true. All that left up to me. Her sanity in my hands. I'd look out the window. "Kids talk," I'd say.

Thomas and I stared in disbelief at the woman we now saw before us. She now cowered under the dimmed orange ceiling lights in our living room, sweating through her nightgown and leaning against the mantle. She appeared to have no strength left. She lurched there silently for a moment, panting like a sick dog. Her lungs sounded old. Her wheezes made her sound weak yet intimidating in a way. Then, suddenly, she began to repeatedly swing Dad's belt against the stone fireplace. Her eyes remained closed, but her teeth were fully bared. She slapped and frothed at the mouth like a wild hyena having the worst of nightmares or the most wonderful of dreams.

Her nightgown fluttered wildly as she rattled her thin frame back and forth. Out of nowhere, again, she halted and clung to the mantle limply, her face buried in the crook of her arm. A ghost's coat, hung up to dry. Her black hair with subtle hints of silver danced around her darkened face. For a moment, there was absolutely no movement.

Then, she slowly began reaching for a picture on the mantle next to her. The one of us as kids with my Dad and Santa at the mall. She then jerked her closed eyes towards the ceiling, appearing to remember something. Her lips were clenched tight. She threw the picture to the floor. The frame smashed on the brick fireplace and glass littered out onto the hardwood around her feet. She then began to drag her arms back and forth across the mantle, knocking everything to the floor. Pictures of our grandmother, our pictures from school, even the urn. Dad spilled out and into the fireplace.

"Thomas," I whispered, clutching my little brother's arm, "basement. Run."

Thomas looked at me. Then at Ma. He took a deep breath and did as I told him. Rushed past Ma, out of the room and down the hall to the basement door. I heard it open and shut, then his footsteps following down the withered planks.

Ma stooped down to the broken picture frame, smashing her hands into the mess and cutting her palms on the glass. I ran to her and pulled her hands up from the glass. She seemed to catch a hint of my smell and I think it might have calmed her for a moment. She put her head to my chest. Quick, quiet sobs came. She stayed that way in my arms for a short time. Then, as if suddenly realizing that I was a villain, she looked at me through her still closed eyes with tortured sinews pulsing in her face. “You’re not him,” she spat, tears still streaming. She threw her clenched fists against my chest, knocking me to the floor. As I struggled to catch my breath, she picked up the picture of our family and stuffed it in her mouth. She chewed and chewed until it was gone. “You’re not Earl,” she cried to the ceiling, “You ain’t Earl!”

* * *

My Aunt Rita was at our house ten minutes after I called from the kitchen phone.

“Just leave her be, I’ll be there yesterday,” she said over the phone.

I told her I’d leave the door open, dodged Ma sobbing on the floor, ran to the door, unlocked it and quickly ran to the basement. Thomas had found an old box of Ninja Turtles. He sat on the floor in front of the old T.V. we never used anymore and bashed action figures together. I sat on my father’s weight bench listening to the commotion upstairs. Ma was still crying, stomping around the living room, punching the floor. Then, we heard the living room door open. “Gigi,” came Rita’s soothing voice. The sobbing suddenly stopped. We heard Rita’s soft footsteps guide Ma to the stairs and back up to her room. No words were spoken.

“It ain’t her fault,” Aunt Rita told me after she’d put Ma back to bed. “She’s been this way since she was little.” She stamped out her third Virginia Slim in as many minutes into the orange plastic ashtray on our breakfast table. Thomas and I sat across from her. A fly buzzing under the fluorescent bulbs in the kitchen seemed to take our attention momentarily.

“What way is that?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said Thomas, “I’ve never seen Ma like that. Like a straight up Walking Dead, or a White Walker-”

“Tommy,” I said, “shut up, man. What if it’s serious?”

Rita exhaled a trail of silver smoke and a sigh.

“Did she hurt you, Felix?” Aunt Rita asked.

“Naw,” I said, pinching my fingers underneath the table. I popped my knuckles and rubbed my chest. I could still feel her fists where she had punched me.

“Uh huh,” she said. A pensive look overtook her face. Her forehead crinkled. She began to examine me like wildlife. She chewed on an imaginary carrot that she would nibble on nervously between inhales of smoke.

“Even so...might be serious,” said Aunt Rita, “she used to walk all the time at night. My father and I had to go get her out of Old Ms. McClannan’s rooster pen every other night. She’d sneak in there and scare the hell outta them birds. Never would remember it the next day either. Daddy always said she had her evening’ eyes on again.”

“What’s that mean?” I asked.

“Oh, just something’ Daddy noticed. Every part of her seemed to be awake but you could always tell when she was walking’ cause those peepers stayed shut tighter than a duck’s asshole. I think she caught on to that though, started using’ it to her advantage,”

“How so?” asked Thomas.

Aunt Rita laughed and leaned back in her chair. The vinyl cushion squealed and the aluminum frame wheezed beneath her.

“Now, don’t you dare tell her this,” she whispered, looking through the doorway towards the staircase in the hall. “But one time, our Daddy said he caught her at your Daddy’s house back when they were in high school. Two of them naked and necking’ in his Pop’s pool. They thought his parents went to a PTA meeting but they got home early and called up our Daddy. He almost wrung your Daddy’s neck. Scared both of ‘em half to death. Then, in the car, she somehow convinced him she had no idea how she’d gotten there. She sweet-talked him so good he took her out for ice cream before they got home. Mama was so mad at him. Daddy always loved Gigi the best, though.

He’d a given his arm for her. Now, *me*, on the other hand— “

“Ma spilled Dad,” Thomas said.

“She what?” Rita asked with arched eyebrows.

“Dad’s urn,” I said. “She tipped it over with all the pictures.”

“Oh, honey,” she said, quickly stamping out her cigarette, “I had no idea. One second...”

Aunt Rita left the kitchen. Thomas stared at a Peanut Butter and Jelly she had made for him.

“Too fucked up to eat?” I asked.

Thomas lifted his head to speak but paused. The overhead lighting danced across his chubby cheeks, creating intricate shades of illumination. “Nah, I’m good.” He began to eat the sandwich aggressively. From the living room, we heard the Dust Buster lurch to life. The closet door opening, the sound of the broom, then things being replaced. A few minutes later, Aunt Rita returned with a small dust bin full of the broken glass from the living room. She went to the kitchen sink, opened the cabinet beneath and deposited the glass into the trash can.

“Now, boys,” she said, turning on the sink to wash her hands, “I don’t think this is the best time to tell your Ma about tonight. She’s been under a lot of stress. I’m not sure if you know this but today would have been your parent’s—”

“30th Anniversary,” said Thomas, “yeah, we know. Ma always takes us to a movie. She said she was too tonight though—”

“Aunt Rita, who’s Earl?” I asked.

“Who’s who?” she asked back quickly, lighting another cigarette.

“Earl. When she was walking’, Ma told me I wasn’t Earl. She was mad about it, too,” I said.

“Earl...” Rita said, letting a small plume of smoke sail up her cheek, “Don’t believe I do remember any Earl. Wonder why she wouldn’t be asking’ for your Daddy.” “Jimmy’s Grandpa’s named Earl,” said Thomas, finishing the last of his sandwich crust.

“Who, Jimmy across the street?” I asked. “You mean Old Mr. Friend? I guess he is an Earl, but he’s like eighty, isn’t he? Why would she think I was—”

“I’m gonna sleep on the couch, boys. You should get to bed. I’ll take your Mama to the doctor in the morning’. Ya’ll scooch, now. Your Mama wouldn’t want you up late.”

Ma and Aunt Rita had greeted us in the kitchen the next day with eggs, bacon, painted-on smiles and that weird positive attitude adults always get when they drink coffee in the morning. Like they just put on a suit of armor. Like they aren’t going to get mad today or mess up at all. Like no one will yell at them or hate them secretly. Like no one will die anywhere. No words about the night before. Just pats on the head and they were out the door. Thomas and I went to wait for the school bus.

Later that night, Thomas and I went to talk to Ma in her room. She never seemed to leave it anymore. The door was always closed and Thomas said he could hear her crying sometimes. I didn't doubt him but I also never stopped to listen. I didn't know what she needed. I wanted to be more like Thomas, more caring, more observant. Something always stopped me, though. Maybe I felt like I had to fill Dad's shoes. Take over in his absence. Thomas needed me, after all. I'd practically raised him since Ma had to work so much to support us. We walked down the pale hallway with the familiar red shag carpeting our Dad had loved so much. All the pictures on the wall we had known growing up had been taken down in secret shortly after we got the news. Disney Land. New York in '97. Niagra Falls that same year when Thomas almost jumped over the rail on accident. They all just disappeared one day. All that lined the stretch of plaster between our bedrooms and Ma's now was sixty feet of white paint and creaky floorboards under vast, wispy fields of soft burgundy fabric. We proceeded slowly towards Ma's bedroom door. When we got there, I knocked twice. The door was opened almost instantly. Ma greeted us with flush cheeks and a dimmer, more relaxed smile than we had seen at breakfast.

“Hi! I was just coming down. You boys want dinner? Breakfast? Order a pizza? What time is it?”

Thomas went in guns blazing, “Ma, why the hell were you a Walking Dead last night?”

I sent him a death glare which he shrugged off.

Ma's smile faded. A fresh tear striped down her cheeks. “Come in, boys.”

We walked in and sat at the foot of her bed. A rerun of “Celebrity Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” was on Ma's T.V. The sound was muted. Matthew McConaughey looked like he was about to win big, though.

“I’m a sleepwalker, Tommy,” Ma said, sitting next to us and patting his head. Tommy’s bowl of hair swayed delicately with her soft touch.

“Ma,” I said hesitantly. “We know that. Last night, though, you were a little more *un-hinged...*”

She suddenly glared at the television. McConaughey had just won one mil for cystic fibrosis. “I never liked that one,” Ma said, her voice suddenly dropping to a lower register, “always seemed a little faggy to me.”

I shot her a glance.

“Ma,” I said, waving my hand to get her attention. “I asked you a question—”

“Ah, Jesus, Felix, you’re just like your father,” she spat at me. “No fun! No fun at all.” She stormed across the room to her purse and started rifling through it. She found her pack of Doral’s, pulled one out and lit it. “That fucking doc says I’m narcoleptic too. You believe that? They never diagnosed that shit? *And* depressive. Jesus, what the fuck aint I?” She put the Doral between her lips, pulled out her cell phone and started to text someone.

“What’s that mean, Ma?” Thomas chimed in from the back seat.

“Honey, all it means is Mama can fall asleep at any time, but because of my medication, you shouldn’t wake me, because it could be very bad for Mama.”

Thomas shot me a skeptical look. I crinkled my forehead. Ma texted angrily. The phone began to ring. “Boys, get out,” she said, “Ma’s got to take this...”

* * *

I still think about the night we found out my Dad was dead. Thomas was still just a kid, three or four, but I was seven and I could still remember it perfectly. The police called at 7:30 in the morning. Thomas and I were watching “Fragglorock” and I answered the phone. They asked

if Ma was home. I said yeah, but she was still asleep. They told me to wake her up, her husband was dead.

Ma stayed in her room for weeks. All she ever told us was that we should never, ever drink. Not a drop. If she ever caught us drinking she would take Daddy's belt and wrap it around our throats. There was no funeral, after a couple weeks some men in black brought us the urn. Ma put him on the mantle right between the picture of our first time meeting Santa and their Wedding Day photo. That's where I would go from then on to talk to him.

* * *

After that, things started getting bad. Ma started walking' almost nightly. Something must have been up with her new medication too. Always yelling now. In fact, if she wasn't yelling at us for watching T.V. or threatening us with Daddy's belt, she was usually slumped over in a corner or roaming around the kitchen knocking over pots and pans. Thomas said he was worried about her hurting herself. I went to the garage and got my bike helmet. We'd make Mom wear it whenever she was walking. Aunt Rita would stay with us as much as she could, but her job at the bar kept her away a lot of the evenings.

Ma also got real depressed when she was awake. One morning, at breakfast before school, Thomas and I were watching "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles" in the kitchen. She stood at the stove with one hand on her hip, still wearing her nightgown with the yellow stains of drool all over it, waiting for the eggs to be ready.

"O.K., boys, T.V. time's over...go get ready for school."

"One more minute, Mom, I just want to watch the new Star Wars trailer!" Thomas said, staring into the T.V. with a wide-open mouth.

Then...meltdown.

The frying pan and eggs flew across the kitchen so quickly that I wasn't even sure she had thrown them. The pan flew directly into Thomas' face. He let out a high-pitched scream and fell to the tile floor as the steaming hot eggs mixed in with the blood from his nose and mouth.

"Thomas!" I shouted, and bent down next to him. He writhed in pain and he was screaming. I grabbed some paper towels and ran back to him. "Put this on your mouth, I'll call the ambulance..." I said. I stood and started to cross the kitchen to the phone on the wall, forgetting for a sec about Ma.

She was walking' again. She stood there, head slumped to the side, and her arms jutted harshly towards the floor. She crept slowly across the kitchen towards us. I picked Thomas up in my arms and dodged out of the kitchen. I laid him on the couch in the living room, and using the cordless I called 9-1-1.

"Hello, we need an ambulance at 718 Elmwood Drive,"

There was a loud sound of breaking glass in the kitchen. I ran in and saw Ma, one arm through the window of the back door, slamming her head against the wood frame. I ran back to Thomas.

"Come on, we're going outside," I said. He was already out cold from the shock.

I picked him up again and ran out the front door to the front lawn. I kneeled there with my little brother in my arms, watching the normal people in the neighborhood drive by in their minivans and station wagons, going to work or school. They drove slow and stared in disbelief through black sunglasses.

Ten minutes later the paramedics pulled into the driveway. Two of them, dressed in white, got out and rushed over to me.

“Stand back...is this the only one?”

“No,” I said, wringing my wrists, “there’s another one inside.”

They took Thomas from my arms and that’s when I saw him. Old Mr. Friend.

Standing at the end of our driveway in a knee-length robe. His graying hair fluttered in the breeze. The thick frames of his glasses masked the dark chasms of his eyes. His silhouette seemed out of place on this suburban street. Like a relic from another era who was just stopping by. I walked down the driveway towards him. As I approached, he pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it. Doral’s.

“Can I get one?” I asked him.

He smiled. A perfectly bleached set of teeth shined back at me.

“Don’t think your Ma would want you smoking’?” he said in a gravelly breath. He loosened something in his throat and swallowed it.

“Is your name Earl?” I asked him.

He glanced at me, but returned his eyes to the front of the house as they pulled Ma out. She appeared unconscious and strapped to a gurney.

“Known your Ma a long time. Knew your Dad too. Raised ‘em,” he said in a somber tone. “Good people. Sad about your Dad. Hit and run?”

“Some couple in a Lincoln is all I’ve ever heard,” I said, “Never identified. So, you know my Aunt Rita too?”

He sighed and turned to leave. I jumped to my feet and ran to stop him. The paramedics had called the cops. Cruisers began to encircle the cull-de-sac.

“Earl, hang on,” I said to him. “Was it you? Were you and Rita in the other car that night?”

He stared at me with black pupils and rosy cheeks. Officers began to close in on us, shouting orders.

“Wasn’t me, kid.” He said with a chuckle, “I’m Santa Claus.”

The Ice Cream King

It had taken some time to get close with the Linquists. Growing up in Michigan meant you waved to the neighbors but rarely spoke. For a time, I only knew Jamie as the raspy kid down the street who could never come outside. It was not until I joined the local soccer team Mr. Linquist coached that Jamie and I finally met. We were probably twelve or thirteen. I told him he had snot on his shirt. He wondered what was wrong with my freckled skin and asked if gingers stole people's souls.

"I got *Shinobi* on Sega," he said, flicking the sweat-soaked, dirty blonde strips of hair from his eyes. "Want to come over and play?"

After the first marathon weekend of playing and watching everything from *Mortal Kombat* to *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Jamie and I were officially inseparable. I would visit him at his house every day when Mr. L was at work and Mrs. L was cleaning their huge house. Jamie was obsessed with every game he could get his hands on. A closet in the Linquist den contained every conceivable board game I could imagine. Five different types of *Risk*, six different *Trivial Pursuits*, four *Monopolies*. Between these and the several video game consuls that Mr. L had bought on his cushy divorce lawyer's salary, the Linquist's house became our personal arcade. That summer, we indulged in round after round of late night *Sorry*-sessions, epic chess games that boggled our pubescent minds, brutal *Backgammon* matches and forays into the world of *Tetris* that forever molded our formative consciences. All of this was merely foreplay for the main event, though. Meeting the twins.

D.Q. and Wilma were siblings who lived next door to Jamie. Jamie called them a couple of "tow-headed mouth breathers" because that's what Mr. L called them. D.Q. stood for Darius Quixote. Everyone said he had an IQ of 165 but I'd also seen him snort Cheeto dust for fun. He

had sharp fangs for front teeth and was constantly punching things on his wrist watch calculator. Wilma read romance novels and spent a lot of time volunteering at pet shelters. She wore dish-rag pale hair in long braids down her back. A skill she had taught herself in early childhood. Her right eye was lazy and gray, while her left was blue and bloodshot. Her favorite show was “Murder, She Wrote.” The two of them rarely appeared without the other, earning them the title “the twins,” even though Wilma was two years older. Their Dad, Mr. Powell, was a widower who worked at the same law firm as Mr. L. They said their Mom had died during D.Q.’s childbirth. I didn’t get the impression that it was their favorite subject.

The twins were the ones who first told us about D&D. They had picked it up the previous summer during their downtime from Space Camp. Suddenly, Jamie and I had a brand-new obsession. Our game nights became “campaign nights” and we rarely played anything else for months on end. We were truly immersed in our fantasy world. Each of the four of us portraying characters who we could never be but who all had the heightened versions of the characteristics that we each felt we truly possessed as humans. It was the first game that was both life-affirming and creatively fulfilling. Jamie would make sure and call me every Wednesday night to see that I would be coming over for D&D on Friday.

“Are you gonna slay that Rust Monster this time?” he dripped into his receiver.

“I don’t know,” I said, “guess I don’t have much of a choice, huh?”

“You could try and avoid him, but you’re just going to run into the Gelatinous Cube eventually, and you know he’s just going to teleport you right back to that same spot outside the Demon Fortress, so you better just deal with him.”

“Can’t I cast an invisibility shield or something?” I begged.

“You used that up last week in the Battle of the Displacer Beasts, *who*, by the way, you spent the whole last campaign fleeing from!” he laughed and slurped.

“Easy to laugh when you’re the Dungeon Master,” I said.

“Easy to laugh, sure,” he said, “not so easy watching you cower away like a wuss! What are you, some kind of loser?”

“Ugh,” I said, “did your Dad just hop on?”

“*That’s right,*” his voice arched into his father’s familiar tone, “*now grab me a longneck, ya turd!*”

In addition to coaching the soccer team, Mr. L spoke regularly at PTA and neighborhood meetings and was generally well-known and respected in our community. His wife, on the other hand, was more subdued and aloof. No one ever saw much of Mrs. L. She was always understood to be folding laundry in a back room of the sprawling Linquist residence. Jamie said she used to be a successful lawyer like Mr. L, but had stopped working when Jamie was born. Sometimes she’d bring snacks into the den.

Fancy silver trays of Drake’s Cakes and Chocodiles dropped off with solemn sighs and worried glances at the children in her home. A defeated woman with a thin frame, curly brown locks and bright, beautiful blue eyes that she seldom showed off. Sometimes, though, when Jamie needed to lie down, she’d come swooping out of the shadows and whisk him away to bed like Superwoman. He’d give this weird little squeak and no matter where she was, she’d be at his side in seconds. He said she was his guardian angel. She sort of gave us the creeps, though.

Unfortunately, when the twins and I did show up to the Linquist home that Friday afternoon, Jamie had another game in mind to play.

“Hide and seek?” I asked, “What about the campaign?”

“I don’t have the new Monster Manual yet! My Dad is bringing it home tonight, we can play as soon as he here...but that won’t be for a few hours. Come on, I haven’t played in years!” he begged.

“There’s a reason for that!” said D.Q., picking at a wedgie. “It’s *laaaaaame*.”

“Ditto,” Wilma chimed in through pink braces, “plus...Jamie, we’ve played this before...and you always hide in the same place...the bathroom, behind the shower curtain. I try to be more creative about my hiding places.”

“Under the back deck? Behind the furnace?” taunted D.Q., “Yeah, you’ve got your two places, alright.”

Wilma charley-horsed him hard in the arm. D.Q. writhed in pain and fell to the ground mimicking a seizure. We all laughed.

“You just hide under that shelf in the kitchen pantry and line up cans in front of you!” she spat back.

“Alright, fine,” I conceded, “just make sure I can slice an Ice Giant in half later,” “You shall have your victory, good sir!” yelled Jamie, “Now, come on! I’ll be ‘it’ first!”

Three minutes later, I found myself stooped behind the very large, very clean, solid oak television cabinet that dominated the Linquist den. I squinted at the buttery beams of late afternoon sunlight that cascaded through the nearby French doors that permeated the room. I remember trying to ignore a strengthening urge to urinate while Jamie counted to one hundred upstairs in his bedroom. Mrs. L had some soapy disaster blasting from the set while she had been vacuuming earlier in the day, and had forgotten to turn the volume down when she went upstairs for her afternoon nap. I stared into auditory fluff.

“I can’t put up with this any longer,” an actress oozed. “I know about you and Tamara. How could you do this to us, Mark Thomas?”

Upstairs, I could hear Jamie’s muffled counting echoing from behind his bedroom door. As soon as “ninety-nine” hit the ceiling, he flung the door open and was bounding down the staircase, calling out through torn lungs, “ready or not! Ollie ollie oxen free!”

I bit my lip and listened to Samantha and Mark Thomas’ latest watered down marital spat.

Mark Thomas chuckled. There was the sound of a drink being poured. “And just what do you plan on doing about it, Sam? You know...I have some very...*revealing* video of you and a certain someone who happens to be running for office. You’re little...*freaky* weekend in Rio last year? If anyone sees that tape you’ll both be ruined.”

“I can *smell* you,” Jamie said, creeping into the den with his palms exposed, as if sensing the air in the room.

I clenched my teeth to the ceiling and tapped my toes in tempered anguish on the carpeted floor.

“You *bastard!*” Samantha screamed. “*How* could you do this to me? Do you think this is some kind of *game?!?*” She began to fake-sob uncontrollably.

“Well, if it is a game, Sam, it’s one that two of us can play at...” said Mark Thomas.

“No, M.T... I’m done playing,” said Sam, suddenly gaining a more menacing tone.

I peeked out from behind the T.V. cabinet and saw Jamie glancing behind the curtains in front of the window on the far wall. I ducked back. He hadn’t seen me. I then heard him run out of the room yelling, “I’m gonna find you, you pricks!” to the whole house.

“This is for us!” shouted Samantha.

Just as Sam fired her first shot, the Linquist's front door opened and closed. Mr. L was home. At the time, I only knew him as my soccer coach. A bulbous, pear-shaped body with a potato head. He had metallic gray beads for pupils and a gold tooth right up front. He was always grinning. His hair was a horrible nest of unkempt, balding barbed wire. Not athletic in the slightest, he was an anomaly on the sidelines, gripping his clipboard between his khaki'd knees and clapping awkwardly at every decent play.

"Jesus, Sam!" shot Mark Thomas, "that thing is really loaded?!"

"Shut up, you two-timing prick!" she called. A second of silence followed. Then the familiar jingle for Blue Bell ice cream.

Two heavy feet stood for a moment in the Linquist's carpeted vestibule area. The floorboards beneath them wailed like banshees. A leather briefcase plunked to the ground. A lumpy torso gurgled and hissed gas. "James!" beckoned his twisted-up maw.

"I'm not supposed to have friends over," Jamie told me once. "My Dad gets super pissed. He works a lot though, so it's usually fine if I do. He doesn't trust anyone. Says I'll infect them and then he'd have a big lawsuit on his hands. By the way, here's some snot," he'd say, and fake into his hand, rubbing my shoulder with a laugh.

I couldn't hear Jamie anymore. He had stopped yelling when he heard Mr. L show up. I knew he was huddled in that darkened tub, whispering curses to the drain. My kidneys began to scream. I bit my lip until I thought I would break the skin.

"JAMES!" Mr. L screamed at the entire house.

The sound of cans falling from a shelf echoed sharply out of the pantry. D.Q. grumbled and dropped his wire frames in the process of revealing himself.

“D.Q.” Mr. L said, disappointed at his discovery.

“H-hi there Mr. L... just playing a little game...Can you hand me my glasses?” “Little old for hiding, don’t ya think, tow-head? Here,” spat Mr. L. “Get lost, kid.”

“Yes, sir,” said D.Q., clearing his throat, “Wilma!”

“Oh, great,” said Mr. L, sighing, “her too. Of course.”

The basement door creaked open on cue and Wilma stumbled into the kitchen in beat up Keds.

“Hey, Mr. L! Good to—great to—,” her worn soles squeaked nervously on the tiles. “Uh, I was just checking’ the basement for rats...so...you know, ‘neighborhood rat patrol’...” she laughed sheepishly.

“Beat it, mouth breathers.” he said with full disdain. “Tell your Pop I’ve got my eye on him too,” he made a disgusted grunt, “...*that* snake.”

“O-okay, sir,” they said in unison.

“Well?!” he said impatiently, “scram, you little pricks!”

The twins scampered out, the front door whisked open and back close. Silence.

My legs were now numb.

“Oh, James, my little Prince!” Mr. L called mockingly. “Sorry to interrupt your little game but we have important business to discuss! It pertains to the acquisition of your precious ‘Monster Manual,’ here! Be out here in three seconds or I shred this thing.

Three...two,” he flared the garbage disposal for full dramatic effect.

I heard the bathroom door whipping open and Jamie’s chucks skidding loudly against the tiles.

“Don’t, Dad!” he squealed.

“He arrives! Man of the hour!” Mr. L dipped his words in sarcasm, “Relax, pal. I won’t shred your nerd book. Just want to talk. You know...buddy...that, uh....Mr. Gablowski? Your gym teacher? He’s my new golfing’ pal. Had a nice long talk with him about your performance in class while we were on the links today, James.” He said with a stern cadence.

“Oh...” Jamie said quietly, aiming his comments towards the tiles below.

“He says you're looking’ at a ‘D’ this semester. Says you won’t run laps with the other kids. A ‘D’ in P.E.? How does *anyone* get a ‘D’ in *gym class*?! Do you know how embarrassing that is for me?” Mr. L barked harshly.

Fresh off commercial break, Mark Thomas pleaded to Samantha for his life in a thinly scripted whine.

“Sam! Please, put that thing away...we don’t need to do this...that can’t be real, is it?”

“You’d better believe it is...it belongs to my father, and he’ll be glad to know that the next bullet won’t miss. I’ve put up with you for long enough, M.T. I’m not going to let you ruin my life anymore...”

“I don’t *understand* you! *Speak up!*” yelled Mr. L from the kitchen.

“I said I don’t care about gym! All the other kids have no problem with it but I just can’t run sprints and laps! I never want to run again!” cried Jamie.

Samantha seethed from the back of the T.V., “...recording my phone calls, blackmail, threatening to ruin a man’s career. You are the lowest slime on the face of the planet—” I pinched my crotch in agony.

“You know what happens to kids who don’t pass gym? They end up walking dogs! You want to walk dogs forever? Live in the basement and sleep on a futon, you little rat? You want

to eat mac n' cheese for dinner every night? You low-life scum. I don't even know where you came from! Give me your hand," yelled Mr. L.

Mark Thomas let out a final plea for his life, begging, "Sam! Please! NO!"

"Dad, I'm sorry," Jamie sobbed, "I swear I'll do better, I'll study more!"

Three shots were fired from the Magnavox. I couldn't take it anymore. I was out from behind the cabinet in a blur. A warm pool began to spread across me. I ran into the kitchen. Mr. L gripped Jamie by the wrist.

"Get up to your room!" he screamed at him.

"I had to go! I had to go!" I yelled, bursting into the kitchen. Mr. L quickly dropped Jamie's hand and stared at me with shock. Jamie darted across the kitchen to safety.

"Who—Harry? What the hell's he doing here?" Mr. L asked frantically, eyes darting to Jamie.

"He—he's...he was playing too, I forgot," said Jamie, clutching a red wrist.

Mr. L gazed in disbelief at me squirming like a stuck pig in his kitchen. I awkwardly covered my wet crotch in misery.

"H—Harry," Mr. L's tone relaxed and lowered in volume and he began to stammer, "...get to the bathroom. I'll meet you in a few minutes. James, go get him a pair of your pants." His wide-eyed stare dropped to the tan kitchen tiles. He patted his chest and produced a soft pack of Camel Filters from his front shirt pocket. I ran for the bathroom. I sat on the toilet and stared at my wet pants for five minutes before there was a knock at the door.

"Yeah?" I said.

"Heya, Harry—," came Mr. L's freshly restrained, hushed tone. "Got a sec?"

I opened the door. Mr. L stuck his head in and offered a folded pair of brown corduroy

pants.

“Here ya go, kid. Meet me out in the kitchen when you’re done. I got something for ya,” he said.

My heart skipped a beat but I took the pants and nodded. After I changed, I walked meekly down the short hallway back into the kitchen, my soiled pants and underwear in hand. Mr. L leaned against the stove and smoked a cigarette calmly.

“Where’s Jamie?” I asked.

“Had to go lay down,” he said, noticing me with a rifled brow, “too much excitement.” The grin I would see in a lot of my future nightmares then danced across his face. Under a thick, yellowish-green overhead light, his lips curled up towards the left ear, exposing a hideously charming gold tooth and the black and grays that surrounded it on either side.

“Hey...,” he chuckled lightly, dropping his cigarette in the sink behind him, “open up that freezer.”

I swallowed my spit and looked across the kitchen to the refrigerator. It was dark brown and covered in magnets advertising local businesses and family portraits. *Dave’s Seafood Diner on 36th*, “Free Catfish for Kids Every Wednesday!” A picture of a couple in front of the Eiffel Tower. One of Jamie’s drawings from first grade. A Tyrannosaurus Rex with a flaming head and a speech bubble exclaiming, “My head is aflame!”

“I actually don’t need anything right now...” I said, “I’d better get home and wash these— “

“Just go open the stupid freezer, Har.” He shook his head and crossed his arms.

I took a quick breath and then crossed the kitchen to the freezer. Mr. L's metallic beads never strayed from me. He was locked in, and there was nowhere to go. I reached the freezer door and opened it.

A thick, pearly plume hit my cheeks and I was greeted with a familiar and frosty scent. A large tub of chocolate Blue Bell ice cream stared down at me. Pale fog danced around its contours, and the warm air gave way to fresh condensation. There was a tap on my shoulder. I turned to Mr. L offering a small desert bowl and spoon to me. I took it with only slight hesitation. It was filled to the brim with the stuff. Emitting nearly translucent tails of white under the warm kitchen air.

"Now, Har," Mr. L said, partaking in his own bowl of the dessert. "You're always welcome here. If ya don't know that, you should. Jamie just thinks the world of ya, and I've got no reason to think you'd be a pest or anything, right, Har?"

I let the chocolate ointment melt in my mouth like a mind control lozenge. "No, sir."

"Har—," he said, dropping his bowl and spoon into the sink. "We gotta get one thing clear. I'm not going to make things difficult for you. You don't have to worry about anyone hurting you, your Mother, your dog, nothing...because we're just a couple of guys who like to eat ice cream. Right?"

"My...what?" I asked with arched eyebrows, pausing and letting the spoon rest in my mouth.

"*Harry*," whispered Mr. L, leaning in closer and glancing at the doorway. His potato head blocked the light now, and his silhouette looked depleted and bare. Like something that should have been kept private, maybe. Kept hidden in a trunk somewhere for years and brought out for

special occasions. Under the kitchen lights he looked both desperate and dangerous. Ghastly yet bewitching, "...they'd never see me coming'."

The freezer suddenly lurched to life with a bitter buzz. Mr. L's ink-blot stare persisted, though. Unwavering, violent and frozen. His side-faced grin taunting with an impenetrable disdain.

"Yeah...sure, Mr. L," I said, wiping the chocolate from my lips with my shirtsleeve.

He quickly clutched me by the shoulders. "I'm serious here, kid. My house. My rules."

I stared up into his gray pupils, searching for some fleeting vestige of humanity. I only saw the loose skin beneath his lids twitch nervously. The tar on his breath like skewers puncturing my cheeks.

"It's no problem, sir. I got it." I said, taking another bite.

"Atta boy," he said and walked out of the kitchen. "Harry gets all the ice cream!" he told the house. "Long live the king!"

I didn't hear from the twins or Jamie all weekend. I called both of their respective houses multiple times, but no one ever answered.

"We had a church retreat thing," said D.Q., "total drag."

I didn't see Jamie until we all met up at lunch time a school on Monday. We sat down to eat at our usual table and I asked Jamie if he was okay. For a moment he looked mystified, then, realizing what I meant, he said, "Oh, yeah. Don't sweat it." I told him about his Dad and the ice cream. He laughed dryly. "Yeah, guess you're his new favorite," he said with an oddly familiar side-faced smirk.

“Jamie,” I said, “he...uh...he scares me. A lot. He looked like he was going to hurt you. I keep seeing’ his stupid gold tooth...”

“Your Dad has those creepy dog jowels,” said Wilma, pushing invisible skin up beneath her chin, “like...cottage cheese face.”

“Oooh yeah,” said D.Q., “he reminds me of a scary Captain Kangaroo on a bender or something. Like a few weeks after he got cancelled, maybe.”

“Guys,” I said, “...come on. Jamie needs us to be there for him right now.”

“Harry, relax! I’m fine,” Jamie laughed. The twins snickered.

“I don’t know, man,” I said, “he looked pretty mad. It looked like he was going to hurt you—”

“Let’s just talk about the campaign, guys” Jamie said uncomfortably. He produced the fresh Monster Manual from his backpack. “There are much bigger monsters out there to slay than Marrion Linquist.”

I wasn’t buying, though. There had to be more to it. Why didn’t Jamie want us to help him? Why didn’t the twins care more? They grew up next-door to them for years. They had to know more about this. They saw Mr. L when he came home too and were clearly just as terrified as I was. And where was Mrs. L all this time? Through all the yelling? Did that monster keep her locked up like he did Jamie? And what about me? ‘*King of the Ice Cream,*’ he said. Jamie had said I was his ‘new favorite.’ Favorite what? His gold tooth kept mocking from the back of my mind. I tried to think of anything to get it out—girls, comic books, even algebra. I just kept seeing it dripping there next to gray molars and crimson gums. I decided the only way to cleanse my brain of the image this was to ask myself what *The Shadow* would do. And the answer was, of course, to *know*.

That Wednesday evening I waited for a call from Jamie so that we could plan the weekly campaign. It never came. I gave it until about nine and tried to call him. No answer. I waited for twenty-nine rings just in case. I called the twins' house too. Same story. I felt a sudden twitch in my left cheek. Something I couldn't control. Some nervous tick I'd picked up in all this paranoid confusion. I paced in my bedroom, trying not to ask myself questions like 'where is everyone?' 'are they hurt?' 'do I call the cops?' My rational mind told me that, of course, they were all together and safe and happy. That psychotic man who was holding his own son's hand to an open flame not even a week ago has nothing to do with anything. Even if he did, it's not your business. The cops wouldn't even believe you anyway. Who believes an eighth grader about anything?

I looked in my bedroom mirror. My dark red curls framed a brow furrowed with a grief-stricken awareness. Then there was that twitch in my cheek again. Two or three times a minute. I could not escape the feeling that something was going on beyond my control. I heard Jamie laughing in my head. "*You're such a wuss, sometimes, dude.*" I rushed to my desk, opened the top drawer and produced my old pocket knife from Boy Scout camp. I went to the hallway closet downstairs. In the back was my father's jacket from high school. He hadn't been around to wear it since I was eight. Moved to Boston for a new wife and a new life. It was black leather, one size too big. It smelled like old fire. I slid it on and felt twenty times tougher. I ran out of the house and hopped on my bike.

I rode down the thick bricks of my street, turning left on McPherson at the end of the block. A cool autumn breeze whispered menace to my unprotected ears. It warned me that I was doing something off-script. It wasn't supposed to work this way. Another block and I made a left on Sprendell. *Maybe it's too late, I thought, maybe they've already been Texas Chainsaw*

Massacre'd. Halfway down Barrett St. and I was there. Part of me expected everything to be burning, bodies strewn everywhere, heads on stakes. I arrived at two dark houses. No one appeared to be inside either of them.

I walked my bike up the drive and dropped it in the Linquist's front yard. I noticed the back light was on in the den. I slowly crept down the driveway towards the back of the house. When I reached the den window, I looked inside.

Mr. L faced the television, his back to me. He appeared to be watching a PBS Boating Auction. I reached into my pocket and put my hand on my blade. I walked around the back of the house to the French doors that opened into the den. Before he had a chance to notice, I had dashed the doors open and had my knife pointed right at the back of his head.

"H-hands up!" I yelled at the room.

He remained motionless, his right leg resting on his left knee. A cigarette in his mouth, smoke coating his eyes and nose. A glass of scotch in his right hand, a remote control in his left.

"That the King?" he called back to me, his demeanor cool and unthreatened. "I got a knife," I warned him.

"Good on you, kid," he said, changing the channel to C-SPAN.

"Where's Jamie—," I said, slowly walking around the couch, knife outstretched. Mr. L kept his eyes on the television screen and ignored the question. He took a deep drink from an icy tumbler.

"You got a girlfriend yet, Har?" he asked, calmly glancing in my direction. "Where is he?" I demanded again.

He snorted and quickly rose to his feet. I stumbled back a few steps, keeping my knife drawn and trained on him.

His grin greeted me with a sly insistence. “You probably kissed one or two by now, I’d imagine.”

My cheek ticked. He laughed to himself, dropped the remote on the couch and calmly walked around me, out of the den and into the kitchen. I looked around the room quickly for clues. Nothing looked out of place. No obvious signs of struggle. I looked around for the portable phone, but it was nowhere in sight. I slowly walked into the kitchen, where Mr. L was preparing another drink.

“One thing,” he offered his index finger to me as he poured from his brilliantly bright bottle of expensive looking scotch, “you gotta *learn*, Har. Before you get older... And I know your Pops was a rat so he’ll never get to tell ya...*Women* know *exactly*... what they want. *Men*, on the other hand...,” he laughed and placed the bottle back on the counter, lifting his glass to me. “A *man*...is more empty-headed than a goldfish. Sullen creatures bottom-feeding until there’s nothing left to eat.”

My knife slowly dropped to my side. I looked up at him swaying there. Palms digging into the dark counter top, the slimy grin beginning to fade under twitching lips.

My cheek ticked again.

“They’re probably halfway to the Cinci already—,” he whispered, suddenly flinging his glass across the room, colliding with a vase sitting on the breakfast table and sending shards flying everywhere.

He swayed and grunted on the tiles, out of breath, saliva dripping down his reddened face. Then, suddenly, he took notice of me again. His grin returned, the gold tooth re-emerged, my heart sped up.

“Yeah,” he laughed lightly, padding his shirt pockets for his Camels. “I got ‘em. I know I do. No denying that. My Daddy had ‘em too,” he shook his head, lighting his cigarette. “Used to take me to the garage,” he said, exhaling blue smoke over the granite counter top, “made me lean up against an old radiator while he dripped hot molasses down my back. Hurt so horrible. I used to think, ‘*all this cause I saw some skin mags in the attic?*’” he chuckled. “That mean old bastard just had a chip to pass on, that’s all. Guess that’s what I got. And you know what, King?” he said, dropping a stack of ash onto the granite, “James might not have ‘em, but *you...*” he pointed with his cherry, “you got some *big ones*, my friend.” He laughed and flicked his cigarette into the sink.

He turned away, walked to the back door and opened it. “Oh,” he said, pointing to the table. “He left you something’. See ya around, Kid!” he laughed into the night air and slammed the back door.

Among the shards of glass and clay, there was a note on the table. It was addressed to “Harry” in all D&D font. It read:

Hey man. So, it all goes away today, I guess. No more campaign. No more Ice Giant Battles or Gelatinous Inquisitor Cubes to mess you up. I wasn't expecting it to happen this way or even to happen soon, but I knew it would sooner or later. My Mom's a good lady. She didn't want to take us away...it's just...him. After this last time, she knew it had to end. She says we'll meet up again in another life. Best friends always do. I'm not allowed to say where we're going but it's for the best. The twins say their sorry too, but we're all going to find a way to stay in touch. Maybe we can even campaign again someday. Hope you learned to keep fighting, buddy, and don't let that darkness win. It's in all of us, but we can control it.

—J

I folded the note, put it in my pocket and wiped my ticking cheeks.

Sylvia

As I walked up to Nancy and Jake's house from the car my spine suddenly turned to ice. Something about the cozy ranch house that Jake had bought right after the wedding looked slightly ominous with the bloody orange sun setting behind it. I looked into their bay window from the porch and saw a little girl with a walnut-brown bob cut, about five or six, waving to me from inside. I waved back, smiled, and rang the doorbell. Seconds later Jake swung the door open.

"There she is!" he said with a smile. He had grown a stubborn-looking goatee since the wedding and I almost didn't recognize him with his several gray hairs. I couldn't believe it had really been such a long time. "Thanks for coming, it wouldn't be Thanksgiving without you," he said with a chuckle.

"Oh, here, let me bring that into Nancy," he said, taking the foil-covered dish of cornbread.

"Is that her?" Nancy's voice echoed from the depths of the home. The walls were all decked in dull paper and pictures of old, white family members that could have come with the frames.

"It's Allison, sweetie," he called back. "Here, let me get your coat."

I handed Jake my coat and was about to greet Nancy in the kitchen when I felt a tug on my skirt. I looked down and saw the little girl from the window staring at me with the black crow eyes. "Oh, hi, sweetie, you must be—" I paused and scanned mental photographs of past social media feeds, "*Cynthia*, right?"

She shook her head at me. Nancy entered, drying her hands on a dish rag. We sang each other's names through our brightest teeth and embraced. We laughed for a while at the awkward

sight of each other. I made light of her growing soccer-mom pouch that protruded beneath her apron and she poked fun at the wrinkles under my eyes. We had always done that. Just then I remembered that I kind of hated her when we lived together in the dorms. She never once bought toilet paper.

There were no words about the seven Christmases without any cards or gifts. Nothing said about all the crucial calls that were never answered or returned. The drunken nights we had both spent with actual, relevant loved ones over the years. Unhinged and bitter, revealing one another's most embarrassing secrets. All seemed irrelevant then in that cheesy, bright chandelier light and awkwardly placed cheese tray on the table. Her email had read:

“What’s up, Girlfriends?!”

You are cordially invited to the annual SIGMA PI ALPHA reunion! We are having a Day-before-Turkey Day Party out at Dunwood Ranch! Free food and drinks! Bring your boots, because there will be square dancing in the barn after dinner!

“Oh, *Allison*,” Nancy poured it on. “This is our daughter, Sylvia, I don’t believe you two have ever met.”

“Oh, Jeeze, I’m sorry, Sylvia,” I said, “I forgot your name.”

“She’s got cracked eyes,” Sylvia said, extending her hand up to me.

“I—I what?” I asked her. I looked in the mirror. Same shock-white skin and bony cheeks I was familiar with. “What do you mean?”

“She’s just—” Nancy waved and whispered, “she *sees* things, that’s all.”

I tilted my head slightly at Nancy. “That so?” I looked down at Sylvia. “Well, aren’t you a smart one?” My tone was surprising. I sounded as if I were addressing a small terrier. I

had almost completely forgotten the child had existed. I shook her hand and pretended to be interested in her little pig-tails and the mustard stains at the corners of her mouth.

“Do you want to see my dolls? They’re in the basement,” Sylvia asked.

Before I could make something up about having to go to the bathroom or helping Mommy with dinner, Jake and Nancy had put the words “Suuuuure” and “Let’s go!” right into my mouth and were shoving me towards the basement. Sylvia bounded down the stairs, yelling “hurray!” and jumping over the last two into the florescent basement.

Still at the top of the steps, holding onto the doorframe for dear life, I leaned back to Nancy for help. Her elbow dug into my back. “*Nancy!*” I yell-whispered, “*You know kids make me nervous...*”

“*Oh No! She’s really smart. Besides, she likes you! She’s never been this nice to anyone who comes over...I’ll finish up cooking and we’ll call down to you guys in a few...Have fun now!*” She gave me a little shove.

Again, before I could protest, I had been pushed on to the first step and was faced with a closed door.

“Come on, Come on!” Sylvia was yelling from the bottom of the steps. The hideous reflection of the lights brought even more of that evil look into her eyes. She waved a Barbie doll in the air. “Come on, Come on!”

I grasped both sides of the wall, sighed, and cautiously descended. I felt like the clicking of my own high heels on the wooden steps was like my death-march to the chair. I kept thinking I was crazy. *Why am I so petrified of kids?* I thought. *Come on, it’s just a little human. Plus, you’re way smarter than her. You do the crossword every single day. The New York Times Crossword! This kid’s still stuck on coloring books. Relax.*

When I reached the bottom of the steps and turned left, I saw that Nancy and Jake spared no expense in turning the basement into a kids' wet dream-wonderland. Evidently, little Sylvia didn't just like dolls, but every possible toy the local Target had available. There were train tracks that wrapped around the entire room with a little automatic locomotive that she could sit in, a huge assortment of gigantic stuffed pandas in the corner, board games everywhere, G.I. Joes, coloring books, everything. All Sylvia wanted to show me were her dolls.

She had a giant chest open and was wildly throwing little plastic brunettes, redheads, and blondes over her shoulder. I did my best to dodge, but caught a Malibu Skipper right on the chin. "Aw, shit!" I yelled, and quickly covered my mouth.

Sylvia paused, and with her back still turned said "Mommy says we're not supposed to swear..."

"I'm sorry, Sylvia...It's just...you hit me with one of your dolls and..."

She turned around quickly, her pig-tails slowly following, smiled and said, "It's okay!" Then she spun right back around and continued digging. I gave her back a look of contempt and rubbed my still throbbing chin. I sat down on the bottom step.

"Here she is!" Sylvia exclaimed, holding up a tiny wooden doll. "Her name is Sylvia!"

Not exactly original, but I was thankful that she wasn't launching the wooden one at me. I politely asked, "and who gave you Sylvia?"

"My Nana!" she said, stroking the doll's red hair. "Look! She has brown hair just like mine!"

"Sweetie," I said, pointing to the doll. "I think little Sylvia's hair is red."

Sylvia dropped her hands to her side and drilled her black little eyes into the center of my forehead. There was a long pause in which I glanced around the room quickly to see if there was

any quick means of escape. Maybe a screen door I could dart out of and get to my car in case Sylvia decided to pull any “Village of the Damned” shit on me. Sadly, my only means of escape were the stairs, and with my heels on I would be easy pickings for the girl. I imagined myself screaming in terror as blood spewed out of Sylvia’s mouth and her head spun around, darting up the steps, tripping and being devoured by the little girls’ gnashing teeth.

“Do you want to hold her?” she asked, her innocent voice bringing me out of the nightmare.

As she held the doll out, I laughed at myself for being so horrified of such a sweet little girl, and said “Sure...”

The doll looked like it had been in the family for years. For one thing, it was a solid piece of wood that had been whittled into two arms, two legs, a torso and a head. There were two dots and a half circle painted on the head made to resemble a smiley face. Red yarn had been glued to the head and it wore a cotton poke-a-dotted dress.

“Wow...” I said. “She’s...really pretty!”

Sylvia giggled and said, “prettier than you!”

I bit my lower lip and did my best to dig my fingernails into little Sylvia’s painted eyes. “Give her back!” Sylvia shouted, suddenly abandoning her laughter for fear. She grabbed the doll and clutched it to her chest, once again drilling into my forehead. “I’m sorry, Sylvia...”

“You don’t get to play with Sylvia anymore!” She said, putting it back in the chest, shutting it quickly and sitting on the lid.

Shucks, I thought.

“Well, if you don’t want to play with me I guess I’ll go help your Mommy with dinner...” I said. I hadn’t meant to pull the reverse-psychology thing at all, I just wanted to get the hell out of there. I stood up and turned to go up the steps.

“Wait!” She said desperately, getting up quickly and reproducing the doll from the chest.

“Oh no, Sylvia, it’s okay...I think playtime is over for me anyway, I’d better—,”

“I want to take a picture of you with her!” She cut me off, extending the doll.

“Um...well, alright,” I said, “where’s your camera?” Sylvia darted over to the panda patch in the corner and pulled a tiny Polaroid camera from around the stuffed animals’ neck.

“Okay, smile!” She said.

I frowned as the bulb flashed. It was brighter than I expected and was quite stunning mixed with the fluorescent lighting. I stumbled backwards, lost my balance in my heels and dropped the doll beneath me, bringing my ass crashing right down on top of it. I heard a snap and felt the splinters pierce my skin. I screamed, stood up quickly and immediately began trying to pull them out. As the black spots from the flash cleared, I looked down and saw little Sylvia’s broken neck, still hanging onto the body by a splinter or two, smiling up at me. Sylvia saw too, but didn’t scream like I expected.

“Oh, my God, Sylvia, I am so sorry...” I said, pulling the last of the splinters out of my ass.

She quietly walked over to little Sylvia, picked her up and brought her back to the chest, her head dangling from her body. She then calmly walked back towards me and started going up the steps. On the third step she stopped, turned around, and with her pigtails slowly following, and half-whispered, “Mommy says I get to decide.”

I gazed at her in the dark stairwell. A tight grin had snuck up her cheek at the end of her sentence. The carpeted steps began to feel like the last vestiges of a melting ice cap.

“What do you get to decide, Sylvia?” I asked her.

“Who stays,” she said, suddenly alive.

“Who *stays*?” I asked skeptically. “You mean for dinner, hon?”

She nodded her head vigorously and ran up the steps. I followed slowly, dragging my fingers over the patterned walls like grazing tridents in freshly laid soil.

Upstairs, Jake bellowed at a large flat screen television from his poised position on the love seat in the living room.

“Robbed!” he screamed, red-faced, and ignoring me. He turned his white USC Trojans ball cap around. I tip toed past him into the kitchen.

Nancy was knelt, listening to Sylvia. Sylvia spoke silently and emphatically to her mother. Nancy nodded, then noticed me with a quick glare.

“Go wash your hands, sweetie,” Nancy said to her. “Tell your father we’ll be ready in twenty minutes.”

“So,” she said, looking at me square, “what happened?”

I tried to stop and understand the implication in her tone, but came back with nothing.

“Nothing! I—”

Nancy folded her arms. I felt like we were back in our dorm again, except she was the nosy R.A. asking about our Boon’s Farm stash instead of the one puking it up in the bathroom.

“We...” I started hesitantly, “We were playing with her doll...”

“Little Sylvia?” Nancy said, picking up the knife. “That’s my mother’s. Alli.”

“Y-yes,” I said. “I accidentally sat on it, and it broke—,”

Nancy looked at me coldly. “You *broke* Little Sylvia?” she asked sternly, her shocked hand stroking her sternum.

“Well...I’m sure she can be fixed, Nance,” I said.

“She broke her *forever*, Mommy,” Sylvia entered the kitchen holding the two pieces of the broken doll. “She’s never coming back.”

“Oh,” Nancy said, taking the doll from Sylvia, “I can’t believe it...”

“I told you she had cracked eyes!” Sylvia said, her little black eyes squinting at me.

“*You* have cracked eyes, kid!” I cried back, “What does that even mean, anyway? Look, Nance, I know this is a family heirloom and those can’t really be replaced but I’ll pay you, I’m sorry! And I didn’t mean to yell...I’m just shit with kids, man.”

Jake entered the kitchen. “What’s the deal? Someone need to go in time out?”

“Daddy,” Sylvia said stretching her arms up to Jake. “Mommy said I get to decide.”

“That’s right, sweetie” Jake smiled and picked up Sylvia, cradling her on his hip. “She did. Do you want Aunt Alli to leave?” Sylvia nodded and kissed him on the cheek.

“Dude,” I said. “Are you *kidding*? I haven’t seen you guys in years!”

“I decide,” Sylvia squinted, playing with Jake’s hat.

I looked to Nancy. She noticed me in her periphery as she cut carrots.

“Look, Al,” she said, sighing. “Maybe we can meet up in the city next week and talk it out, I really just don’t think we need you here right now with all this...bad mojo. The girls are all going to be here soon, and I’d rather we just cut ties before they show up and—”

“Oh, Christ,” I said, spinning and exiting the kitchen on squeaking heels. I grabbed my purse from the dining room. As I darted for the door, I heard the doorbell ring. I swung the door open and was greeted by six tubby Sigma Pi Sisters wearing nearly identical pantsuits.

“ALLI!” they said in unison. Without a word, I burst through the pant suit wall and ran for my car. As soon as the engine was on I was peeling out. The pantsuits stared in mutual confusion. The last thing I saw was Nancy standing behind Sylvia, shaking the broken doll at me in the sunset. I would hear Sylvia’s words echo in my quietest of moments for weeks to come. “I decide,” over and over like a delusional mantra. Who was she to decide anything? I received numerous emails from the sorority asking what had happened to me. I never told them. Never spoke to any of them again. I moved, got a new career and detached completely from my old life. Years later, I heard from a family member that Sylvia had grown up, married into the Country Club business and was apparently expecting twins. I boiled water for tea and chopped vegetables in my one bedroom apartment. I was glad she had made the right decision.

Free Lunch

It was a bright Saturday morning in the summer of '96, and my father was driving me to Clint's Comics on Westport and Main St. in his Aluminum Gray Mercedes Benz. On the ride over, I poured over the latest issue of Deadpool with clammy palms. My parched pupils darted across precisely woven frames depicting my favorite fictional heroes and villains duking it out, engaging in epic battles for the good of mankind. My sixty-year old father cranked up the Van Morrison. I cringed and tried to read harder.

"This isn't gonna be another one of your Thursday night shopping sprees," he informed me dryly. "Today you're getting a goddamned job."

I cleared my throat as a menacing pendulum began to swing across a cavern of humiliation in my stomach that I had yet to encounter, but that would echo itself again several times in my life. Hollowed-out homecoming dances. Sweaty, zit-filled public speaking classes. Hopeless job interviews with suspected child pornographers. Work was as foreign to me as speaking to girls was at this point in my life. I had no idea what money was or how people got it and even less of an idea of why people tried so hard to do so. I wore blue Umbro shorts and massive t-shirts sporting the logos of NBA teams that I had never supported in any way. Sometimes I ate Kraft cheese singles for breakfast. My favorite band was Everclear and I had already committed the screenplay of Jurassic Park to memory. I was very much twelve in 1996.

As we entered the comic book shop, we encountered a lumbering slug with open facial sores sitting behind a dimly lit counter top. He glistened with a sticky glow from behind the latest issue of Spawn. He hurled a grunt towards us. The ding from the entry bell reverberated throughout the empty shop over fuzzy industrial music and distant feline mews. My father

shoved me towards the slug. I reluctantly shuffled up to the counter and directed a muffled inquiry to the cash register.

“Hi...you hiring?” I half-whispered.

The Slug’s black-beaned pupils scanned my insufficient frame dismissively. With a crinkled, pocked forehead and gaping, calloused lips, it began to vocalize something. Taking a wheezy breath, it suddenly paused and looked past me to my father, who was standing by a display case in the corner pretending to know how much vintage baseball cards were worth.

“He can’t work here,” The Slug oozed over me at him.

“Oh,” my Dad said, cupping the only ear he can hear out of, “Why’s that?”

“Porn in the back,” The Slug retorted, gesturing a slimy member listlessly towards the back of the shop.

An emptiness far more potent and consuming than I had ever encountered seemed to immerse us in that moment. Something having to do with generational angst, oppression of thought and an overall misunderstanding of lifestyles was suddenly hulking around the three of us, making social awkwardness unbearable and general communication a near impossibility.

“He can’t...run the register up here? Take the trash out? Nothing?” my father asked, laughing casually.

“Labor laws. Porn,” The Slug belched back at him.

“You know, I had my first job when I was ten,” my father started in on him, hand perched on his hip and finger nearly prepared for wagging, “I was bagging groceries in ten hour shifts, six days a week! You’re telling my son he can’t get a part-time job?” His tone escalated into his favorite register, argumentative. This was clearly not The Slug’s first time encountering an unruly customer though, and he refused to engage with him.

“Can’t. Porn,” it offered again with a hopeless sigh, black beans drifting back to neon mutants attacking each other, dancing across the glossy pages it cradled so delicately in its puffy palms.

As we exited the shop and started back to the car, I asked my father why he felt the need to embarrass us like that. Why did I need to work? None of my friends had jobs yet. It wasn’t 1950 anymore and why was I expected to bring something to the table? Was my existence too expensive for my parents? Was I even more of a burden to—

“There’s no such thing as a free lunch,” he said curtly. I was suddenly drenched in unwanted moral superiority. I didn’t know it at the time, but I had suddenly been thrust into something like a New Yorker cartoon. Not only did I hate being in that moment with him, but I could feel the decades of difference between us in every fiber of my being. Don’t be like that. Don’t be like that. Don’t ever be like that, I told myself. I still hate that moment but I also recognize that as the point in which I started to understand who this person was. I have been researching him ever since.

David Lewis Biersmith was born Nov. 6th, 1936 in Kansas City, MO to Anna and Edward Biersmith. He would be the second of three boys. He would come of age in the 1940’s and 50’s. The children born in this period were known to work very hard and keep quiet and were henceforth dubbed “The Silent Generation.” The city was still reeling from WWII and Tom Pendergrass’ prohibition era. My father witnessed firsthand the cultural rebirth of the United States through Kansas City’s ever-adapting, gilded scope. As the baby boomer generation took hold in the 50’s, the city my father had grown up with began to change drastically. He and his two brothers, John and Jim, were raised in a small house on 56th and Michigan on the city’s east side. They attended Catholic School and Church at nearby Little Flower Parish. He idolized

his brothers. John would become a successful lawyer and Jim worked an HR job at an insurance company. Both would start their own healthy, stunning families. In 1955, the year my mother was born, he joined the marine corps. He never saw any action.

By the time The Beatles played the Ed Sullivan show in February 1964, my father was 28, had graduated Rockhurst High School and College with a physics degree, married his first wife, Mary Jo, and had three kids. The couple had bought a house in Brookside and sent their children to St. Peter's Catholic Parish. Initially a salesman for a medical supply chain, he began to start several independent businesses in the 70's. A heart murmur he had been diagnosed with at birth came back to haunt him when he was in his thirties. He lost hearing in his right ear. A doctor told him exercise may extend his lifespan, so he started running. Three more kids and one divorce later, he met my Mom in 1979 through the Kansas City Track Club. Both would become avid racers, well-regarded both locally and nationally as both began to qualify for marathons in the early 80's. They bought a beautiful, historic three story house in Coleman Highlands. They got married on their front porch in '83 and less than a year later I was born. My sister, Bridget, came in '86. Then came the divorce.

I still don't know why my parents divorced, only that it's a reality that I've had to accept for some time. I came to terms with it early on and I have learned that everyone does not need to get married. It was a lesson in the long run, but it did come with its pitfalls. Growing up, all I really knew about parents was that I had a Mom and "kind of" Dad. Early on, I remember blurry sketches of Saturday mornings when that Aluminum Gray Mercedes Benz would pull up to our house and park at the end of the driveway. Sometimes he would just honk and wait for us. Other times, he would get out. I seem to remember a strong reluctance on his part to get too close to the house, though. I would watch from behind our large, open living room windows as a

slim man with a beard and gray, spiraling curls would step out of the car, sit on the hood and cross his arms, staring with legally binding patience at the house and life he once thought that he would have forever. Sometimes he would wear corduroy sports jackets with patches on the elbows and a gray newsboy cap. Sometimes just a “Big Dog” shirt and running shorts. Always asking if we were “ready to rock.”

In the 90’s, Bridget and I started school at Visitation Grade School and my father’s older kids began growing up, getting married and having kids. His oldest daughter, Carolyn, married a lawyer and had two kids. His middle daughter, Beth, also married a lawyer and had three kids. Over the course of their lifetime, it was revealed that two of his children were victims of sexual assault at the hands of the Catholic Church. Not only was the priest in question a trusted community member in their parish, but he was related to the two boys. In the 2000’s, David engaged in an active protest of Bishop Finn, who saw to it that several cases of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church were covered up. Finn resigned in 2015. In 2016, David completed the Boston Marathon at 79 years old. It was his 160th marathon. He has been running for over forty years.

Somewhere along the way, people might lose track of the real reason they are raising a family or pursuing a career. Stress landfills get deeper and deeper and some days we can barely see three feet in front of us. Close friends of mine know that my father and I have always struggled to relate to one another because our personalities are so vastly different. I complain about my Dad a lot because I do not fully understand the way he does things. There are bills that go unpaid for months. He owns more property than he knows what to do with. He is litigious to a fault, participating in hundreds of law suits a year as both plaintiff and defendant.

That said, when and if I become a father, I plan on taking the best lessons I learned from my Dad and passing them on to my children. Important virtues like honesty, compassion and taking action will always be crucial lessons for every child to learn, and I might have never learned them if I had a different upbringing. I can think of plenty of people who were not lucky enough to learn those lessons, and I'm very happy that I did. My father has been distant throughout my life, and at times can be hard to be around. Sometimes he would forget to pick us up. My sister and I would spend hours waiting on our front porch to be taken to a movie as promised. Sometimes he made people feel inferior for your education level or even your race. Asking where friends went to school and talking down on those who didn't attend private institutions. We always apologized to our friends for him. Despite his faults, I can honestly say that he never gave up on us. Plenty of people don't have Dads to complain about, either because of death or one party's lack of participation in the relationship.

This year, on Father's Day, I sat in a dimly lit, pseudo-posh bar across from a man who fathered eight kids, ran 160 marathons and spent years fighting for genuinely good causes. We laughed, related and commiserated. I didn't pretend to understand him any better than I ever have, but every conversation feels a little bit closer lately.

"Death gives you perspective," he said. I dropped my fork. I was never shocked at his candor, but his more profound statements always catch me off-guard,

"I'd imagine it does," I said.

"You never know how badly you've done until the end."

"Well, that's a little dark, don't you think?"

"No," he said. "Just how it is. You see the good and the bad. You just have to reconcile with it. You can't let it take you over."

I struggled a lot writing this piece, because our relationship is still very active and complicated. I have a lot of feelings about my Dad, and I'm not sure I'll really come to terms with them while we're both on the same planet together, but I felt like I should start here.

Black Buffalo

He woke his daughter with a shake of her bedpost. “Outta bed, Sash,” he said gruffly. Peter Boland pulled a scratched-up pomade tin out of the pocket of his knee-length, terrycloth robe. He stared with daggering pupils through thick, horn-rimmed frames into her vanity mirror on the far wall. He wiped a smear of wax across his patchy scalp and used a small black comb to whip the silvering oil slick atop his lumpy crown into his signature quaff. Pale orange light from the hallway accented his round face, freshly shaved and boasting a perfectly pruned, gray and black-striped mustache.

“Wheaton and Downer’s Grove to hit before the day’s done. Brush your teeth.” He flipped on the overhead light. Sasha Boland sent a husky sigh rippling up the wood paneling, sputtering over her *Van Halen 1984* poster, cascading across the white popcorn ceiling, and finally crossing aggressively into the threshold of the microphone in her father’s hearing aid.

“Got a garage full of crutches that haven’t exactly been *walkin’*, little Lima Bean,” he exited the bedroom and called from the hallway. “We’ve been over this!”

“Dad,” Sasha drew her down comforter up over her freckled face. “I think I should skip today. Finish my CAI application. Its due tomorrow!”

“Ain’t askin, Lima Bean,” he called, as his loafers thudded down the carpeted staircase, “Finish it when ya get home. I’ll start the coffee.”

The windshield of the Boland’s 1969 Dodge Royal Monaco Station Wagon was parked flush against a tennis ball hung precisely with fishing wire from the dusty garage rafters. The weathered truckster sported a muted lime green paint job and faded wooden paneling, four bald balloons for tires and three silver hubcaps, permanently dirt-caked and oil-stained. Peter pulled

the latch and slowly swung the heavy rear gate ajar. He grunted, knees cracking and hinges squeaking, sending reverberations bouncing off the concrete walls of the modest little garage.

Sasha had nicknamed the wagon ‘The Key Slime Pie’ when she was young. “It looks like a melted pie!” Before her Mama went away, she’d let Sasha sit on her lap when they drove home from church. Sasha used to make Peter chase the ice cream truck around the neighborhood while she yelled out the window for “Fudgy the Whale!”

The folded wheelchair clunked loudly against the rust-spotted bumper.

“Watch it,” Peter warned.

“I know,” Sasha said, re-placing the chair on the torn, vinyl bench.

Packed from panel to panel with multiple washbasins, IV catheters, cardiac monitors, gurneys, stethoscopes, otoscopes, fetoscopes, scalpels, tongs, goggles, surgical gowns, crutches, wheelchairs and ventilators, the family style vehicle was a complete eye-sore to the many of Skokie, IL’s privileged denizens. Attempting to assuage any authority figures’ doubts, Peter had designed and ordered two large decals for either side of the car. “BOLAND MEDICAL SUPPLIES. 667-865-8866. *No More Lies in Medical Supplies!*”

Moments later, The Key Slime Pie pulled into reverse and descended the Boland’s sloping, gravel drive and onto the fresh, tar-black Skokie asphalt. Father and daughter cruised quietly through the early morning whips of mid-January’s Midwestern winds. Translucent snowflakes danced against the warming windshield and dissolved into crisp puddles on the glass before being wiped away. Sasha used the flip-down vanity mirror to apply dark purple eyeliner.

“Not too much of that,” Peter grumbled.

Sasha smacked her lips and placed her makeup back in her tassled, leather purse. She gazed out the window. An ecru landscape unfolded before her routinely. Beige-sided A-frames and dead yellow lawns soon gave way to interstate rails and zipping road ragers. Her pale green eyes were projected back at her atop the frenzied milieu that surrounded them. Her rouge-soaked bob of curls was chopped at the chin and cast a bright wreck of tangles into the passenger's corner of the cab. She remembered screaming until the ceiling tiles fell down every morning when she her Mama used to brush her hair.

She reached into her purse and produced the hairbrush. An anniversary gift from her Grandfather to her Grandmother. Her mother, Margie, had given it to Sasha at Hartgrove the last time they spoke. "So, you can get those tangles out," she whispered to her, stroking her cheek lightly. She had heavy, sedated pupils and an unnatural hook of a smile that had become cemented inside Sasha's subconscious like withering wallpaper. It was the final personal effect the mental hospital had allowed Margie. She had sent her sewing machine through a plate glass divider, carved her phone number into her arm with pottery shards and singed her cheek and tongue by mouthing a live curling iron before they finally took away all her privileges. The brush, hand-carved from cherry-soaked olive wood, sported beautiful interlocking roses carved into its back. Sasha pressed the white horsehair bristles into the palm of her hand. Peter glanced and sighed.

"Your hair is fine." The stench of black coffee and peppermint mouth wash sliced through the cab. "We might not even see anyone today."

Peter reached for the worn tuner knob on the radio. The knuckles of his left hand were like cracked amber covering crimson bones. They tensed tightly around the spine-like, grime-soaked steering wheel. He navigated with tense eyebrows through dense AM static.

“Guess they aint bitin’ today, Daddy,” Sasha said, turning back to the defrosting window pane. She put the hairbrush back in her purse and pulled out a ballpoint pen. She brought rolled her left sleeve up to the forearm and began to doodle a dark rose. A white-washed evangelist’s timbre suddenly burst forth from the speakers.

“Our president is not so proud a man,” the creaky man pined. *“Our president is not a devil with his gun pointed at you in malice. He has been given a burden, just like our lord and savior was given. Whether or not you agree with the use of these weapons—”*

Sasha quickly flipped the switch to FM. Heart’s “Magic Man,” cascaded into an instrumental bridge. She scraped at some lasting vestige of orange nail polish on her ring finger. Peter cleared his throat as they pulled off the interstate and reached a red light. “What’s the matter,” he chuckled, “not feeling political today?”

He reached into his jacket and produced rose-colored pack of Viceroy cigarettes. “Weren’t you the one I dropped off at that hippie rally last week? Anti—appa—what was it?”

“An Anti-Apartheid Rally,” she took a deep breath and held it in tight so she could have her own air for the moment. “We marched through downtown to City Hall, Dad.”

“Could see the patchouli cloud from the parking lot,” he pulled a tanned-white coffin nail from the pack with his gray teeth, pushed the lighter into the dash. The traffic light turned green. Peter’s toes plunged a bit too aggressively at the silver gas pedal. The tires squeaked on the asphalt beneath them. “Easy to protest when ya got a trust fund,” he snorted. “My father, *your* Poppy, used to work ninety hours a week at that Rendering Plant out in Joliet. Came home smelling’ like burnt flesh and bone. No one wanted anything to do with him. Died in the basement one morning. Heart just exploded. If Manny Bologna knew I was dropping his granddaughter off at some freak-fest for eggplants and —”

Sasha let out a groan and reached for her door handle.

“What?” he side-eyed her. “...What’d I say?” The cigarette lighter popped.

“‘Ballone,’ Dad? What, I’m deaf now?” she heard the familiar tone echo forth from her throat and bounce back at her from the dashboard. Peter reached for the lighter and brought it to the end of the cig. Slim snakes of smoke sprayed up towards the torn material on the Key Slime’s ceiling. “—and besides that, I warned you about all that stuff. I told you once, right after they took Ma away. You remember? You and that Latina nurse cussing each other out in the lobby. I told you that night—when the kids at school ask me where my Dad gets these ignorant words, what do I tell ‘em? ‘He’s from the city?’, ‘He grew up by the track?’ You think any of my friends ever heard of a Hispanic woman being called a ‘speed demon,’ before? Or Mr. Collins who owns the hardware store...what’d you call him?”

“He’s a shine,” said Peter with a grin. “You gotta watch ‘em. Steal your woman and your wallet,” he laughed, rolled down his window with a crank of a squeaky lever and exhaled a cloud into suburban traffic.

“That’s what I’m saying,” Sasha moaned, “You just don’t get it. You’re not a mobster just because you grew up on the South side in the sixties. You’re just...Pete from Skokie. You sell crappy, used medical supplies to every suburb in this horrible suburban white-mare,” she grumbled.

“Doin’ my best, Lima Bean” said Peter with an artful smile, “who’s first on the docket today?”

Sasha glanced down at the clipboard on the vinyl bench between them, “Silverstein and Son.”

Peter glanced at her with a buttery mire. Sasha severed the slimy smirk with a frigid glare.

“What?” he balked, “I didn’t say nothing, Lima Bean.”

She leaned forward and reached for the door handle again. Peter extended a calming arm to her shoulder and lightly pushed her back into a recline.

“Sorry, Sash,” he said, exhaling a gray cloud from his nostrils, “I’ll keep my mouth shut on this one. You do the talking’, ok?”

Silverstein and Son’s Medical Practice was located just off Algonquin Rd. and I-294 in Des Plaines, IL. Peter pulled the Key Slime Pie into the moderately vacant parking lot and pulled to a stop on the West side. He examined the one-story commercial business building like an old fisherman on the trail of the coveted black buffalo. “Perfect,” he growled, “you want to make sure they’re not too busy too early, or you’ll never get in. Look at the cars, too. You see nicer cars, means better customers, more dough,” he told her, stray spit hitting his chin.

Sasha’s stomach suddenly gushed and frothed like a tar waterfall, “I can’t do this, Dad—” she started, but Peter was already out of the car and at the back gate, muttering something about rubber nipples and trying to finagle a walker free.

She tried to think of how many times she’d seen her father close a sale. None came to mind. There had always been talk of “big days” and “bad days” around the dinner table, but the cluttered garage never seemed to get any clearer in her memory. She tried to summon some of his sage-like advice. He had told Sasha that he sold the most supplies to the people who needed them the least. “Ya gotta sell ‘em *hard*,” he’d spout over a wall of the *Tribune*’s sports section at the breakfast table. “They don’t want to see you. You’re street trash to them. You gotta show

‘em that what you got in here—” he’d reach over and give her a noogie right on the melon. She’d laugh, squeal and squirm away, “...is the same as whatever the hell *they* got in there. And believe me, that isn’t always easy. Sometimes I have to pretend I went to Yale. Sometimes it’s City College. You gotta play the room, Bean. Play. The. Room.”

They soon found themselves sitting in a tightly furnished, gloriously illuminated office adorned with several degrees and awards, medical tomes, encyclopedia sets and beautifully intricate sculptures of the human anatomy. An imposing name stood in tall, black and bold letters on a chrome-plated plaque, “DR. MAXIMILLIAN J. SILVERSTEIN, M.D.” The desk was massive, mahogany and it sat stoically in front of an elegant, black leather office chair. Sasha felt hot lizards writhing in her stomach and a wet caterpillar darting between her toes. She took a deep, calm breaths as her panic began to sizzle. She reached into her purse and caressed the bristles of the hairbrush. Peter rifled through various medical demos he had brought in. “Don’t forget to mention the forceps,” he offered.

“The what?” she whispered urgently.

“We got forceps on sale this month,” Peter said. “Box of three hundred goes for a grand, two hundred for five hundred...you know.”

“I’m freaking, Dad,” said Sasha, “I really don’t know if I can do this on my own,”

He reached over and squeezed her hand lightly.

The door opened and a gruff voice was heard speaking from the hallway.

“...They’re who?”

There was a muffled reply, a pause and the reluctant sound of the door swinging open. As footsteps landed on the soft burgundy carpet, Peter jumped up, spun and extended his hand.

“Mr. Silverstein,” he said warmly, before an unintentional grimace. Max Silverstein was around eighty-five years old from the looks of it. His slim, sloping frame and spiky knees seemed to favor the right, while his jutting torso stacked on top seemed to poke to the left. The few white wisps of hair above his bulbous forehead swayed in the central air like seaweed. His suit hung on him like a wet drape on an old, wooden cot. His deliberate, jilted gait and wheezing breath made it apparent that Mr. Silverstein suffered from several types of arthritic, joint, and respiratory issues. He passed Peter’s grin and extended hand without note, slowly making his way behind his desk. Sasha cleared her throat as Mr. Silverstein began to lower himself into the creaky, leather chair. Suddenly, the weight shifted beneath him unexpectedly, and the chair rolled sharply to the right. Peter dashed and quickly caught Mr. Silverstein by the forearm and helped him into his seat. The three of them then sat for forty seconds in silence, waiting for Mr. Silverstein’s staggered breathing to quiet down.

“Whatchya got?” he finally grunted at them.

Peter smiled at Sasha and nodded.

She gave the passenger door of the Key Slime Pie an angry kick, causing a small dent.

“Hey!” Peter called out from Silverstein’s front door. He started making his way towards her, awkwardly dragging arms full of crutches and walkers. “The hell’s wrong with you, Bean? I mean, I know she’s a beater, but come on...”

“He was just so *mean*...” she said, biting her lip and bulging her eyes, “I cannot believe that old bastard! *So many* examples of medical malpractice, by the way. I saw antiseptic from like thirty years ago in the bathroom! They’re...I can’t believe that old piece of—” She caught

sight of herself in the Pie's windshield's reflection. The midmorning sun dripped down dreamily on another teenager losing her mind in a suburban parking lot. She saw Peter standing behind her, lighting a fresh Viceroy, and she dropped her fists to her side, defeated.

"You know, you shouldn't be so hard on yourself, Bean," he inhaled, "I think it went well. Yeah, he called you a twerp and me a grease ball. Don't worry about it. That clip-tip will be worm food by Shabbos...Come on, I'll get ya a milkshake to make up for it."

Peter skidded the Key Slime Pie east down Route 14 about five miles to Arlington Heights. He took the Euclid exit and pulled into the downtown strip. Consumers lined the sidewalks in front of the storefronts like freckled apes, circling without much perceived focus. They appeared to Sasha as both aimless and ignorantly enviable under the radiant ray of springtime sun that cloaked them. Peter saw them only as roadblocks. Hurdles of flesh put there to deliberately waste his time, stall him, jam him up, keep him from his milkshake. He grumbled and pulled up to a parking meter in front of a small cabin-like structure that had been converted into a restaurant off Sherman St.

"Here she is," Peter spoke with a rough throat.

Sasha noticed a large green 'C' Inspection rating posted on the glass of the front door. A greasy, smoke-stained wooden sign hung above the front door. Carved in it were the words "Hackney's Pub." Peter hopped out of the Pie, adjusted his tree-trunked legs in his breezy business slacks and started for the door.

"Dad," Sasha opened her door and called to him, "I can't eat here."

“Bean,” he smiled, “I used to take your mother here. They got an ice cream sundae named after her, for Christ’s sake! Just don’t order the catfish.”

“Oh, come on,” Sasha smiled, “what’s the worst that can happen?”

“Worst that could happen?” he shined, taken aback. “Ever heard of gut rot, Sash? You want to wake up with a big hole in your stomach? That’s what happens, ya know.”

“Stop it,” she laughed.

“No, I’m serious!” he said, “My old buddy, Franco Z., he always said he had an iron gut, you know? Said he could eat anything...like a Billy goat, you know? So, Stan made him eat three catfish from here, guy’s intestines were found three days later, three counties down. Just liquified. Didn’t leave his mother’s house for weeks,” he cracked, holding the door open for her. She rolled her eyes, pushed the door open, stood and let it slam close.

“They got Limeade?”

Peter smiled, “They got it all, babe.”

Hackney’s interior was dimly lit with orange electric torches ensconcing each of the four bare walls. The low ceilings and lack of windows made it a cozy haunt, populated sparsely with elderly bar rats and young grizzly bears. One of them, a barrel-gutted beast of a man decked in a sleeveless leather vest sat alone at a booth in the corner. He sported a pock-marked throat that had been shaved too often for years. His eyes were glued to Sasha as soon as she saw him. He stood and walked over to an old jukebox near the booth. Hank Williams’ “There’s a Tear in My Beer,” was dripping from two haphazardly mounted speakers on the wall as he searched for a new selection. She zipped her sweatshirt up and followed Peter to the end of the bar.

“How you doing’ there, Petey?” a skeletally thin bartender asked him. “R&R Neat?”

“Sure, Stu,” he said, “and let me order a Marshmallow Margie for the kid, here.”

“A *what?*” Stu’s sunken eyes narrowed and he cupped four celery-sticked fingers around a bulbous, purple ear.

“Marshmallow Margie...” he said, “you remember my little wife? Margie? Pretty little brunette girl? Tiny little waist? Used to make her a special Ice Cream Sundae. Marshmallows, hot fudge, and sprinkles on it for her, the works. She loved it.”

“Oh, right,” Stu smiled, showing his horse-tooth dentures. “How’s the ol’ Battle Axe these days? They still givin’ her the juice up there?”

“*Margie*, Stu,” Peter said, reaching for his wallet and plopping a twenty on the counter. “Tell ya what, just make it two strawberry shakes and a couple of pattie melts.”

“Comin’ right up, Petey,” Stu said, scribbling down the order.

The Hank Williams song came to an end. Silence invaded Hackney’s like a stale sprinkler. The man at the jukebox scrolled through page after page repeatedly for up to a minute before pausing, reaching into his back pocket and pulling out a quarter. He inserted it into the machine and made a selection. Ted Nugent’s hit “Stranglehold,” then began to permeate the atmosphere, adding warm spikes of guitar rock and perverted lyrics to the second point of the day when Sasha felt like she might lose her mind. She pulled a pen from her purse and began to trace her fingernail beds. The jukebox man glanced at them once more and then lumbered to a booth in the back corner, colliding with loud creak onto the wooden bench.

“This was our spot, your Mom and me,” said Peter. “Used to be in here every other night for years, before all those kooks up at Hartford got their claws into her. I’ll never forgive your grandma for signing her over, Bean. Never. Goddamn *electro*? I still don’t believe it. That woman was saner than me. She took some pills one night, so *what?*”

Stu returned with two tall, frosty strawberry milkshakes and a small tumbler of golden, brown Rich and Rare for Peter and set them on the bar. Peter dumped his bourbon into the shake and began mixing it in with the straw. Sasha leaned forward and took a sip out of hers.

“Mom didn’t ‘go nuts,’ though, Dad” Sasha said.

“Sash,” Peter said, taking a long sip, “the last time I saw her she had ripped all her hair out. You never did see that. She was just gone. Nothing’ in those eyes anymore.”

“She’s not nuts,” Sasha said.

“Yeah, well...” Peter said, glancing up at the television above the bar. A man was playing golf. “Let’s just be happy you got your head on straight and you’re going places...”

“Going places? Downer’s Grove?” she asked him, “I told you I need to finish my application today.”

“Oh, right,” he said, “What’s the major again? Arts and Crafts?” She imagined a refrigerator crushing him over and over. The violence was soothing.

“Media art,” she said, putting the pen away and slowly stirring her shake.

“Oh, come on!” Peter yelled at a golfer on the television. “How do you screw up a par four?”

The jukebox man finished making his selections and re-seated himself at the booth. Sasha eyed him in her periphery.

“We should go soon...” she said quietly.

“What, you don’t like the shake?” he asked.

“It’s not that— “

“What, your Mom?” Peter asked. “I’m sorry, Lima Bean. You know...I’m alone out here too. You don’t think I have feelings on the subject? It’s only been three years, ya know. We’re both sloshing’ around in the same boat.”

“I know that. That’s not it,” she said. Stu arrived with two plates, each with twin steaming hot pattie melts and steak fries.

“Look, Sash,” said Peter, “just tell me what you want from me, here. I aint no mind reader— “

“I want to do my art, Dad. Like, *really* do it. Actually get *paid*,” she said.

“Paid? For what? Those drawings?” he shrugged at her, “isn’t that just like...kid’s stuff? You’d learn more from me doing’ sales, Sash. It’s a hell of a lot cheaper than art school too.”

“You’re such a prick,” she sighed and spread her paper napkin over her lap. “I’ve done them since I was thirteen. It’s what I’m best at.”

“You mean, like that thing hanging’ in the dining room back home, right? Your Ma back at Kent State?” he asked, slurping down his shake.

“Yes,” she said, “the pretty one of her under the pine tree from that old photo album.”

Peter smiled and prodded his milkshake with his straw. “Yeah,” he said, “that’s a good one.”

“I’ve told you about them so many times, Dad,” she said, “I’ve got a friend and she says she’ll let me do a show at her gallery in the city. You remember Hazel, right? If I get a few shows, I’m sure I can get a scholarship to CAI, easy.”

“CAI, huh?” asked Peter. “We used to mug those kids on the train,” he chuckled.

Sasha pinched his elbow.

“What?!” he rubbed the twisted, red skin, “We *did*. Had to. I was eatin’ dog food, for Christ’s sake. Those kids got a check every month, meanwhile I’m beggin’ for scraps. Don’t you know where you came from?”

Ted Nugent laid into the third minute of a broken-down guitar solo.

“Look,” said Peter, “I know we’ve had different lives. It’s just hard to see everything the way you do when you come from a landfill. I guess people my age just want some respect. I don’t know...recognition.”

“Every generation says that, Dad”

“Yeah, well...maybe that’s cause it’s true, babe,” he said. “Hey, I’m gonna hit the head real quick. Tell me more about those sketches when I get back, huh?” He winked at her, rose on cracking joints and started towards the back of the restaurant. Sasha leaned on an elbow and slurped up her milkshake. Dan Quayle frowned from the TV. “Quayle flubs ‘Potato’ Spelling,” read the headline. She tore a steaming hot fry in half and tossed it on her tongue.

Just as Sweaty Teddy’s guitar solo crescendoed and peaked, a man entered the bar. He was thin, with sandy, sun-bleached skin and black curls down to his shoulders. He wore tight denim bell bottoms under a matching jean jacket. He sidled up next to Peter’s stool at the bar. “Hey!” he called towards the kitchen, “...can we get the Sox game on out here?”

“Who the hell’s that—” Stu appeared from the back of the house, wiping his hands. “Help ya there, fella?”

“I think it’s on channel nine,” the man said, staring at the television and lighting a cigarette. Sasha looked around the restaurant. The jukebox man had disappeared. Stu stooped behind the bar and began clamoring about with a stubborn footstool. He stood and moved over to Peter’s seat.

“Um,” Sasha started, “that’s actually take—” He plunked onto the leather stool with a satisfied grunt. Stu wheezed loudly as he reached for the knob on the old, mounted Zenith. Grease and sweat had made his thin cotton shirt nearly translucent. Sasha averted her eyes.

His cheeks were sunken and odd. Five-day old whiskers appeared in patches on his rusty face. His hair reminded Sasha of her own when she was a child. She’d seen pictures in old, crackling photo albums of her Mama holding a little blond baby. She used to ask her Dad who the baby was. Her first big laugh.

“There it is,” he said, exhaling with satisfaction. “Ah, hell! Down by three now. Goddamn Indians. Alvarez is gonna throw is friggin’ arm out. Gimme a Coors there, huh? A shot of Beam next to it.”

“Sure thing,” said Stu, stooping down again to put his stool away. Stu let out a phlegmy cough and prepared the man’s drinks.

A moment later Stu placed the shot and beer in front of the man. “Anything else?” The man grunted and swatted him away. Stu put his hands up and receded. The final squeals of “Stranglehold” petered out and the familiar synthesized introduction to Journey’s “Separate Ways” began.

“You play guitar?” He mumbled towards the bar.

Sasha paused, suddenly realizing how many times her father had done this. The Alpha trick. Walking in and taking charge. Like every silent person in the room was just waiting in there for them to show up.

“I...uh...tried a little in grade school,” she said, “My parents had me take lessons for a while.”

“Ah,” he asked, sipping slowly. “So, can you play any Floyd?”

Mama sat on the edge of little Lima Bean's bed, plucking the beginning of "Wish You Were Here," humming the guitar lead and showing Sasha how to play the rhythm chords on her ukulele. When Mama's hair was up in a bun she looked like she was about to conquer the world. When it was down, she swam like a sea snake skinny-dipping in some midnight reverie.

"Used to be able to, yeah" Sasha said.

He chuckled a little to himself, flicking his ash on the bare bar in front of him. It landed at the base of his Coors and melted away into nothing. "I used to be able to play all of 'Black Magic Woman'...you know Santana?"

"Oh yeah," she nodded, "he's...pretty great."

The first of Daddy's records that Mama had torched was Santana's "Abraxas." She knew he loved it the most. They used to send Sasha to bed early and have their friends over for wine parties. She'd hear the same repetitive swath of Latin jam music for hours upon hours, lying on her bed and tracing the veins in her arms and thighs.

One day, Mama found some old tickets from the dog track one of Daddy's trouser pockets. On a hunch, she called the bank. All their savings and my college fund had been withdrawn. It broke her. She cried for hours. She dumped record after record from his collection into our aluminum trash can in the driveway, doused them with lighter fluid and lit the up. The smell was nauseating. Daddy came home and screamed at her, punched a big dent in the side of the refrigerator. Mama moved them to the motel. Then came the drinking and the late-night phone fights. Then the lawyers. A full-scale attack.

"So..." he leaned over to her with a dusty pitch, "you're probably wondering', huh?"

Sasha teetered on her stool, cleared her throat and took a long look into his pale blue eyes.

“Wondering...what?” she turned, smiling. She inhaled the scent of the cooling Pattie Melt on the plate in front of her and started scraping nervously at the irritating and relentless chip of nail polish.

“*Wondering*” he spoke up, taking a large gulp of beer. He dropped the can on the bar, picked up the shot of bourbon, threw his head back and downed it. He then dropped the shot glass on the bar and downed another gulp of beer. He took a deep sigh, beat his chest with his fist and belched loudly. “...Just where in the hell your Pops is. I mean, *right*?” he laughed.

Sasha’s nerve system tensed uncontrollably from somewhere under her heart. He met her shocked glare with raised eyebrows and a wide grin. She tried to hop off the barstool. The man shushed her. “Relax, chica,” he said under his breath, “we’re old friends of your Pops.” The man pointed down to his right foot. He pulled up his bellbottom leg to reveal a large hunting knife strapped to his ankle. Sasha’s pulse picked up. She looked to Stu. With arched eyebrows, he had turned away, mumbling something about pot roast and ambling back to the kitchen. She reached down into her purse slowly, feeling for something heavy. The hairbrush was all she found.

“Don’t even,” he said, leaning in and pulling her towards him by her purse-strap. “Now,” he said through tense teeth, “I’ve got a friend. You may have seen him earlier. Big guy. A rocker. Like us, babe. He’s in the parking lot right now, probably giving your Pops the tune up of the century. All we gotta do is meet them in the back without making’ a scene,” Sasha tried to lunge but the man pulled tighter on the strap.

“Ya know,” he said, “with the Sox losing’ this bad, Daddy might not have any teeth left, so let’s just try to make things easier on him, huh? You be a good girl, now,” he warned her.

He stood and pulled her up off her stool, guiding her towards the back of the restaurant. The few remaining bar patrons stared into pale drinks under buzzing machines.

“We’re just gonna take you and Pete to see an old friend, Chica. That’s all this is...old business,” he spoke in a soft, urgent tone. He leaned in a little closer and cooed into her ear, “maybe later we can even rock a little Santana, huh?” he chuckled.

She grunted angrily and stomped on the toe of his snakeskin boot. The man jumped back with a yelp, releasing her. She ran towards the back of the building, darted to the right down a narrow hallway and then saw a door below a bright orange Exit sign. She shoved it open and sprinted out, tripping over a booted tree trunk of a leg immediately. She fell to the Cole-black asphalt, her knees and palms breaking her fall.

The silhouette of the jukebox man appeared from behind her. The crisp air and bright sunshine made it appear that steam was coming off his shoulders and bare head. He stooped down and brought her to her feet. The other man stumbled forth from the back door, laughing.

“Too late, Ginger,” he called. “No place left to go!”

The jukebox man swiveled and brought a finger to his lips. Sasha brushed debris from her hands. Her tights had been torn in the fall and now revealed two crimson-pocked knees.

“Shut it, Murph,” the jukebox man said, “she’s just a kid.”

“Suck me, Puppy Dog!” said Murph, patting his jean jacket, “You’re the rookie around here.”

“I’m gonna take her in the wagon,” said Puppy Dog. “You take the truck.” He put a thick arm on Sasha’s shoulder and examined her face. She spat on the asphalt.

“What the hell is going on?! Where is my Dad?!” she screamed.

“Let’s get going,” Pup said, putting a hand on her shoulder and leading her towards the front of Hackney’s

“Yo!” Pup called back to Murph, “He’s in the back seat, sleeping’ one off. I tied him.”

Pup reached into his overalls and pulled out a set of keys, tossing them to Muph.

“Right,” Murph said, catching the keys. “You better watch Little Ms. Breakfast Club there, too. She was reaching’ for her purse.”

Puppy Dog had neon green skulls tattooed on all ten of his knuckles. They smiled at Sasha brightly as he spilled the contents of her purse onto the front seat of the Key Lime Pie. He took a moment to examine the items, then rolled down the window and tossed a few eyebrow pencils and pens into the quiet street. He put the hairbrush, a few notebooks and some tampons back into the purse and handed it to her. She snatched it from him quickly and clutched it tightly on her lap. He pulled Peter’s keys from the front pocket of his overalls and inserted them into the ignition. The engine wretched to life. He pulled the wagon into gear and roared into the street, making two right turns and then heading up the I-294 on ramp, towards the city.

“Where are we going?” she asked him.

“We’re going to the South Side,” his tone crumbled as he spoke, like the words didn’t feel right to him, “Sherman Park, where your Dad’s from.”

Sasha bit her lip and focused in on one of the tiny green skulls.

“Don’t jump,” he told her blankly.

Sasha briefly considered the jump onto I-90. The immediate, face-crushing pain. The agonizing ache of at least six vehicles running her over, each more crushing than the last. The eventual and welcomed release of death several hours later.

Pearly tufts of cotton white speckled the calming blue hue swirling above them and brought the marvelous Midwestern afternoon into full fruition. Sasha watched out the window as car after unsuspecting car full of people she'd never met drifted in and out of their vicinity. She wished she could signal to them somehow. Pup seemed to sense her trepidation, speeding up and changing lanes aggressively. A car behind them honked their horn at his pushy merging.

Puppy Dog pushed the Pie up to eighty miles per hour. They zipped past tourists and elderly people in brand new sedans and gigantic Cadillac boats. Soon, the office buildings dissipated into "L" stops, old apartment buildings and old, sagging houses shedding roof tiles.

Sasha's parents had never one taken her to the city. "You'll get robbed," her Dad told her, sitting at his TV tray behind a slab of gravy and meatloaf.

"It's *Disney On Ice*, Peter," her Mom said under gigantic curlers, "Sue Granden is takin' everyone..."

"She aint takin Sash *anywhere*," he'd rumble, Caesar sauce dripping off a leaf in his teeth and landing on his plaid tie.

Once, though, when she was fourteen, she got to go with her friend, Liza. Liza's older sister had a car and dropped them off at the Art Institute in the downtown loop. It was the first place Sasha said she wanted to go. She'd seen it in a book in the art room one day when she was looking for magazine clippings to make a collage. The giant bronze lion on the front steps greeted her like something out of a dream. "Okay, we can stay for a sec, but we have to go to Weiner Circle right after," said Liza, "they yell mean stuff at you when you order food!"

They spent the afternoon looking at gorgeous works by dozens of artists. Names like Stefanelli, Mušič, and Enwonwu whom she had never heard of before graced plaques next to some of the most beautiful art she had ever seen. Heartbreaking sculptures of wounded mothers

cradling dead children, mind-bending paintings of impossible design and color. She basked in the glory of something she couldn't understand yet, the desire to create something.

She didn't just watch the art, she watched the people. They seemed so different compared to the PTA Moms and Khaki Dads she was used to out in Skokie. These people seemed open, unassuming and elegant. Then again, maybe the man with extensive Italian loafers had a pill problem. Maybe the lady with the perfect figure hadn't eaten in a year. Maybe the family of perfectly symmetrical faces and impeccable style throughout is the product of years of incest. Whatever the case, she was intrigued by that place, and knew that she should be there.

After gliding past downtown, Pup took the 63rd St. Exit and headed West. The bustling metropolis of downtown she had first encountered on her trip to the museum was nowhere to be found. There were dead streetlights, empty parking lots, burnt down apartment buildings and people gathering in the street. Traffic lights blinked red or yellow. Sasha wrung her wrists and held her breath again. Counted to ten. Pup went South on Halsted for a few blocks, then took a left on 59th and a right on Sagamon, entering a darkened residential neighborhood.

They reached a windowless, two-story building with an attached garage at Sagamon and 73rd St. Pup pulled an electric door opener from his overall pocket and pushed it. The garage opened and he pulled the Pie inside. Once inside, Pup pushed the button again, closing the door and enveloping the two of them in darkness.

Pup shut off the Pie's snarling engine. They sat for a moment. Sasha could feel her lymph nodes getting larger. She reached into her purse for the brush and felt the bristles on her fingertips.

"Alright," he said, "I'll take ya upstairs."

Pup grunted, leaned his heavy frame forward on the creaking bench and pulled the door lever open. He heaved himself to his feet with a deep exhale and slammed the door behind him. Sasha quickly felt around with her left hand in the back seat. She grasped the cold tongs, felt the sharp edges of the bulky respirator and then finally the cardboard box of scalpels. She ripped it open and snuck one up her hoodie sleeve just as Pup arrived by zippo light to open her door. He swung it open and stepped aside.

She followed him up a small set of steps, and he opened a small hollow core door. They stepped forth into a dimly lit vestibule. Pup nodded to a darkened hallway on his right. Sasha followed slowly. Several medals, placards and awards, all well-maintained and polished, lined the walls of the tight wood-paneled hallway. Most were from local gyms and athletic clubs. One was from the Lakeview Gym in 1978 for “City-Wide Middleweight Champion.” Another was a shellacked, wooden placard displaying a picture of the 1976 George Washington Raiders.

The floor moaned under Pup’s hulking frame. He wheezed along with it in guttural harmony. Sasha slid the scalpel down her sleeve and into her right hand. She removed the plastic safety guard and let it drop to the ground. She felt her wrist twitch, the blood pulsing in her forearm like a thousand horses running off a cliff. Pup suddenly stopped climbing the staircase and looked up. Sasha paused and slowly concealed the scalpel back up her sleeve. Pup held up a pudgy index finger. She tried to quiet her breathing.

At the top of staircase was another door, this one made of steel and painted black. Behind the door, a muffled conversation could be heard. The words were stifled but the tone seemed to be escalating. Two men began shouting at each other. Then there was the distinct sound of furniture being toppled and loud glass breaking. Pup glanced back at Sasha.

“You probably want to step to the side,” he motioned her towards the wall.

The steel door abruptly whipped open and a person was ejected from the room. A blur of purple leather, dark skin and white sneakers went sailing down the stairs past them. The man hit the railing headfirst, knocking it off the mounts. He continued to cascade down the dirty staircase, belting horrific moans until he smashed into the hallway wall. Sasha winced as the railing then collided with the wailing man’s skull with a resounding thud. He groaned and cradled his head in agony.

“I’ll break every face you got, Ernest!” a stalky man with deep ebony skin snorted from the doorway at the top of the steps. “You tell your boy Rico that Vic isn’t playing’ his game no more. Tell him Sherman Park, Throop, Cornell...*all* his turf is Greensleeves’ territory now, you hear me?”

The man groaned, spitting teeth on the floor and weeping.

“Ern? You heard that, right?” He called down to him with a thundering roar. “Or did I break your stupid ear drum too?” he chuckled and itched his graying, tightly kempt afro.

Ernie got up on one elbow with considerable pain. He then pulled himself up to his knees. He drooled blood like crimson syrup which dribbled down his chest and swirled into the violet leather texture of his jump suit. He finally made it to his feet and balanced himself on the wall. He leaned back and whimpered up the steps with a black and blue face, “I G-Gotcha, Vic.” He then limped his way down the hallway and staggered out loudly out into the street.

“Sometimes, Pup,” the stalky man said with a smile, “I got to do your job for ya, huh?”

“Shove it, Vic” Pup said, “I was sitting’ up at Hanksy’s so long I got blisters on my ass. We got ‘em, didn’t we?” Pup shoved past him and entered the office.

Vic Greentree rested briefly at the top of the steps. Python-thick arms eased themselves on his broadly set hips. A thick, sweaty beer gut heaved as it poked out of his light blue dress shirt, the buttons of which had been ripped off entirely in the preceding scuffle. He held a thin cigarillo between his teeth. In between labored, hoarse breaths, an infectious smile would light up his face as he spoke, but his stare was still fixated on the pool of blood at the bottom of the staircase. Sasha had noted a similar glint in her own reflection at the museum that Summer afternoon with Liza. He was interested, excited and above all, proud. Ernie's smashed head at the bottom of the stairs was his latest masterpiece. His chest thumped with his bright heartbeat. Sasha tried to blend in with the wood paneling.

Vic's snaky gaze finally broke and slowly fixated on Sasha for the first time in the three minutes since he'd appeared. His stare was not menacing, invasive, or ugly. He observed her the way a bank teller would a random safe deposit box. How a mortician might feel about stitching up a body split in three. Or how a seasoned Macy's clerk might feel the morning after Thanksgiving. Dark green irises housed deeply penetrating black pupils. His stare was unflinching, self-assured and analytical. He took a deep breath, straightened his posture and closed his shirt.

"Sasha," he said with a warm, pearly smile. "Please, come in..." he motioned politely towards the office doorway at his right. She entered.

* * *

Sasha dragged her fingers over Vic's doorframe like her Mama had, tracing the veins in her arm the last time they'd seen each other. They sat at a card table in the corner of the room she had been assigned at Hartford. Flaxen wallpaper with floral designs and streaked-up, pale linoleum seemed to haunt the place. Mama's burns from the curling iron still bubbled on her

cheek. The Boland's old phone number was still scabbing on her forearm. She hummed "Wish You Were Here" as she traced the veins. She'd taken to posting Sasha's prints up in the opposite corner.

"I hate the yellow, Sash," she said, dragging her freshly clipped nails across her wrist. Sasha always giggled from the goosebumps but never pulled away. "Your work is so much livelier. I love the horses."

Mama's favorite was called "The Canyon" in which a stampede of horses was running off the edge of a cliff. Sasha had started it last summer with just the team grazing in a lonely field. By the time Mama left, she'd added the cliff.

"Glad you like it, Mama," Sasha said.

A towering nurse stood outside Margie's door, casually glancing over her shoulder and into the room every thirty seconds or so.

treating you in here, Mama?"

Margie stopped tracing Sasha's veins and began inspecting her own. She caught the nurse's glance. "You're not supposed to call it 'in here,' babe. Bad for morale, they say."

"So, you've been going to those rage meetings Daddy was talking about?"

Margie sighed and grinned. A man could be heard screaming a Jeopardy answer from the common area. A television was not heard.

"They're afraid of me, Sash," Margie said, staring straight through the nurse. "They think I'm gonna cut somebody up or something. Took all my pencils, can't even write my poetry now. I'm afraid I'll forget it all. Your grandma always—Oh," she placed her palms to her heart, remembering something suddenly. "I forgot. I have something for you."

She crossed the room to a plastic nightstand that sat next to the queen-sized mattress which was tucked, frameless and sheet-less, in the corner adjacent to the card table. The nurse shot a glance at the sound of the plastic drawer opening. Margie pulled out her mother's wooden hairbrush.

"One of the only things they let me have anymore," she said, clutching it to her chest. "It's too old to hurt anyone." She brought it to her tightly cropped hair. She began to brush lightly in the back, but soon paused, "Truth be told, though," she said, pulling strands of black, red and gray from the brush and letting them glide from her slender palm to the floor. "It does more harm than good for me anymore."

She handed Sasha the brush.

"You know it was Grandma's," she said, "but I bet you didn't know that your Grandma—" she pulled a wallet-sized photograph from the nightstand and showed it to her, "was about as foxy as they came in her day."

It was not the first photograph Sasha had ever seen of her grandmother, but it had to be the best. There were countless old Sears ads and church photographs which lined the hallways of her youth. She had always looked quiet, tight, reserved, yet independent and graceful to Sasha. The girl in this photograph was about fifteen years of age, pale of skin, freckled up and down. She was on an old tire swing attached to a towering oak. Shade danced down on her smiling face as she gazed for the camera. Her hair was the most striking, though. It whipped around her shoulder in a tight embrace. The photo was black and white, but the deep crimson curls were unmistakable.

"She really was," Sasha said, "I can't believe that's her!"

“I mean, she had entire football teams calling her,” Margie laughed. “Can you imagine? At fifteen! I never looked that good. That hair, my God. It’s just like yours. Must have skipped a generation, huh?”

“You’ve got good hair, Mama,” Margie said.

“Not next to you two,” she laughed. “She used to call it a ‘rat’s nest,’ but everyone always thought it was the most beautiful thing. The cat-calls this woman would get, oh my God, Sash—”

Sasha laughed, imagining the girl in the photograph dancing down Michigan Ave. on a sunny spring afternoon. Turning the heads of men wearing hats and hard hats. Rolling the eyes of women in fur coats with hands full of shopping bags. She’d stroll across the street to Grant Park wearing dungarees and a black cardigan, carrying only a cherry red smile and a notebook.

“Whatever happened to—”

“Was wondering when you’d ask,” Margie said, dropping a small leather-bound notebook in Sasha’s lap. “That’s everything she ever wrote. Well, in college anyway. She’s good. A little maudlin, but that’s what I like about your stuff, Sash.”

Sasha opened the notebook and eyed the first few pages. Each stanza looked perfectly planned. There were no words scratched out or lines emitted. It was as if she had the blueprint in her mind and she was merely transcribing.

“They’re beautiful, Mama,” she said. “Thank you so much.”

“You got to do what she couldn’t, Sash,” she said, dropping her hand to her wrist once again. “What I could never do. You’re the first one who can do it. We fought for this. For you. You know that, right?” her loving grip tightened slightly. Sasha’s heart skipped and she felt

herself lurch upward slightly. The nurse was preoccupied with the Jeopardy man and was shouting at him to keep it down.

“I know, Mama,” she said, pulling her wrist back.

Margie let a darkening gaze sink to the linoleum.

“At least we got you out all this mess,” she said. “How I ended up married to such a piece I’ll never know.”

Sasha squirmed in her seat. Margie stared at her deeply.

“Damn it,” Margie said, quickly jumping to her feet in a huff. She started to pace, tracing fading skid marks with her lace-less white Keds. “You sneak any smokes in?”

“No, Mama,” said Sasha, “I don’t smoke.”

“Oh, bullshit,” Margie said, gripping her hands tightly around her waist. The bulky institutional sweatshirt masked an impossibly thin frame. “You girls, what’s her name...Hazel? You both used to come in after those stupid freshman mixers reeking of your Dad’s Viceroy’s.”

“Mama,” Sasha said, “I don’t have any. I’m sorry.”

“Eh,” she said with a hiss. “I’ll ask Janet Reno here.” She hollered towards the nurse for a cig. The nurse laughed. Margie began to pace.

“Can’t even get cigs anymore, Sash. You see what he’s doing to me? All this over a divorce?! Committing me?”

“You’ve been hurting yourself,” Sasha said.

“It’s the god damned medication, Sasha,” she said. Her eyes burned a darker green than Sasha had ever witnessed before. A spider’s nest of crackling red blood vessels framed her piercing pupils. “I never hurt myself out there. Not once. And then he has me *arrested?* ‘Domestic abuse?’ Did that *really* happen? I keep playing it over and over, Sash. I can’t even

write about it anymore. I never hurt you or him or anyone! I took some pills and burnt some records, so what?!”

“Look, Mama,” Sasha said, noticing the nurse’s glances increasing in frequency. “I don’t know what the hell was happening between you two. The burning smell woke me up. Then I saw you two yelling at each other in the back yard, and the big fire and I just freaked. I’m sorry I called the fire department, the limbs were catching. I didn’t know what else to do.”

“No, baby,” Margie said, “this isn’t you. This is me and him...” her gaze drifted back to the hallway.

The nurse was dragging the Jeopardy man back to his room. He kept yelling, “what is an ampersand?! What is an ampersand, Alex?!”

“...Always has been, always will be.”

“*You* don’t even have to read it!” Peter yelled at the nurse behind the front desk. “Just give it to her doctor. It’s your job. Dr. Smythe is his name. Is he back there? We talked about it earlier...on the phone. I’m Peter Boland.” He tossed a weathered journal on the desk in front of her.

She swatted an invisible fly and drank Frappuccino from a plastic green straw. “Once again, sir,” she continued chewing a large ball of gum stored in her cheek. “Dr. Smythe is currently out of the office, and I cannot accept material pertaining to his patients, without filing these—” she gestured the top of a puffy pink pen towards a stack of forms in front of him.

“That’s ridiculous,” Peter reared his head back, “look, I’m a salesman, I gotta go as soon as my kid gets out here. I’ve got appointments all day. Here—” he flipped open the notebook, glancing at the waiting room door. “I put post-it’s on the important parts. See?” he gestured

towards her with the notebook. “Right here, Sunday, March 4th, 1977, ‘...heard voices telling me to pray to Crowley again.’ And then here, in May of ’79, she’s blowing some guy at a KISS concert,” he said.

The nurse rolled her eyes and landed on the forms.

“Do you need a pen?”

“Lady,” Peter’s blood started to rise. “You’re not hearing’ me. This is the mother of child, I’m a Christian now. If I don’t—”

“Sir, you have to go through the proper channels,” she said, chewing louder.

“Oh, that’s it,” Peter yelled. “You speed demons are all the same! Can’t give a guy in a tie a break, huh?”

The waiting room door opened and Sasha was lead through by two nurses.

“Hiya there, Lima Bean,” Peter said, quickly pocketing the notebook and rubbing a reddening neck. “You ready?”

“Yeah,” she said, walking towards the exit.

Peter grabbed the forms off the counter and tucked them tightly under his arm. He exited with a huff. The nurse stared and sipped.

The Key Slime Pie slithered out of the Hartgrove parking lot. Sasha stared out the window at the streaks of sandy sunset and wispy cornstalks in the distance.

“What’s up with the notebook?” she asked him.

Peter sighed and thumped the car lighter on. “Your mother’s.”

“Is it to help her...or...,” she glanced across the bench at him. He shifted in his seat.

“Help, Sash,” he stuck a Viceroy on his lower lip and waited. The lighter popped. “It’s all to help.”

* * *

Vic Greentree’s office was modestly sized, walled by whitewashed cinderblocks. Dismal, taupe office carpeting expanded from wall to wall. There was gold and black stand-alone safe in the far corner. Two dark gray filing cabinets with no drawers in them sat next to it. Someone had set up an impromptu desk comprised of a hollow-core door resting on two dusty, paint-pocked saw horses. The drooping desk was littered with yellow, white and pink receipts, stacks of cash and three different handguns. Next to a pool of bullets there was a dilapidated coffee maker and four ashtrays brimming with butts. Sasha smelled tuna from a can and Ajax in the carpet.

“She’s got her Mama’s red hair,” Vic said with a chuckle. He approached Sasha sweetly and framed her face in his callused palms. “Same face, too.” Pup plopped down on a white, leather love seat in the back corner of the office.

“Pup’s the new guy, so he never had the pleasure of meeting’ Margie,” Vic said, dropping his hands and walking behind his desk to a brown folding chair. “Too bad, Pup. She cooked the best goddamned wop food I ever had. Now, I’ve seen you at the salad bar down at Caruso’s, and that’s no joke, Pup, but *this* broad would have had you snoozing’ after the appetizers, man.” He took a seat, his heavy frame forcing the chair to wheeze loudly. “Lasagna, tortellini, mastaciolli,” he crossed his arms and continued to examine Sasha unabashedly, smiling wide, “and we ate it up.”

Sasha swallowed her spit. The fluorescent light-soaked walls began to take on a violet hue as her eyesight settled. She felt her grip settle on the scalpel once more. She began to eye the door again.

“Murph called from the road,” Vic said to Pup, his stare persisting. “Gonna meet him over there later.”

“Drexel?”

Vic sniffed in reply.

“Figured,” said Pup. “So, what’s next?”

Vic crossed the room to a paneled closet door, sliding it open. “Go ahead and check out their car,” he said, tossing a set of keys to Pup. “See if we could use any of that junk.” Pup nodded and stood. He crossed the room and exited.

“Sir?” Sasha started, “if there’s anything my father has done, or anything I have done, please...” she began to inch toward the door. Vic cackled as he thumbed through hanger after hanger of designer dress shirt.

“I was all-state running back at George Washington,” he said, unbuttoning his cufflinks, “Class of ’78. I’ve still got some moves, so don’t sleep on me, now. I’d catch you before you got halfway to Western, little girl.” He dropped his shoulders and let his soiled blue dress shirt fall to the floor. His back was broad and sturdy, centered with a large, tattooed depiction of the Virgin Mary. His shoulder blades swung swiftly as he reached into the closet and pulled out a fresh white dress shirt.

“Why did you bring me here? Where did you take him?” Sasha’s heart rate sped ever faster.

“Relax, hon,” Vic said, “I just wanted to show you something really quick,” Vic pulled his shirt over his shoulders and buttoned it starting at the top.

“See,” he said with quick sigh, “things have changed a lot since we’ve seen your father. He ever tell you about the old days?”

“N-no,” she sputtered, yearning for an exit strategy. Maybe she could slip out through the front before Pup would hear.

“Didn’t think so,” Vic said with a sudden frown. He walked behind his desk and picked up a framed photograph. He examined it closely for a moment, allowing his frown to slide back into his toothy grin. He walked over to Sasha slowly and handed her the frame. Sasha dropped her gaze. The, sun-worn, black and white photo depicted a group of about eleven young black, white and Latino boys between the ages of seventeen and twenty hanging around the front porch of a freshly painted shotgun shack-style house. The boys held fresh paintbrushes and rollers. White paint freckled them all.

“There’s me,” said Vic, pointing to a smirking brute of a boy leaning on the railing to the right, squinting in the sun and flexing his biceps. “See them guns?” he asked, reproducing his tableau pose for her, “still got it,” he chuckled.

Sasha smiled a little.

“Who’s this?” she asked him, pointing to a lumpy man in a bowling shirt with a jet-black helmet of hair.

Vic crossed the room to a mini-fridge. He took one of several liquor bottles that were gathered on top of the fridge and poured himself a glass of Christian Brothers brandy.

“That’s Petey,” he laughed. “That’s your Pops.”

He stood to the side of the bunch, not portraying much of an image. He looked to Sasha like he wanted to be counting cash somewhere. She'd seen that side glance in several of her own family photos. Slippery Pete always looking for the next buck.

“See, we were all orphans, met in foster homes on the South side. Your Dad’s Dad, he ran one of them. Drexel House. “Vic said. “That’s us painting the front porch.”

Sasha shifted her weight. Her feet began to burn on top of the gray carpet fibers.

“When’s the last you seen your Ma, girl?” Vic asked her.

“I don’t know,” said Sasha.

Vic shifted the ice around in his tumbler. He stood again and headed back to the bar to make another drink.

“Mine left me a few weeks after that photo you’re holding was taken,” he said, spilling more brandy into his glass. “She met some hash dealers and decided to take off to Detroit. Left my young ass holding a state pennant. Guess she thought I’d be alright on my own. I had other plans, though,” he sighed. “Met your Daddy slinging dope. He was working for somebody—who was it...maybe Ripper,” he said with a reminiscent rumble-Man, one of them. Petey ran Morgan Street for them.”

Sasha tried to see ruthlessness in her young father’s face. There just seemed to be impatience. The distant boy in the picture stared off with dazzlingly familiar eyes. Eyes that she had seen judge like a Supreme Court Justice from overtop the newspaper. Eyes that belonged to the wheezing man across from her at the breakfast table every morning, sitting and smoking cigs in his shorts and dress socks.

“Dealing’ and all had its perks, “Vic said. “We had a lot of fun. Until we didn’t.”

Pup suddenly came thudding up the steps and into the room.

“She’s got something’,” he said, holding the scalpel’s plastic safety cover up.

“Oh—” Vic stood up from the chair.

Pup lunged towards Sasha, she quickly made a move and produced the hidden blade, swiping it at his huge frame. He whipped her wrist towards the ceiling, pulling her up off the ground. Her joint popped loudly and she shrieked as it took on her full weight. Pup reached up and ripped the scalpel from her hand, tossing it on the makeshift desk.

“Well, that takes it,” Vic said, picking up the scalpel and examining it closely. “Put her down, Puppy Dog.”

Pup let her go and panted heavily. He stepped back and blocked the doorway.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had anyone come after me with one these,” he cackled again and handed the scalpel to Pup. “Keep that.”

“Maybe we should tie her up,” Pup suggested.

“Yeah,” Vic agreed. “Here,” he stooped down and unplugged a long brown extension cord from behind the desk. He tossed it to Pup.

“You’re bad, kid,” Vic said. “And here I was trying’ to see if you could help us out. Guess we gotta do things the hard way. Ballones...bridge burners. Every one. What’d I tell ya, Pup? Apple don’t fall far.”

* * *

Peter was tired from yelling into the gag and kicking his legs. His tongue was numb and his lips were swollen. A steady drip of drool had been gushing like an open IV onto his dress shirt. The zip ties around his wrists and ankles were too tight, and circulation had stopped. The

computer chair he was duct taped to was too rigid. His lower back ached intensely. His glasses had been taken or smashed or both. All forms seemed shapeless. He could smell moldy drywall. There were no lights.

Murph struck a match off an old stone mantel piece and lit a candle.

“Always loved this place, man,” he said, bringing the match to a nail and inhaling, “I mean we *loved* it here, Petey.”

Peter grunted and swiveled in the chair.

“I got so drunk here, man” he laughed. “Shit, I got *laid*.”

He exhaled and flicked ash onto the mantle.

“I’m really grateful for that, Petey,” he said, “your folks always did right by me. Gave me a place to grow up...and you and me, when we had the place later, there were a lot of good years. That’s why it’s too bad.”

Peter sank in his seat.

“You know I did ten for what went down here, man?” Murph asked. “Ten in the pen, Petey. Guess I shouldn’t be complaining’ though, Vic got fifteen. Most of that in solitary, too. Kept on fighting’. You probably read up on all that, huh, Petey?”

The chair spilled onto the floor. Peter landed on his right thumb and wailed in pain.

“Oh, come on, man,” said Murph with a laugh. “You *know* you taught us better than that. You aint gettin’ outta that chair anytime soon.” He crossed the room and picked Peter and the chair back up. “Try to remember, Petey,” he said. “You had to know we’d catch up to you sooner or later.”

Three quiet taps were heard at the back door. The Drexel House, abandoned for the past six years, bent audibly under the frigid south side winds. All rooms were devoid of furniture. The plaster walls wheezed and the holes in the roof created whistling wind tunnels. What window panes remained shivered constantly. Gusts of icy air ripped through the floorboards like tissue paper. Murph made his way to the back of the house and unlocked the kitchen door.

“Well, well—”

Pup shoved past him, leading Sasha behind him. Her wrists were bound with extension cord and a bandana had been tied around her lips tightly as a gag. They ambled through the kitchen and into the living room. Vic slowly followed.

“He still with it?” Vic asked.

“Yeah,” Murph said, “haven’t told him the good news yet, though.”

“Mr. *Boland!*” Vic called from the back of the house, walking steadily and landing in the living room. “What a pleasure it is, sir. I don’t believe we’ve been introduced. My name is Vic, and I do believe we share a common field of employment.” Vic nodded to Murph, who crossed the room and cut each of their gags off.

“Oh now, wait a minute...” Vic feigned surprise. “I’ve just gotta tell you...and please don’t take offense...but, you look *just* like this old wop friend of mine.”

“Is that—Vic?” Peter writhed in his seat, “If you hurt her, Vic, I’m gonna—”

“Daddy,” Sasha called to him. “I’m here. I’m okay.”

Vic crossed the room to the mantle and picked up the candle. “It’s really good to see you again, Petey,” he said.

“Vic,” Peter pleaded, “just let Sash go, she’s got nothing’ to—”

“We know somebody’s got *somethin*’, Petey,” said Vic. “We just don’t know who it is, yet.”

Sasha inched toward her father. Pup noticed and pulled her back. Vic waved him off. “Let her.”

Pup released her. Sasha quickly went to her father.

“Hey Bean,” he said. “They got my glasses.”

“He can’t see without those,” she said to them.

“Do you even remember the name, Pete?” Vic asked, dripping wax on the mantle in three small pools.

“Name of what, Vic,” Peter said bitterly.

“The clubs,” Vic answered. “I mean, you want your kid to know her local history, no?”

He pointed to the first pool of wax drying on the mantle.

“First was us,” he said. “Burger King Boys. The originals. Murph was there too.”

“Pride of 68th St.” Murph echoed.

“I know you remember that one, Petey.” Vic chuckled, “Our clubhouse was right here in the basement of 613 Drexel. Then the next year we got this living room and then when your folks finally moved to the suburbs we had full reign. We all loved this place. Had enough drugs to sell to keep the lights on, and enough women to keep us sane when there wa—”

“Alright, Vic,” Peter protested, “enough. What’s the point?”

“But *then*,” Vic said, “Petey got a girlfriend.”

“Jesus,” Peter said, “Vic—”

“Petey started staying’ out,” Vic said, “New lady in his life. Tiny redhead named Margie. Skinny little thing, but you couldn’t tell by the way she could she cook. She’d come over a lot in the early days, right Murph?”

“Yeah,” said Murph, “we all loved Margie.”

“*Loved* her, Pete,” Vic said, staring through the candle light. “We loved both of you like family.”

He pointed to the second pool. “Then we started hearing about a new gang. Vigilante duo robbing huge drug houses left and right. We all called ‘em the Unicorns because they were out of sight. Gone.”

“The South side cholo’s were shakin’ in their boots, Petey,” Murph laughed.

“Yeah,” Vic said. “We heard it was just the two of ‘em in black ski masks and .22’s, but who knows. They had some kind of system. *Something* was working. They hit Morgan, Washtenaw and Hirsh Streets in one week. Five hundred thou, just suddenly missing from the game. Corners shut down for weeks. They never left any bodies, either. Riding high and then no one ever heard from them again. Coincidentally, Burger King Boys took a hit too.”

“No unicorns that night,” Murph said with a sigh.

“Pete might have been out that night,” Vic said.

Pete moaned, “Cut the theatrics, you pricks. I had nothing to do—”

“We were sitting *right here*,” Vic walked into the dark dining room adjacent to them, illuminating the dim walls with the candle. “Playing Texas Hold ‘Em. Nine thirty on a Wednesday night, as I recall. Front door burst wide open. We all threw our arms up. Doogie even had his .45 sitting on the table. We all still had cards in hand. Murph, I think you won, right—”

“Did I?”

“You had the two pair, as I recall,” Vic said.

“Christ, Vic—” Peter yelled. “What the *hell* can I do for you?”

“Probably hard to remember, Murph,” Vic said over the crackling of the molding in the dining room. “That S.W.A.T. officer slammed your head against the table probably forty times in a row. How many stitches you get?”

“Inside or out?” Murph asked.

A piece of plastic insulation was hanging from the window in the dining room. Vic slowly walked over and lifted the candle up to it. The plastic quickly shriveled away. The flame drifted up to the rotting wood of the window sill. Black smoke began to fill the room as the flames slowly spread.

“They found it all in about five minutes,” Vic said. “Coke. Weed. Smack. All in the basement where no one knew about it. Just us. Put us away for a decade each. Even Micah who lived in the back room did some time for that. He didn’t even sell, man. You hear about that, Petey?”

“Vic,” Peter coughed. “I never—”

“Petey was always Mr. Invisible,” Vic said, re-entering the living room.

Sasha squirmed to loosen the extension cord around her wrists.

“The rest of us though, we all went away,” Vic spoke above the rising crackle. “Four of us. I did a decade plus. Multiple attacks and beatings endured at the hands of racist thugs and murdering junkies. Cried myself to sleep when I wasn’t begging to get out. How much time you get, Petey?”

Peter coughed loudly again, the smoke from the dining room was beginning to spread throughout the house.

“Oh, that’s right,” said Vic. He held the candle above him and slowly turned his wrist. Peter hissed in pain and kicked his legs wildly. Petey and Margie were ‘out.’ And so, the fairy tale begins. Petey Ballone disappears into thin air. All the sudden, Peter Boland buys a house up in Skokie. Nice place, too. Murph’s seen it many times.”

“Beautiful rose garden, Petey!” Murph grinned.

“He starts his own medical business, does pretty well for himself,” said Vic, “Even though he wasn’t much of a salesman. This Peter Boland had a lot of the same habits as another friend of ours. A friend who never came to visit either of us in the pen once. Our buddy Petey who never saw a day of time and who we never saw again.”

The ceiling began to burn in the kitchen. A fixture shattered somewhere in the back. Then, another was heard from upstairs. Pup’s eyes darted.

“Jesus Vic,” he said. “This place is going up.”

“Vic,” Peter pleaded, out of breath and coughing from the upturned chair. “You’re no super villain, we both know that, and I’m not gonna Hulk out of this tape any time soon. So just tell me—I can’t do it no more. You gotta stop it. Let us go and I’ll give you whatever you want.”

Vic pointed to the third pool of wax. “And now, Sasha,” he said. “We have the new guard. The Greensleeves. When we got out, we all regrouped. I took the lead, and with Murph and Pup here we’ve soared higher than anyone else before us. As of today, all the corners are ours. I’m doing better than Petey Bollone ever did, that’s for sure,” Vic laughed, placing the candle on the mantle and walking over to Peter. “But you can always go higher. And now that

the house of cards is falling, Petey, I'd like to know," he said. "...Just what in the hell happened to that five hundred thousand those Unicorns nabbed back in the day?"

Vic's eyes darted to Sasha, slumped on the floor next to Peter. She cried. He leaned in to her ear. "How about you, Sasha? Your Mama ever mention a 'college fund?'"

Sasha acted quickly, lurching forward and jamming the recovered scalpel anywhere she could. It landed at his shoulder, and bent under her weakened wrist, just barely tearing through his dress shirt. Vic hurled himself backward in surprise.

"How—"

Pup lunged and grabbed her, shaking the blade to the ground. Thick, black smoke now enveloped the living room. Windows were heard shattering throughout the house. Murph grabbed Sasha from behind and held her back by the shoulders.

"You alright, Vic?" Murph asked.

"*Ballones,*" Vic checked his shoulder, "yeah, she didn't—"

A crimson strip of blood suddenly soaked the back of Vic Greentree's white dress shirt.

"Yeah, that'd be the artery," Murph said. "Catch him, Pup!"

Vic fell to his knees and wheezed loudly. Blood began to pool on his tongue. He threw his arms wildly, scanning his torso for the entry point. Puppy Dog stooped and stood him up. The three of them began heading towards the back door. Vic thrashed and gurgled in indignation, skidding the kitchen floor with his boots as they dragged him out.

"Come on, Vic," Murph whispered. "He aint worth dying'. Rat's never go far."

Moments later, The Greensleeves' windowless cargo van hissed out of the back alley towards Western Avenue. Moments later, four separate groups of screaming firetrucks and

police cruisers arrived at the blazing Drexel House. Sasha scrambled to pick up the scalpel from the popping floorboards.

“Bean,” Peter blindly called out to Sasha across the popping floorboards. “Leave it. Just drag me outside,” he sighed. “They know me.”

* * *

He awoke his daughter with a shake of her bedpost. “Up and at ‘em, babe,” he said, sipping from a foggy mug of freshly prepared Folger’s. Sasha’s brain throbbed. Her lungs felt like suitcases full of coal. She could still feel the freezing cold chair from the police station on her shoulders. The stink of piss from the holding cell still hung in her hair.

“You stay up and finish it?” he asked.

She sighed, “yeah, I was too wired after questioning.”

“That’s my little trooper,” he said. “You send it in?”

“Yeah, Dad,” she said.

“Through the uh—”

“E-mail.”

“Cover letter too?”

“Yes.”

“Portfolio?”

She ripped the covers off her face. “Do you even know what a portfolio is?”

“Yeah, Bean,” he smirked at himself in the mirror, “and you can't get into the best art school in the city without one, right?”

“Right...” she said.

“Come on downstairs,” he said.

“Daddy,” she begged, “after yesterday I just want to sleep.”

“I promise you don’t have to go out with me today, Lima Bean. I’m uh...working from home today,” he said. “Just come down for a sec, I gotta surprise.”

The Key Slime Pie sat in the garage parked in its normal position, flush with the tennis ball.

“So...” Peter sipped happily from his mug, seated in a wheelchair in the corner of the garage, “what do you think?”

“It’s...our car,” she said.

“No...,” he wagged a finger, “as of this morning, it’s *your* car. Look, I even cleaned it out for ya.”

Sasha crossed the garage to the back gate. Indeed, all the medical supplies had been removed. It was the first time she’d seen the way back empty since they bought it. She sighed.

“What’s the matter, Bean?” Peter asked, his spine straightening.

She shrugged, “I mean, thanks,” she said. “It’s great, but...I want to live in the city. I don’t really need a car.”

“Don’t need a *car*?” he balked, “Man, you never heard that in the sixties. Even in the city.”

“It’s nice. Thank you, Daddy.” she smiled and started back to her room.

“Hey, Sash—” Peter called to her.

“Yeah?” she turned and paused at the door.

“I wanted to let you know,” he shifted his weight in the wheelchair, “I’m sorry you had to be included in that business yesterday.”

“It’s fine,” she said.

“No,” he said, “it’s not. But maybe it can be.” He leaned to the side and reached into his back pocket, pulling out a small notebook. “*This*,” he said, “belongs to your mother. You remember these?”

Sasha nodded and turned back to him.

“Now,” he said, opening it and inspecting the entries. “She may not make it out of that hospital in this lifetime. Its chicken and the egg with that one as far as I’m concerned. I don’t know if it’s the pills making her nuts or if she was nuts in the first place.”

“Dad,” Sasha started.

“*But*,” he continued, “once upon a time, she and I had quite a life together. That life appears to have ended now, and I’m fine with that. I have been for a long time. There was a time when I honestly wanted her to hurt, but I know now that I’ve let that feeling go. She deserves her peace too, Sash. And I think she might find some of it here and in these others,” he motioned to an orange plastic milk crate at his feet full of old notebooks.

“Those are...Mama’s?”

“Yup,” he said, thumbing through the pages and squinting at the entries. “Grad school and a little after. Where in the hell is it? Should have used a post-it. Ah!” he smiled, “there.”

He handed the dusty journal over to her and held his thumb to the entry under July 8th, 1982. It read: “*I have found a love that is real, everlasting and genuinely forgiving in all ways. My prince and I are going north to build a family. We want only to build from what we have earned together and leave the past in the past. We will start anew in a new place with new*

names. And she will be worth every step we take together. When the time comes, we and only we know where to send her.”

“Where to *send* me?” Sasha asked. “Where exactly am I going?”

“Go ask your Mama,” he said, tossing her the keys.

VITA

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