

PROTECT AND SERVE

A Thesis

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by

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Matthew Benjamin Grice received a BA in English from Columbia University in 2009. He was born and raised on the Connecticut shore, and his work has appeared in the Apple Valley Review and other publications.

To my father

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to Cornell and the David L. Picket Endowment, to Michael Koch and *Epoch*, to my fellow fiction workshop members, my writing professors, and especially my committee members, John Lennon and Stephanie Vaughn, for helping me figure out how to say it.

When I was a young teacher at Cornell, I once had a debate about education with a professor of psychology. He said that it was his function to get rid of prejudices in his students. He knocked them down like tenpins. I began to wonder what he replaced those prejudices with. He did not seem to have much of an idea of what the opposite of a prejudice might be. He reminded me of the little boy who gravely informed me when I was four that there is no Santa Claus, who wanted me to bathe in the brilliant light of truth. Did this professor know what those prejudices meant for the students and what effect being deprived of them would have? Did he believe that there are truths that could guide their lives as did their prejudices? Had he considered how to give students the love of the truth necessary to seek unprejudiced beliefs, or would he render them passive, disconsolate, indifferent, and subject to authorities like himself, or the best of contemporary thought? My informant about Santa Claus was just showing off, proving his superiority to me. He had not created the Santa Claus that had to be there in order to be refuted. Think of all we learn about the world from men's belief in Santa Clauses, and all

that we learn about the soul from those who believe in them. By contrast, merely methodological excision from the soul of the imagination that projects Gods and heroes onto the wall of the cave does not promote knowledge of the soul; it only lobotomizes it, cripples its powers.

I found myself responding to the professor of psychology that I personally tried to teach my students prejudices, since nowadays – with the general success of his method – they had learned to doubt beliefs even before they believed in anything. Without people like me, he would be out of business... So I proposed a division of labor in which I would help to grow the flowers in the field and he could mow them down.

- *Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind*

You gotta give ‘em hope.

- *Harvey Milk*

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The line to enter the Duomo wrapped around the front of the cathedral and hugged the bell tower, and Shane stood behind Jason, between Sonia and the sun. Probably it was all the walking they were doing, but Shane's leg hurt more than usual. The light was already hot on the crowds of pinkish tourists, while men who looked like matinee idols zipped around on motorbikes with POLIZIA lettered across the sides. Shane felt no kinship with them – he was as pink and heavy as the other Americans, and his uniform was home in his closet in Louisiana. He watched Sonia fidget, lean against the wall of the cathedral, straighten up again, then open the Europe guidebook she'd insisted on carrying since they got off the plane and fan herself with it. He marveled at her twelve-year-old's inability to get comfortable with her own body.

Shane thought about what would happen after he and Jason dropped Sonia off in Orlando at the end of their trip. He would have to separate his things from Jason's. Move out. He could go to his cousin's in Mississippi. It would be a longer drive into New Orleans from there than from his sister's but his cousin didn't believe that he was going to Hell.

In Paris Sonia's exuberance had distracted him: she claimed she was going to move to France as soon as it could possibly be arranged; she was taking the language in school and translated random words off street signs and menus. But she was quieter now. She knew, too, that something was over.

They waited outside the Duomo for thirty minutes and moved halfway up the line. Sonia pointed to the dark-skinned men and women holding out shawls to the tourists. "Why are so many people buying them?" Shane didn't know. "They look cheap. I bet they're not real Indian scarves."

"I don't think those are Indians," Shane said.

“They’re Gypsies,” Jason said, trying to fit the Duomo into the two and a half inch screen of his digital camera.

“Really?” Sonia glanced sideways at Shane. “They look like that?”

“Oh, perfect,” Jason snapped, putting down the camera. “You’re wearing the wrong clothes. They’re selling the shawls because women in tank tops have to cover their arms.”

The front doors were flanked by guards turning away visitors wearing inappropriate attire – anything that showed bare shoulders or leg above the knee. Sonia’s shorts and her top were both against the dress code. “What an effective use of our limited time in this country,” said Jason as they got out of line.

“I didn’t know, Dad, okay!” Sonia yelled. “Why are you being such a tool?”

“Do we need to treat Italy like it’s a long car ride?”

“Do you need to be a jerkoff?”

Sonia stomped off in no particular direction. Shane, his bad leg sore from standing for so long, lowered himself to the curb. Around them, gangs of Italian boys in tight jeans looked disdainfully at pasty American girls. Sonia was standing in the street, squinting up at the dome of the cathedral, her fists still clenched. At twelve, she was just a little too young for the Italian boys to eye; two of them pulled sunglasses down from their longish black hair as they stepped into the heightened light of the piazza.

“I don’t know why she’s acting like this,” Jason said to Shane.

“You think she doesn’t know there’s something wrong? She’s been afraid to speak to you the whole time.”

The something wrong had appeared in the flesh two days before the European vacation was to begin. It – he – had a crown of curly hair, a delicate spiderweb tattoo of a slingshot on his back, and no name that Shane knew. Shane

had found him in bed with Jason when he came home early from the station.

It made sense. He and Jason hadn't kissed in four months. Five? Six? They were over, even though they were sharing a room at the Villa Camerata, after a week of sleeping in the same bed but not touching in a hotel on the Rue Condorcet in Paris, after what had become an assumed routine of sleeping apart in the bed at home on Magazine Street in Louisiana.

But Shane didn't think Sonia was fooled. He beckoned to her: "Look at the Italians." After a few minutes she forgot about her anger as they both watched the effortless locals thread through tourists wilting in the heat.

Shane apologized for losing his temper, and suggested they buy some new, more cathedral-appropriate clothes for her to wear. "They're so fashionable here. I don't know," she mumbled, but she agreed to step into one of the boutiques lining the side streets and see what happened. As they walked, Shane watched Jason watch the Italian men. What made them so different? Better tailoring? Better fabrics? Confidence? He wondered if he would be able to fit into any of the high-end Italian clothes.

They went into a shop on the corner of two side streets, each just wide enough for a single car. A clerk said hello in Italian and English and looked inquiringly from Jason to Shane, as if uncertain about their relationship to one another.

Sonia wanted something with ITALIA on it, or FIRENZE, but this wasn't that kind of store. The jeans and pullovers and dresses in the women's section cost hundreds of euros. They were warm, deep colors, like the colors of the city itself, and made so that every inch of fabric flattered. Jason strode over to the men's section and pulled a corduroy jacket down from a hook. Shane could imagine how it would hug Jason's waist and straddle his shoulders. Jason already had a closet full of jackets, jackets he needed only a couple of months out of the year in New

Orleans. Shane picked up a pair of pink striped shorts. They were absurdly beautiful. One hundred and forty-eight euro.

“Those are nice,” Jason said to him. He had the jacket on already, as if via jump-cut cinematography he had magically changed costumes.

“I don’t think they have a pair that would fit me,” Shane replied.

Jason looked down at the floor. He didn’t say anything.

“Dad, are you going to buy that?” Sonia asked him. “You should, it’s really nice. I don’t think I want to get anything here.”

“Come on, kiddo,” said Jason. “Pick something out – take advantage.” He was draping items over his left arm. He was paying for himself and for Sonia and for everyone’s food and train tickets for the trip. Shane was paying only for his plane ticket, which alone had cost half a month’s pay, for his share of the hotel rooms, and for his museum passes, though he’d chosen, the last few days in Paris, to let Jason return to the Louvre and Pompidou while he and Sonia sat on the Pont des Artes and watched boats pass beneath them.

Sonia found a navy t-shirt that was a little big on her but as soft as tissue, and Jason pulled out a credit card. Shane didn’t attempt to try anything on, although he probably could have fit into the extra-large-size jacket or cashmere hoodie that Jason was buying in mediums. Then Jason remembered about the Duomo, and he selected a pair of jeans for Sonia. She seemed afraid of them, and when Shane saw them on her, he knew why. They were too grown-up.

“She’s still in middle school,” he said to Jason.

Jason ignored him. “They look great on you, honey. You’re dazzling.” He bought the jeans, and they re-entered the line, the sun brighter and higher in the sky and the other tourists that much sweatier.

Shane got dressed up for Jason when he first met him, fresh out of police academy and seventy pounds lighter. Jason asked him to wear his uniform to a

party, and Shane obliged, even doing a few sets of pushups before he drove into the Garden District so that he'd look his best. He was a big hit with Jason's yuppie friends, and especially with Jason himself, who squeezed his shoulders and yanked out the tail of his shirt with a saucy grin. Shane remembered that it was at the party he first heard Jason had an ex-wife and a daughter in Orlando. That night was also the first time they had sex, until they were interrupted by Shane being called in to work (a cop shot/standoff in New Orleans East.) Jason was stunned that Shane had to leave in the middle of the night, to be a real police officer. He was stunned again when Shane himself was shot four years later.

On the way back to the villa at the end of the day, they bought a loaf of bread, olive oil, cheese, and prosciutto, planning to take a walk through the forest and the vineyards, and then make sandwiches outside in the courtyard as night fell. But after hiking for about an hour, Jason said he wanted to go to bed. Shane knew that Jason couldn't be more tired than he was, with his limp and the extra weight he carried around, but he didn't say anything. He lugged the bread, oil, meat, cheese, and water down to the lower courtyard, and sat on one of the stone benches beside the fountain. Sonia sat down next to him, her lime-colored shorts restored, her hair down but kinked in the back from the elastic band that had been securing it all day.

"It says here that sixty-seven percent of Italian men live with their mothers until they get married," she read out of the guidebook.

"It's different over here. It's normal for Italians to have three generations all together in the same house. La famiglia. I'm not pronouncing that right."

"Are you Italian?"

"Naw. Scotch-Irish, mostly, I think." Shane shrugged. "And you're Spanish on your dad's side and English on your mom's side."

"My mom used to not like you very much," Sonia said, looking down, as if talking to the guidebook.

“You can understand why she used to feel that way.”

“Yeah. She still doesn’t.” She shrugged an apology and her elbow knocked over the bottle of olive oil. “Shoot.”

Shane got up and grabbed the food. The oil oozed into a puddle the size of a dinner plate. “Let’s move down to the other end of the bench.”

“I’m so clumsy all the time.”

“You’re twelve. If you weren’t clumsy at this age, you’d be a freak.”

She picked up a piece of bread that had fallen on the ground when she jumped away from the oil spill, and threw it into the water. The fountain was just a trickle out of a metal spout above a large pool, which was dotted with lily pads and small islands of grass growing inside stone basins. The morsel of bread floated for a second next to a white aquatic flower, then was snapped up by a mouth.

“Something’s alive in there!” Sonia slid to the edge of the water and peered down.

Shane joined her. A few foot-long, dark grey fish slid underneath the lily pads. A fatter fish was visible in outline below them, though it disappeared in the dark water. Sonia dropped a few more breadcrumbs. They were eaten. She threw some across the fountain, underhand, as if feeding skittish pigeons.

Then a different creature swam into view between an entanglement of lilies. It had a grinning mouth that stretched the width of its narrow body. It ate the bread with a smile, and twisted toward Sonia and Shane, eager for more. It was an eel, at least four feet long, with eyes like press-on buttons and a side-to-side sashay of its tail that made only the slightest ripples on the surface of the water.

Sonia shrieked at Shane to take a picture of it. He had some difficulty because of the reflection of the setting sun on the nearly black water of the fountain, and the eel’s tendency to swim out of the shot. “We need to name it,” said Sonia. She consulted her Europe guidebook, which had fallen open onto the

ground. "I saw something that would be perfect. It's what Austrians say." She waved a hand at the upturned, curious, turtlelike head of the eel. "Hi, Gruss Gott." She pronounced the final *tt* with the appropriate guttural.

They plied Gruss Gott with breadcrumbs until he grew full and swam out of sight behind one of the stone basin islands. "I wonder if he crawls out of his watery home at night and eats Americans," Shane suggested. Sonia kicked off her flip-flops, dipped a toe into the fountain and screamed, imagining that Gruss Gott was going to nibble it off. Shane scooped a hand down into the water and splashed her. She dodged away, and vaulted onto the low-hanging branch of a tree that grew a few yards from the stone benches. "I'm in a tree in Italy," she said. "Freeze," said Shane, holding up the camera again, then "Stop climbing!" as she shimmied up to the next limb. He put down the camera, pulled off his shoes and socks, and started after her. He could feel the weight of his own bulk as he hefted himself up, and the place in his leg where the bullet had sunken into skin and muscle and bone, and by the time he joined her on a stout branch that stretched above the fountain, he was out of breath. "Don't recommend you try diving in," he said, "even if it is bottomless."

"I have a piece of crust," said Sonia. "Maybe Gruss Gott can jump from the water and pluck it from my hand like a dolphin." She held out the bread but there was no movement from the water. "You have to take a picture of me here," she said. "I want to remember this."

"I left the camera on the ground." Shane hesitated. He didn't want to climb back down. He wanted to stay there forever. He was afraid to say anything, and instead pictured Sonia flinching and falling into the water. They sat on the limb, Shane breathing hard and Sonia looking around the courtyard and at the villa and the walls.

"Je manque toi," she said.

“What?” Shane said. “What’s that mean?”

She thought for a minute. She looked at him perched there, and he looked at her bare feet swinging back and forth. “Je pense que...” she said. “Je pense que... eel.”

The next day the three of them visited the Palazzo Pitti and stopped by four different gelaterias before they found the one that Jason’s co-worker had recommended. They carried their dessert down a shady side street until Sonia dropped onto the curb in front of a shuttered one-room shop. Shane lowered himself next to her, and Jason stood nearby, taking a few licks of his amaretto dessert.

An old man with a tobacco-stained beard ambled up to the three Americans and smiled at Sonia, revealing a single tooth in his mouth. He said something in Italian, but Sonia hadn’t finished apologizing for not speaking the language before he shifted into halting but confident English. “Sorry. My wife, it is her shop. But she is not here.” He peered at the door, and pointed to a small note taped above the handle. “Ah. She returns in an hour. She gets talking, and you know, when the women talk to one another...” He winked at Sonia. Shane wondered if the man were homeless, or a thief. He moved his backpack to the other side of his legs.

“You are American?” said the man. He nodded at Shane. “You have the very beautiful daughter.”

“I’m her father,” said Jason from across the way, crumpling the gelato cup in his hand.

Music began to drift down into the street from an apartment window. A strong vibrato twisted through the air like a strand of steel thread. Opera. “Vissi d’arte,” sang the voice. “Vissi d’amore.”

“You know this?” the man asked Sonia. “Maria Callas? You know this

woman? She is American.”

“No,” Sonia admitted. She had put her gelato down between her feet and was staring at the man as if he were an elf.

“She doesn’t look anything like him,” Jason continued. Gelato was running down his fingers. “They’re nothing alike.”

The Italian man shook his head at Shane. “I do not understand what this man says.”

He talked to Sonia and Shane for thirty minutes until his wife returned. He warned them against Albanians, and told Sonia that she would probably come back when she was at university, like all the other American teenagers who study in Firenze and drink too much and talk “out loud.” Jason left to find an internet café to write what he claimed was an important email. Shane and Sonia decided to walk through more of the labyrinthine streets and did not rejoin him for two hours.

After dinner, the three of them crossed over the Ponte Vecchio, headed for the Piazza Michelangelo, where they were going to watch the sun set over the city. As they crossed the bridge, the gold and jewelry stalls shuttered for the evening, Shane peered out at the Arno, and recalling the words from Sonia’s guidebook, wondered how it could have been used for the shipping and trade of a once powerful state. It was an unimpressive rope of water, green with algae and dull with the heat of the air, dazed-seeming. Jason led the way, but directed them up the wrong road, a steep ascent flanked by buildings and windowless walls, no pedestrians in sight. They turned around and headed back down, following the river, though Shane couldn’t tell if upstream or downstream. Sonia pointed toward an old brick tower where a tourist family – visibly American from fifty paces – were standing and screaming at each other. They had Minnesota accents, and the mother continued her red-faced yelling at her two small sons while the father pointed through the base of the brick tower and up the hill on the other side.

They climbed the stairs and hiked the path through groves of trees and across roads until they reached a final staircase that swung around a steep drop. Shane tripped on a step and felt the familiar ache in his leg flare up like a cavity. At the top was the piazza, full of the more athletic tourists and young Italians standing in romantic twos or small groups, pointing and taking pictures and drinking water out of bottles. Shane turned around and looked at the city beneath him, a carpet of history thick as an Oriental rug along the Arno but stretching threadbare up into the mountains across the way. The Duomo loomed like the thorax of a great big red and white and black and grey spider.

“The light on the water,” said Sonia without explaining. The river was much more beautiful from up there, flashing bits of sun as if it were full of fish. It looked like white wine.

“It’s so pretty, but it feels different from Paris,” Sonia said. “It’s weird that people live here.”

“I lived here for four months in college,” said Jason.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Maybe next time you come and visit me, we’ll do some more traveling.”

“Who will I be visiting,” Sonia asked, her diction elevated almost, as if she were afraid of saying wrong what she was trying to say, “the next time I visit?”

No one said anything. The sun began to go down, falling like a drop of milk toward the bowl of the horizon.

“Shane and I have been having our own difficulties,” said Jason as tourists took pictures with their cell phones of the sunset. “I guess you’ve noticed that.”

“Why?”

“Sometimes after a while your feelings change, and both of you realize –” Jason was looking at the camera in his hands as he spoke – “that you don’t feel the way you did before about each other. Not everything lasts. Many couples when

they're in their seventh year together..."

Sonia looked from one man to the other. "You're getting a divorce. I mean breaking up."

"We have to figure some things out," Jason said unconvincingly. "Shane and I are not where we were when we met."

"I hate this vacation." Sonia folded into a sitting position on the stones of the piazza. Her face fell into her knees and she started to cry.

Shane could not think of anything to say. He half-kneeled beside her to put a hand on her shoulder, then straightened up as he felt his bad leg about to give way. He was filled with an inarticulateness that seemed to want to shoot out the tips of his fingers, or break something.

"Why'd we even go on this? To have a terrible time? What is wrong with you!" Sonia was yelling now, the words stumbling over the lumps in her throat. They were in the middle of a crowd of sweating, excited people, but no one was paying any attention to them. Their petty drama was no match for Florence catching the last pinks and oranges of the sunset, petals from a rain-drowned tree splashed against the stones of a city. A breeze moved through the people, and Shane felt it on his neck and his ankles. Jason was saying something about how much the trip had cost, and how they were here to try and enjoy it. Sonia was sitting blankly now, a single strand of her hair glued to her cheek by a tear.

"Sonia," said Shane, "I promise, we really, really want to be here with you."

Sonia continued to stare at the space between her legs. "Let's go home."

That night Jason and Shane lay in the bed, as usual not touching, not looking at each other, and it was so ridiculous that Shane laughed. Their first year together: the love notes taped to the medicine cabinet and rear view mirror, the flowers, the photo-booth shoots in suburban malls, all of it was dead, yet they still

lay next to each other. But after Shane laughed, he rolled over in bed and stared at Jason. He stared until Jason got up out of the bed and staggered toward the door as if about to fall.

The next morning Shane found Sonia already at breakfast when he went downstairs. Her lips were pressed together and squared off at the corners like a disapproving mother. Her hair was pulled back from her face so tightly it made the top of her head look flat. “Jason said that you and I might want to spend the morning together, just the two of us.”

“I don’t care,” Sonia replied.

He took her back into the old city, half-afraid of her and half-afraid of himself. She barely spoke to him and stared out the bus window at the buildings without seeing them. He tried once to get her to refocus. “I want you to try to have a good time.”

She continued to look in the opposite direction. Then she said, “Does he want to date a woman now?”

“Of course not. No.” He didn’t know what to say. He hated Jason. Jason didn’t deserve what he had. Jason had done everything wrong, and he had everything.

They got off the bus at the Piazza del Duomo and walked wordlessly toward the Via Ricasoli. A line already stretched down the sidewalk and around the corner, and they stepped to the end. Shane had suggested visiting the Accademia dell’Arte while they rode the bus, but Sonia hadn’t responded. They waited as American girls from Florida State University surrounding them in line talked about how rude Italians were.

“Why does everything have to get ruined?” Sonia asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Like when I was a little kid, and I visited that time before Christmas, and

Dad said that there was no Santa Claus, that I was too old to believe in Santa Claus.”

“I don’t remember that,” said Shane.

“You didn’t know.” She kicked a stone up onto the top of her shoe, then shrugged her foot and watched it roll off. “I remember you made such a big deal about getting cookies and milk ready. You took me to the store to get cookies, and then you poured out the milk, and we put them on the coffee table in the living room with a little napkin folded underneath the glass, and you kept up this long story about how Santa eats enough cookies every Christmas to last him the whole year. And the whole time I knew that there was no Santa, but I didn’t say anything, because I wanted you to be right.”

Inside the museum, Shane looked at the paintings, but they were all alike to him. He watched Sonia’s face. She stared up at the massive portraits of saints and crucifixions, and the tight-lippedness fell away from her mouth. They walked into the next room, where torsos of unfinished slaves twisted painfully inside their imprisoning blocks of marble. Abdominal muscles seemed to pulse, to beat like ventricles from the stone. Sonia was a different girl now. She took in the statues and her arm reached itself up and undid the elastic band holding her hair back, so that it bounced free in all directions, horizontal, vertical, diagonal across the back of her head.

He was so busy watching her that he didn’t see it until long after she did. She kept looking in the same place, and finally he noticed and he followed her eyes. The David stood at the far end of the room, beneath a domed white roof, space before it and behind it and around each side, space filled with people standing and staring and not moving. Shane and Sonia both walked towards the statue, both now oblivious to the other. They stopped, together, at the feet of the David, guided invisibly by the room, by the air, or by the statue itself.

There might have been noise in the room, murmurs of appreciation, expressions of astonishment, even chatter about the anatomical accuracy of the work of art. But Shane was insensible to it. The David in front of him was alive. The David cut through the space around him like a knife cutting light, cutting a piece of the universe away and revealing what was behind it. The David stood in the hall, weight on one foot, head turned, curls glowing, and Shane, not breathing, knew something terrible.

After an immeasurable time he turned and looked at Sonia and saw that she was looking at him. Her eyes were wide and when he saw them he knew that his were wet. She thought she understood. “It’s so beautiful,” she whispered, nodding. “It’s so beautiful.”

They walked around it, behind it. Then they drifted over to the next room, pausing, catching their breaths. Now they did not look at each other.

“Hey,” said Shane, the words like clouds of condensation on a cold day, “I want you to know, no matter what happens, that you’re beautiful too.”

“I’ll still see you when we get back to the US, right?”

“We can call and write. But – ” He knew she was about to be a teenager, about to start dressing differently and dating and pulling away from everyone who wasn’t her age. She would not have time for him. He did not have a role in her life. He was not her father or her mother or – he was not anything.

He thought about going back to work when he returned to Louisiana, going back into the station. He wasn’t sure he’d be going back. He had not told Jason he was taking Sonia into the city that morning; he hadn’t said anything to anyone, and now he was wondering if he could get on a train with Sonia to Pisa, get on a train, just take her and go. He saw the faces of the cops he worked with. Like him, they’d softened up, gained weight since they were rookies, but they’d done so because they’d settled into a routine, a family, a wife or a husband, sons and

daughters, their own bodies. All Shane had was a certainty: that there was something important, something he wanted, and it was not his.

“I think I need to sit down for a minute,” he said to Sonia.

She looked at his leg. “Did they ever catch the man who shot you?”

“No.” The man who shot him had flashed across the street and over a wall, so weightless that it seemed like he must have unloaded something much heavier than a bullet into Shane. Shane had hesitated that day, had simply stood and stared when he should have drawn and shot, and his life changed. To not treat one another as flesh only – he held on to Sonia with his eyes, and he knew that a bullet was just one way to break a part of another person.

INTERIOR

When I was seven years old, my mother took me and my sister to Six Flags in Louisville. We were all miserable. Six months before, my father had left and gone to Los Angeles, and the one time he'd called, he spoke in pauses, like someone else was there, distracting him. All day at the park, my sister and I fought with each other, until our mother threatened to grab our hands, lead us to the car, and drive back to Lexington. I yelled something at her and ran away.

I wandered through the cotton candy and ice cream lines, looking at the stuffed animals and feeling sorry for myself until I realized I was lost. I didn't know how to get back to my family, and everything looked unfamiliar. I tripped over some cobblestones and cut the side of my hand. My bladder was also swollen with two amusement park-sized Cokes, and I ventured into a bathroom that was part of a Wild West theme, with swinging saloon doors. Giant booted feet were visible in the stalls, as well as denim-clad legs spread wide, and chunks of phlegm as someone spit repeatedly on the floor. Two heavy, bearded men with shirts soaked either by a water ride or by sweat stood at urinals next to one another and grunted as they relieved themselves. I went into a stall and tried to block out the noises, but as I peed I saw some urine from the adjoining stall run across the floor toward my foot. I got out of there without washing my hands. My mother suddenly reached out and grabbed my shoulder, and I dissolved against her, sobbing. But as she hugged me, my relief changed to resentment.

Something in my amusement park-addled brain seized on the repeated dire warnings about strangers I'd received, and I whispered to my mother, "Mommy... a man touched me in the bathroom." She went stiff, and pushed me back from her, and I saw the color in her face drain away from the center of her cheek towards the edges. I'd seen the same thing happen to the skin around a wart on my foot when

the doctor squirted liquid nitrogen on it. I'd seen the same thing a different time, too: when my mother had been on the phone with my father just before he left, and she said "People who love each other make sacrifices," and then she heard whatever it was he said in reply.

My mother didn't speak for a moment, and my ears rang with the sound of my own words. Then she started to shake me, her fingers pinching my shoulders, and bubbles of sound floated out of her lips: "What? Who? Who?" Her flared nostrils were big pools of blackness. I could not get control of myself to tell her it was a lie.

She brought me to park security, where two men and a menacingly soft-spoken woman muttered things into walkie-talkies and asked me questions I continued to be unable to answer. Finally I got it out that I wanted to talk to my mother alone, and they stepped outside the door. My mother had circles of sweat under her arms, big and round like an extra set of breasts. I squeezed my eyes shut, and then hid my face in my hands. My mother said in a voice with no energy left, "Honey?" I whispered, "I made it up." She stared at me a few seconds more, smacked me in the chest, and then she grabbed me and said, "Oh Christ. You're not just saying that, are you? You're not just saying that because you're ashamed?"

She wouldn't believe me. Hours later, days, weeks, she'd corner me in my room and ask, "Jacob, I love you, you know that, right? Please. Are you telling the truth? Nobody touched you? No man touched you?" I shook my head so much the tendons in my neck started to feel sore. "How could you do that to me?" I had no answers, no explanation; I started to avoid her.

The Fultons became my home away from home, across the street and down three houses. Gregory Fulton was the same age as me, with a little sister, Brittany, and a mother, and a stepfather named Daniel, and two stepbrothers who were in the Army and never home. We'd ride our bikes out along the street to the

dead end and then slow-motion crash them into each other, leaping dramatically to the left or right or backwards or over the handlebars, making explosive noises and death rattles.

“My soul is leaving my body, it’s floating up,” I yelled, “on a little cloud and I have a halo and a harp and big white wings.”

“The BMX sustained heavy damage: twenty-four spokes broke, one pedal in the gutter, the other pedal cutting the seat in half, gel-cushioning leaking all over the road,” Gregory narrated. We pretended to fix the bikes with Gregory’s stepfather’s tools, playing with the chains, inflating the tires, detaching and attaching the seats.

“Let’s go put pennies on the railroad tracks,” I said, getting bored and punching him in the shoulder. “Hold on – this pit crew member needs a smoke,” Gregory said, sharing his pack of candy cigarettes. I took a drag and he punched me back, hard in the stomach, so that I choked up a puff of pixie dust. “The little kid can’t inhale,” Gregory teased. “I’m only eighteen days younger than you,” I protested.

Gregory asked me to go to church with him, and I went, and soon I was going every Sunday. I saw how Gregory’s face looked when the minister spoke, I saw how he believed everything, and I wanted to be him right then, I wanted to feel what that felt like. The church we went to was next to the highway, and it had two thousand members, plus a big sign with letters that could be changed to form different messages. The messages were always attributed to God and they always referenced pop culture. The first time I went to church with the Fultons, the sign read:

WHAT PART OF NO DON’T YOU UNDERSTAND?

- GOD

The Sunday school was over four hundred kids and had its own building,

with dedicated teachers who were mostly wannabe actors and worked with budgets my public elementary school would have envied. Five large rooms had been decorated to show scenes from Jesus' life: there was Bethlehem, Nazareth, Capernaum, the desert, and Jerusalem. Set designers had built whole towns on a reduced scale, volunteers played various roles, and we were shuttled from location to location, shown short scenes from the Gospels, and allowed to walk around in the sets and ask the re-enactors questions. We were each given a bundle of straw in Bethlehem and a set of wooden dowels in Nazareth. Gregory whispered to me in the desert "that guy playing Satan is my mom's dentist" but he still turned white when the man, with blood-red makeup and horns that twisted down from his temples toward his eyes, told the story of the three temptations of Christ, baring fangs that were yellow and mottled and as real as the movies. And in Jerusalem when the actors playing the Romans pretended to whip Jesus and then carried his limp body up to the cross, Gregory started to cry. He bit his lip and scrunched up his mouth and his head hung between his shoulders like he had done something so wrong he could not even try to apologize for it. I was amazed at how they made it look like Jesus had nails going through his palms, but I couldn't feel sad. All I could think of was the big quiet man who had played Joseph in Nazareth, sawing two-by-fours, swinging a hammer, and talking between the nails in his mouth. I didn't know who he was but I sensed something, like the way I felt when I saw a minor character in a movie who would turn out to be important later. It wasn't what he said about teaching Jesus carpentry. It was something in the way he moved his hands.

We also had traditional instruction: we were taught that God Is Love. "He gave His only begotten Son to you, that's how much He loves you," the most motherly Sunday school teacher said. She hung a sign from the wall: GOD'S LOVE: IT'S UNCONDITIONAL. "It doesn't depend on what you do," she went

on. “He loves you! Isn’t that something? He gave up His Son for you!”

My mother never took me to church. “Why don’t you ask your father to take you?” she’d say, a bitter curl to her lip, as if she didn’t realize my father was in LA. Then she’d shrug. “I would, honey, but I’m too tired to put on makeup and do my hair right now.”

When we hit puberty, we both shot up fifteen inches, Gregory first, then me sneaking up after him and passing him by half an inch. We looked alike – tall, meaty, with necks as wide as our heads – and we still lived on the same street, but we started to drift apart. I studied, and Gregory built bikes from the spare parts of old ones. We smoked cigarettes (real ones now) together occasionally but couldn’t find much to talk about. “Go out for football,” Gregory’s stepfather told us. Gregory always did the opposite of what Daniel told him to do, but I listened and joined the team, liking what it did for my body and starting to be aware of other bodies as well. I told Gregory that playing ball would get him attention from girls, thinking that might persuade him, but it didn’t work. He just flicked his cig ends with his thumb and forefinger.

I was at a total loss with him, and so when Daniel invited me to come with him and Gregory and Gregory’s step-uncle hiking, I said yes and skipped practice to go. We spent four days in the heart of Appalachia, in the bracing desolation of West Virginia. Daniel, who strongly approved of my football playing and seemed determined to impress on Gregory that he’d made a mistake, shared insights on the sport as we hiked up to the top of a mountain with a broad expanse of exposed rock. Daniel and his brother wanted to pitch the tents under the trees, but Gregory found a place where the rock was covered with a soft layer of accumulated sediment and springy moss. He didn’t want to listen to his stepfather discuss the merits of the nickel defense anymore. Daniel warned us that the wind was going to make us cold, and if it rained we’d be soaked, but Gregory insisted on us boys

sleeping at the very top of the mountain. Daniel and his brother camped a good two hundred yards away, on the southern slope.

The wind whirled around our bodies like rainwater filling the spaces between tree roots. We poked at the embers of our campfire with wet sticks that oozed steam. We tossed in handfuls of pine needles to hear them crackle and to fill the silence.

“I want to move to a big city,” I said.

“We’re on top of a mountain in the middle of nowhere and you want to go to a city?”

“Yeah. This is nice and all now but when I’m out of school I’m going somewhere big.”

“Where? LA?”

I thought of my father. “No. New York.”

“This is pretty awesome,” said Gregory. “I could just keep living here.”

When we climbed into the tent, at two a.m., I felt close to him again, physically close, like how we were as little kids, wrestling in the leaves after crashing our bikes. Gregory fell asleep, his mouth open, his broad chest rising and falling, and I lay on my back, face to the sky, and began to masturbate. I was new to it, I’d never done it with another boy next to me, and I watched, out of the corner of my eye, the movement of Gregory’s body with each inhalation and exhalation of breath. I wondered if he might wake up, and it excited me even more. We’d left the canvas coversheet off the top of the tent, so we could see the stars through the netted ceiling. I thought of Gregory, unconscious, innocent, and completely alone with me, exposed to the sky, and I wondered if I were being watched too, somehow, by something in the stars, or by the mountains themselves.

I rolled over and put an arm around Gregory’s shoulders. I pulled the bottom of his t-shirt up and slipped a hand underneath, rested a few fingers on the

flesh and muscle at the side of his stomach. I felt like I might do anything.

Then I knew Gregory was awake. He just lay there but something at the center of his body had changed. We lay one enfolded around the other, full of consciousness.

An indefinable amount of time passed and then I rolled slowly back to my side of the tent, praying every second that nothing would happen. After a long time I fell asleep.

The closeness was gone. The next morning I had the feeling it was gone forever. Neither of us spoke of the night before, and I tried to read his face and body language for clues as to whether he even remembered it, until I felt crazy. Had I imagined that he was awake? What had I done and why had I done it? He said once that “You move around a lot in your sleep,” but Daniel interrupted to ask us which fork in the trail to take, and neither Gregory nor I picked the thread of conversation back up. After the hiking trip, whenever we shared a beer and cigarette in Gregory’s backyard, it was with more silence than speech.

Senior year, I was a starting linebacker on the team, and Daniel was coming to almost all of my games. He congratulated me every time I sacked the quarterback, and then talked about the work he was doing for George W. Bush in preparation for the upcoming election. He was convinced that Bush was going to win, and in the weeks after November 7, when the results seemed to be up in the air, he complained like a bitter old man. “Have you seen the maps?” he asked. “Have you seen all that red? The whole center of the country’s red. Only the edges are blue. There’s no question about who won this.” Gregory told his stepfather that all those politicians were the same anyway.

When we graduated high school, and I headed off to NYU while Gregory started landscaping work full time, we celebrated with half a pack of cigs and just one six-pack between us— not enough to get much more than a buzz. Maybe that

was deliberate. Maybe one or both of us was afraid of what, uninhibited, we might divulge.

“So,” said Gregory, and then drank half a bottle of beer before continuing. He had developed a permanent farmer’s tan – a burn, really. The back of his neck was red and peeling. “So. Think you’ll remember me when you’re in the middle of New York City?”

I shifted my weight, not sure which direction to lean, which foot to rest on, nearer him or further away. “Sure I will.”

“Sure you will. I bet you’re thinking how lucky you are to get the fuck out of Kentucky.”

“Sometimes.”

Gregory didn’t say anything.

“I’ll come back.” I hadn’t thought about it before, but suddenly I felt sure I would.

My mother wouldn’t drive me to school because she was afraid of New York City traffic, so I flew for the first time. I called her once I’d gotten into my dorm room.

“I’m so proud of you,” she told me. “Going away to such a good university with such a big scholarship. And the odds you were up against, coming from a single-parent home.”

“Mom, I’m gay.”

She didn’t seem to believe me at first, but then she softened, and she told me she loved me. “I love you, I love you no matter what. You can tell me anything, absolutely anything.”

“I don’t have anything more to tell.” I thought of the camping trip with Gregory.

She continued to probe: had I always suspected? Had there been a turning

point? How far back could I remember? Then: “Jacob, I mean it when I say you can tell me anything.” She sounded like she was apologizing. “That time in the amusement park... was there a man –“

I opened my mouth but then closed it. Part of me wondered if there *had* been a man, and I had just forgotten it, or blocked it out. What would the man have looked like? I pictured someone hazy and tall, and then realized I was picturing my father.

“You can tell me anything,” my mother repeated.

“It was Dad,” I almost said.

In the city, I dated a Columbia student from the Upper East Side whose attitude I mistook for glamour. Sometimes he begged me to let him suck me off in locker rooms, him wearing his blue Columbia running shorts and shirt, me in violet NYU workout gear, or sometimes my old high school football uniform, bright red jersey and helmet. Something was missing, though; despite his fantasies, I never saw anything in his face that resembled submission. I never felt in him deference – to me, to someone, *anyone*, something greater – and I still missed that, I still wanted that.

I moved back to Kentucky and got a job with the Lexington Police Department. I’d studied sociology in college, not criminal justice, but I talked about playing football in high school to the interviewers, two of whom had also played, and they hired me.

“I always thought once you made it to New York City, you weren’t ever going to come back,” my mother told me.

“I had to come back. I’m sorry.” I mentioned the fresh air, the trees, the slower pace of life, but not the thing I’d missed most, because the only way I could describe it was by invoking that expression on Gregory’s face at church. I wanted to ask my mother about him – about what he was doing, if he was still around – but

I didn't, and I didn't go over there either. I just looked at the Fulton house when I drove by.

"Don't be sorry," my mother said. "Just doesn't make a lot of sense to me."

In the Academy, I kept to myself, and when other cadets got too inquisitive about my sex life I told them I was most concerned about my relationship with God.

When my first real shift as a uniformed Lexington police officer was over, I was too tired to go out with my coworkers. I went home and went online instead. I found myself talking to someone named Tyler. Tyler said he was a Christian who was looking for a "real connection, not something cheap."

That sounds like what I'm looking for too, I wrote.

You're going to have to prove it, Tyler wrote back.

Tyler was in his second year at a Baptist college in southern Kentucky, majoring in theater arts. I asked him why he'd chosen a school that had named itself after the most economically depressed section of the country to study musical comedy. Couldn't he have gone to UK at least? Tyler said he'd applied elsewhere, had even gotten into some schools on the west coast, but had been so scared of being out on his own that he chose Appalachia U. It was less than an hour from home, and his father had gone there, and three members of his church went there.

We met each other two weeks later. Tyler was twenty years old and his head only came up to my collarbone. He had curly red hair. "You're enormous," he told me. "You're tiny," I told him. On our third date I took him back to the house where I was renting a room and we ran around in the backyard like kids. He dodged away from me, ducked and crawled between my legs. I grabbed him and set him on my back, hauling him through the overgrown rosebushes my landlady had planted years ago, not feeling the thorns.

“How many guys have you been involved with?” I asked, wanting the number to be zero, not because I felt possessive but because I wanted my idea of him to be accurate.

“I’m figuring things out,” he said. “There aren’t very many guys at school. Our theater department is small. The professors are just a couple of women who designed costumes for Tennessee productions in the seventies.”

We were lying on the ground now, our legs intertwined, our feet bare and embarrassed-looking. “I never had a computer all to myself before, like I do at school.” Tyler’s hair against the grass was like Christmas. “The computer showed me that there are gay people everywhere, even in Williams, which is a town where half the men work in the mines everyday. The computer educated me on myself.”

“You’re so young,” I said. I was looking at his neck, where the skin was blushed red but smooth like he’d never once run a razor over it.

“Listen, Jacob. You know I’m a Christian, right?”

A dump truck drove by, with a man hanging on to the back of it, chewing furiously. In the backyard of the adjoining house, children rolled in small piles of weeds.

“Yeah.”

“My understanding of what God says to me has changed in the past, and it may continue to change as I know more. But what that understanding is, that is what I believe. Okay?”

When I put my forearm on top of his upper arm, they were exactly the same size.

“Okay.” I laid my head down on the ground and looked down along the length of our arms, as they receded into the distance.

We spent a few weeks visiting each other from our respective bases in Lexington and south Kentucky, driving up and down the state, stopping in little

towns and talking to old men with weak chins, and young men with missing teeth. We sang along to the country music on the radio, and got sunburns through the windshield.

I had him over at my place one evening, and as it got darker and cooler we slipped beneath the blanket on my bed. I reached my hand inside the front of Tyler's pants, feeling waterlogged with lust.

"Wait," he said.

"Okay." I put my face in his face, pressing his head back against the wall, and kissed him.

"I'm celibate," he whispered, so unexpected that I heard *sediment* instead; but I saw in his eyes that he was telling me No.

I leaned back away from him, thinking of how long I'd already waited.

"God," he said.

I made a noise, soft and threatening, the way I sounded when teenagers didn't immediately clear out of the stairwell during my vertical sweeps of the projects. Then I turned over in the bed and faced the wall, looking at my uniform hanging up on a hanger.

Neither of us said anything for a while. Then he started to move and I assumed he was going to get up and leave the room. I felt a hand on my back, an attempt to tilt me forwards so that his arm could slide underneath me. But Tyler couldn't lift my torso up off the bed. Eventually he settled for wrapping his upper arms around my neck and pressing his palms against the skin of my chest where my shirt was open.

"I know," he said. "I know, I know."

If I had gotten up then, lifted myself out of the bed, he would have come with me, attached to my back, clinging to me.

The next day I was driving him back home and we stopped on County Road

233, the car bumping across the dirt and fried grass and coming to rest at the beginning of a pumpkin patch, green vine looping in and around and through itself in a Mobius strip, and behind that a big brown house on fire. The flames were silly-looking, like the pumpkins had jumped up on the roof and started dancing. It smelled like a campfire, friendly and confidential, how it had smelled on that mountain in West Virginia right after Gregory added a new log. A firetruck was extending its ladder toward the flames, but none of the firefighters were visible. An old man stood in the pumpkin patch, holding the hand of a small child with an enormous orange hood up over its head. Immediately I thought of my responsibility as an officer, and jumped out of the car, but Tyler did too, and I couldn't walk away from him. We joined the old man and the child, all of us staring at the flames, and Tyler fumbled blindly until his fingers curled into my palm.

I looked away from the fire at him and his hair was darker than the pumpkins and the flames, dark as red ink. He looked like you could stand him out under a raincloud and the red would leach out of his hair and spread across the ground.

We held hands and watched the fire burn at the house but not consume it, and then the firefighters suddenly rushed out of the truck and vaulted up the ladder, into the building, their hoses going, water clashing with the fire in an elemental battle that produced another element – great masses of steam, visible air that floated over our heads. Tyler squeezed my hand and the old man squeezed the hand of the little kid. Then we got back in the car, drove for a bit, and I told Tyler that I loved him.

I got myself into a routine that winter. When I woke up I trudged bleary and sluggish into the bathroom, settled myself on the toilet, and masturbated, wiping myself off and throwing it into the bowl. At least once during my shift, I

ducked into a stall, yanked my police uniform out of the way, and brought myself off. And just before I saw Tyler I imagined him – I made him do what I wanted him to in my head, and came again. So all that winter, I was sore and raw, spent, tired, emptied of seed and able to control myself. At work, I absorbed the criticisms of my superior officer with looks of blank satiation, like a milked cow, and with Tyler, I went to church, listening to the minister and feeling his words enter my ears, settle heavily inside my chest and stomach, but not looking at him: half-turned in the pew, I watched Tyler, I watched his face and I felt so close to him it was like he was naked. It was, somehow, enough.

It was the end of winter when the minister mentioned the need to defend marriage from homosexuals and feminists. He devoted most of his service to the topic, and while the nastiness didn't surprise, hardly affected me, I saw Tyler's face change. He colored all over, deeper and deeper, until he was purple. I could see the veins throbbing in his temples. He'd never looked this way before – like he was angry, yes, but also like he didn't believe. At the Fultons' church, when the minister railed against homosexuality, somehow I hadn't heard it. It hadn't meant anything to me. But now I saw that it did, to Tyler, that his very body was reacting to it, was filling up with blood.

My mother called me up. "I want you to join me at the Fultons' for Easter. Gregory will be there. When's the last time you saw him? I don't want to be alone with someone else's family for Easter."

"Did Gregory ask about me?"

"I see you as much as I see your sister, and she's in Chicago," my mother complained.

"I'll come. I'll be there," I said, excited and nervous, wondering how Gregory looked, how I looked to him now, what he would say.

Tyler was with me, and when I hung up, I asked him if he wanted to come

too. He surprised me by saying yes, since I'd assumed he would want to go to his church. Two days later he surprised me again. He called me and said he had been expelled from Appalachia University because the dean of students had presented him with a printout of his internet profile page, which stated that he had a boyfriend and included a picture of me. The dean asked him if the profile was his, and then asked him if he wanted to change his answer. "I said yes and no," Tyler told me, "and so they kicked me out."

It was a Baptist college, and entering students had put their names to a code of conduct.

"I made the right choice," Tyler said. "You helped me to see that. It's because of you." He gave me a kiss, and he rubbed the back of my jeans with an open hand.

He said it was all for the best, meant to be; he would find somewhere else to go, even though Appalachia was threatening to give him incompletes in all his courses. He still wanted to come with me on Easter.

We showed up at the Fultons', me towering over my mother and Tyler, and Gregory's mother met us at the door. "Happy Resurrection Day!" she said and leaned forward for us to hug her. My mother begrudgingly asked what she could do to help, and a tray full of stuffed artichokes like giant green fists was thrust at her.

Daniel was walking in circles in the kitchen talking to everyone at the same time about how great the housing market was and how there were more homeowners than ever. His big voice and barrel chest made me think of a bumper in a pinball machine. He pumped my hand and asked me about being on the force: I said it was like being scrubbed by a corrosive sponge, but you came out polished. He liked that answer. "This is Tyler," I said. "Hi, Tyler," Daniel boomed, and Tyler looked helplessly at me while the bones of his hand were crushed.

Gregory came into the room wearing a white undershirt, and I could see a big black cross tattooed on his right bicep. After asking each other how we were, we stood for a moment, and then reached for some crackers and cheese from the dish at the same time. Tyler was removing the gold foil from an enormous chocolate egg Gregory's mother had given him. "Don't unwrap it all the way!" she interjected from her spot by the oven. "You have to break it first, or the pieces will go flying everywhere." She came over and put the egg on the counter, then slammed it with the side of her hand. She pulled away the shiny purple paper and revealed the shards of thick brown shell and the plastic Jesus-on-a-crucifix that was inside.

There was a whirring sound and Gregory's grandfather came into the room on his motorized scooter. He beamed up at all of us, shouting "Happy Resurrection Day!" and deftly navigating the legs and stools that cluttered the kitchen. He reached into a knapsack hanging from the back of his scooter seat and removed small yellow ribbons tied in the shape of crosses. "Put it in your car," he told me as I accepted one. "Or on your bicycle. Or around your neck." He continued on, distributing another to my mother, while Tyler examined his plastic Jesus. So far, no one had asked why Tyler was there, or what relationship he had to me.

There was a lot of small talk about the dogs and their intestinal ailments, and about Gregory's little sister's baby. In an hour we were sitting down to eat. Gregory just accepted Tyler's presence, nodding at him in a polite way.

Tyler knew that Gregory and I had once been best friends, and while we were eating the ham he leaned over and whispered to me, "You look exactly like him."

I concentrated on the food. Across the table from me, Gregory did the same, piling it up on his fork and plowing it into his mouth. We hadn't discussed my job, or his, or our lives at all. It wasn't until after dessert that he raised his head

and looked me in the eyes, and said “We’re going down to the go-kart place, the cousins and my sister and me. You too old, or you want to come?”

“I’m eighteen days younger than you,” I said automatically.

Gregory’s sister handed her baby off to her mother, and she and her teenage cousins and Gregory piled into their stepfather’s truck. “Let’s go,” Tyler said softly, without me asking. We followed them to Good Clean Fun, where the go-karts were. I looked at Tyler, who was sweating slightly at the temples, and I thought of the little yellow ribbon tied into a cross that Gregory’s grandfather had given me. It was in my jeans pocket. “Put this on your go-kart when we get there,” I said, “and nothing can touch you.” He smiled a small smile and accepted it, catching it on his belt loop, and not looking at me.

The guys manning the track were wearing oversized t-shirts that they pulled away from their stomachs and waved for ventilation, even though it was a mild spring day. They gave us the spiel about operating the vehicles, over-enunciating the words out of repetitive boredom. The teenaged cousins exchanged glances that I knew meant there was going to be a pile-up by the third lap. Gregory’s cousin with the harelip said “Grab your ankles and kiss your ass good-bye.”

"Be safe, and have a nice ride!" the leaner, less sunburned attendant said as he stepped out of our way. I barely fit in the kart, my knees jammed up near my chin, the sides of my stomach pushed in towards my belly button. I pressed the gas pedal to the floor and surged ahead of the rest of them, hoping that if I stayed far enough away I could escape a collision. But one cousin screeched past me on a turn, then another. After three laps, I’d seen nearly all of them squirt by my car, their hair blown back against their skulls.

Next Gregory came up alongside me. I hugged the corners and never lifted my foot even an inch from the gas, but I couldn’t lose him. He was laughing, but I couldn’t hear him over the buzz of the motors. I swung across to the far side

of the track, and took the next turn wide. Then I looked up and saw that I was being squeezed by Gregory into a railroad tie marking off the edge of the pavement. I slammed on the brake and pulled the wheel to the left. I spun almost backwards, and Tyler appeared, broadsiding my kart in a sudden burst of bright red that twisted me the rest of the way around and shot me into the tie, where something snapped inside my vehicle and my seat fell through the bottom onto the ground.

The buzzing in the air decrescendoeed as Gregory's car zoomed away. My ass hurt. I winced for a minute or so, then unbuckled myself and got out of the kart. Tyler was already standing a few feet off the track, looking a little dazed but unhurt. I stepped around to the side of my car and saw that one of the back wheels had partly detached. The attendant with the peach-fuzz mustache was slowly making his way over to me; he snorted "You all right?" in the same voice he'd used to warn us about properly attaching our sear belts. I wasn't, but I nodded. He bent over the car and said "Shit."

I walked back towards the starting line, where the other attendant was corralling the drivers. Our time was up. Some of the cousins were laughing, others were pushing each other. Two of the cousins had also been rammed off the road, although their cars hadn't sustained any damage. I walked through them and toward the parking lot. "Jacob?" Tyler called after me.

My butt was singing with pain, and I was so angry that I felt unable to control myself. I wanted to grab Gregory and throw him down on the ground. When Tyler caught up with me, I ignored him, continued to limp toward the low, whitewashed shack at the other end of the parking lot. "Jacob, I didn't mean to hit you," Tyler said again. I told him I knew that. I walked up to the window on the side of the shack and an old man with a neck full of ingrown beard stared at me from inside.

“You have beer?” I asked, even though I wasn’t positive it was a concession stand. He looked around, behind me, and nodded. “Good. Let’s get two of them.” I walked over to a white plastic table and sat down, Tyler following me. No one was around us.

I started drinking the beer, not really tasting it, and Tyler looked back and forth between the ground and me until I slid the other cup over towards him. “You want it?” I said, expecting him to say no, but he took it and wrapped his hand around it like a small child fumbling for reassurance. After I’d already finished most of mine he took a sip. I drained my cup and burped, then grabbed his away from him. “If you’re not going to drink it, I will.”

“Hey,” said a voice behind me. Gregory was walking across the parking lot. A few of his cousins were trailing behind him, running in circles and spitting, while his sister and the rest were standing by their car, watching us.

I swiveled in my seat but continued drinking the second beer. The look on Gregory’s face suggested that he’d caught me trying to pass myself off as something I wasn’t – a policeman with no badge, a football player who couldn’t throw a pass. There was disappointment in his eyes, and a little betrayal. I finished the second beer and stood up.

“You all right?” he asked me.

“No thanks to you,” I said.

He squared his stance and crossed his arms over his chest. We stared at each other for a minute, and once more it was like we’d never drifted apart at all. Reaching out and smacking him would have been just as natural as when we were kids. “I should have known, man,” he said finally. “I mean, back when we were kids I’d point out a girl’s chest or something to you, and you’d change the subject so fast. I thought you were just so godly.”

I was shocked. “But you were the godly one.”

“What? What’re you talking about? I smoked and drank and cut class like crazy.”

“No – you believed. You really believed.”

“In what? I was just a messed up kid like everybody else.” He stared at me. “You really thought that? You were the one who cared so much about God.”

I was even more angry. I felt like Gregory was telling me my whole childhood had been faked, had been performed by actors. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You were fucked up in a different way. You were repressed. You said that stuff about football attracting girls, and then... you were my best friend, I made myself believe it was nothing – “ he lowered his voice – “you touched me in the tent when you thought no one would know.”

I didn’t do anything for a second – instead I stood dumbfounded as the light around me seemed to swell, the sky turn white. Then I put my arms up to shove him backward, and he grabbed them at the wrists, pulling me closer to him. I changed tack and tried to spin him around, pin his arms behind his back, like I’d learned at the police academy, but he was too big for me to throw around easily. He stuck out his legs and pushed back against my arms, shoving me with his chest, as square and solid as a car. I pushed back, too hard, and then my face was right in his, my arms were around his neck, and our legs got tangled together and we went down, the length of our bodies flattening against the pavement and each other, my elbow pressing into some part of him that gave a little and then crunched, and my knee digging into another part of him that wrenched all the tendons up and down the inside of my leg.

I wrestled him over onto his side, managing to pull one of his arms around behind him and thrust his hand into the small of his back, where he had no leverage and I saw the muscles in his neck tighten with pain. He kicked backwards and I

caught his heel in my thigh, but I kept yanking on his arm so that he couldn't use his shoulder to heave himself forward and away from me. I put my knee onto his side and leaned hard, held him there until he stopped fighting me, both of us panting and glowing with sweat. Then I let go and stood up, stepping away from him, shaking my head and going easy on my left leg.

Gregory got to his feet and looked at me, then looked at the ground. His cousins were standing among the parked cars, sneering and flipping me off but keeping out of reach. "You pig," Gregory spat out. "You animal." He turned around and started walking away, and the cousins peeled off to follow him.

I had forgotten Tyler was there, and he didn't remind me, standing on the other side of the white plastic table with the two white plastic chairs. Once I was calm enough to hear again, I became conscious of his breathing: quiet, yet excited.

Three days later, he asked me if I had ever had sex with Gregory, and I said, "What do you think? No," and he seemed almost disappointed with that answer. We were walking down an unpaved road in his hometown, to get away for a moment from his beaten-down parents, who had accepted him being thrown out of school with only a few shakes of the head and a couple of fingers pinching the bridges of their sharp noses. We'd also left because Tyler said he wanted to tell me something privately, something that had excited him enough to turn his cheeks a red approaching the red of his hair.

The woods on either side of the road were filled with green leafy vines that appeared to be holding up the budding trees. It had stopped raining but water was still dripping from unseen places onto invisible things.

"I found out," said Tyler breathlessly, even though we were just idling along the dirt, "that UCLA is willing to accept me as a transfer. Conditional on them getting all my paperwork and stuff, everything being in order, but after hearing my story they made an exception for me."

“California?” I said, as if it were a part of Australia.

“I talked to an academic advisor who said he’s going to put me in touch with the gay groups there, that they’re interested in my experience.”

“Are you going to say yes?”

“I feel like a different person,” he continued, “than the one I was when I was applying to college.”

“Your parents are going to let you go?”

“I haven’t told them yet,” he said. “But they want me to be in school.”

“You know it’s different out there,” I said, my voice higher than normal, my words coming out on top of themselves. “UCLA isn’t going to be anything like a Bible college and Los Angeles isn’t –”

“Baptist college.”

“– going to be anything like southern Kentucky.”

“I went to a Christian school not because I was strong in my faith but because I was weak in it.”

“And now what? You think you’re stronger?”

The smell of wood smoke from somewhere behind the trees mixed with the dampness in a woolen combination that filled my nostrils. I didn’t think I was getting enough oxygen. Tyler looked at me without saying anything, then pointed across the road to an unmarked trailhead. The trail was just a little worn path the width of a foot between wild grasses, briars, and vines that had long ago overwhelmed the saplings and shrubs beneath them. We headed down a gentle slope, forced into single file by the undergrowth, me staring at the back of Tyler’s head, which was like an orb of red at chest-level, bobbing and self-possessed, a talisman commanding me to follow it.

In five or ten minutes we came to a stand of trees, and inside the trees a clearing, and in the middle of the clearing a water-hole. The grass in the clearing

was a shiny blue-green and grew in a springy mat along the ground. The air was so silent it seemed as if a vacuum waited in the space around us to swallow our words.

Tyler sat down on the ground and looked up at me, then began plucking the grass with his finger and thumb, tossing the blades into the water. “I used to come here all the time but I haven’t been in a long while.”

I sat down next to him. “I don’t want you to go. LA will corrupt you.”

“Come with me.”

“You’ll change.”

He didn’t say anything. The smell of wood smoke fizzled along the edge of the water. The earth felt like it was going to erupt.

“Do you think I’m leaving you?”

“There’s no doubt in my mind what will happen.”

He continued to not look at me, looking instead at the waxy spears of grass. He shook his head, and then he reached over to me and pushed me down, so we were lying on our sides facing the water. Everything growing along the ground became enormous and insurmountable, and I made no resistance when Tyler slid his hands up underneath my shirt and rolled it above my nipples.

“I already have changed.”

With his shirt off he looked translucent in the sunlight, full of milk and a beating heart. His chest reminded me of the top of a baby’s head before the bones of the skull have closed.

My shoes popped off my feet into his hands with such force he almost dropped one of them into the water. He peeled off my socks, undid my belt, dragged my pants from my thick, stubborn legs.

When he took my underwear off he threw it over his shoulder as if he were enjoying himself.

“Oh,” he said, and he traced a circle on me with his fingers. “You’re

purple here. Purple with bruises. Is this where you hurt your butt on the go-kart?" The skin underneath his hand felt warm and cold at the same time, jumping against itself.

"Purple?" I said.

"Contused," he said, climbing over me, and I saw that he was naked, crouched before me with his head down. The back of his neck was exposed and I thought how I could fit it in one hand and squeeze and it would make no more noise than a twig.

He opened his mouth. Once upon a time he had been a ten-year-old boy who jumped flat-footed from tree root to tree root until he reached the safety of his clearing. He had worn high-water corduroy pants and old recreational soccer team t-shirts, his hair curling around the edges of his ears. He had sat mesmerized by the unknowable alien world, made dizzy by the yawning chasm between himself and all the rest of reality, and finally he'd opened his mouth to pray or sing or say something, and he had not felt alone.

I pushed him away. I meant my hands to be harsh, but he didn't feel the anger behind my fingertips, only smiled at my touch. I pushed him harder to make him understand, but there was no recognition in his dull brown eyes, and his smile widened as if happy for the contact. He took my hands and held them to his face, my palms grazing the stubble dotting his chin, which I could not remember ever noticing before. I looked at him and wondered what he thought this meant. He continued to caress his own face with my hands, but I didn't move, and, closing his eyes, his smile faded, drawing to a neutral, even line. He looked disappointed with his own eagerness.

Eventually he turned over, his back curving away from me like the sail of a ship. I lay there looking at his back while the Earth rotated on its axis, and I stared at him forever. I was waiting for something to happen – a little trick I was usually

able to play on myself. If I looked at the same thing for long enough, I could disassociate myself from myself, detach my brain from my body and leave my body behind, float for a moment in a different kind of space that wasn't myself and wasn't the thing I was looking at. But the trick didn't work, I couldn't stop thinking as me, I couldn't stop thinking *This is me and that is Tyler*.

His back arched, and I said, "When you get to LA, if you see my father, will you tell him something?" He didn't move, but something changed in the back of his neck, something that told me he was listening.

SPECIAL DELIVERY

Ms. McDonald had a string of pearls around her neck which she would not allow the doctors to take off. Up until six centimeters she had continued her videoscreen teleconference with studio heads in Los Angeles, saying things like “I think we can all agree that if it isn’t Tom there’s no point in making the picture. Tom *is* the picture.” She looked steely and composed from the shoulders up, the pillow behind her head framing her face with a deep blue that gave her an air of authority. The studio presidents could not see the bottom three-quarters of her body, where Drs. Griff and Stinger were anesthetizing nerve bundles to keep her contractions from disrupting her work. I stood with one hand in the pocket of my cargo drawstring scrub pants and scanned the chart, pulling furtively at the neck of my shirt where it tried to choke me. I am an inconveniently big guy, in my middle thirties now, and extra-larges were starting to fit tightly. Appended to the back of Ms. McDonald’s chart was an eighty-two page birth plan.

Liposuction at four months, six months, eight months, and after appropriate recovery time post-delivery, the plan stated, then specified the contours and measurements to be achieved. Homeopathic, osteopathic, allopathic pain control techniques: pp. 33-51. Instructions for minimization of lost productivity time: pp. 60-69. YogaNate sessions will include postnatal lower abdomen stretching no less than three (3) times a day. All procedures agreed upon by maternal party, supervising Stork Medical doctors, dietician, personal trainer, psychiatrist, career counselor, and life coach. It was the platinum Minimal Impact Birth package, the bread and butter at Stork Medical. Of course she also wanted Navel Architecture, so I was present (I had my combined NA/RN degree). The hospital had a small Free Clinic population, indigent local mothers, but it was mostly the wealthy, the busy, the plan-ahead types who were my patients.

“Give me what’s coming to me,” said Ms. McDonald as the doulas rolled away the teleconferencing equipment and returned the contracts to the leather binders. She arched her neck and threw her head back, displaying a profile as fine and bony as a seahorse. “I don’t mind the pain but I really can’t afford the skin damage of too much grimacing.” Dr. Griff slid a large needle into her leg. “Thanks. Is my teledevice beeping?”

“We’ll monitor it for you,” I explained, “but the doctors recommend that from now until you give birth you devote your full attention to the delivery process.” I smiled to let her know that all would be well. Something about her had won me over. She made obscene amounts of money by going toe-to-toe with the CEOs of multibillion dollar studios, and had not found a husband to match her – but was not letting that fact thwart her parental desires. Her chart indicated artificial insemination had been utilized. Boy, was she going to be a mother.

“I came down for breakfast this morning and your father wasn’t wearing a shirt,” Dr. Griff grumbled, rubbing his beard with his shoulder.

“Well, he is a man, it’s allowed,” Dr. Stinger said, removing a pair of latex gloves and snapping on new ones.

“It’s uncomfortable. I don’t know what to say to him as it is.”

Dr. Stinger jumped in place a few times, letting his arms bounce at his sides, like a cheerleader warming up before the halftime show. He was petite and firm, evenly tanned, an action figure. “You can talk about anything. Cars. The Bills. It doesn’t matter. I usually talk about what I’ve been eating recently. Like if I’ve been on a granola kick or I’m off whey for the month. He’ll just grunt.”

“I wouldn’t mind if he grunted,” Dr. Griff said while turned away, checking the equipment, his back broad as a garage door. “But he stares at me and I can hear him breathing.”

“Of course you can! The emphysema.” Dr. Stinger began to do face

exercises, twisting his lips to the left, then up, then to the right, then down. “He likes you, you know. He lets you wash his socks. He would never let me do that.”

“That’s because you’re incompetent with laundry.”

“I am not!” Dr. Stinger bounced over to the bed. “God, he’s been looking old lately. It comes from being alone so much.”

Ms. McDonald made a face like she was going to throw up and had another contraction. The nerve sedation techniques were no longer effective; sure enough, she was at nine centimeters. Dr. Stinger pressed his fingertips in three places on her distended abdomen.

“Ms. McDonald, please move your legs like this,” I told her. Nothing could go wrong in this delivery. I would see to it. Ms. McDonald, like the majority of Stork Medical clients, had taken care of herself during her pregnancy, had read every book, followed every rule. This baby was going to be healthy as a horse. She’d probably be too high-strung to breast-feed the kid, but that wouldn’t matter. I imagined myself holding the formula bottle, the baby’s tiny lips parting around the nipple.

Ms. McDonald gestured with one hand, waving it near her mouth. I leaned over toward her. “What is it?” She squeezed her eyes shut, and I felt her breaths wash over my face. The air was being ejected from her nostrils and open mouth with ragged inconsistency, and I smelled peppermint, and underneath that, strawberry. The evocative power of her breath brought me back to childhood: Massachusetts, the horse farm, the smell in summer of the mints I fed Doc and Chili, of the wild berries growing alongside the split-rail fence.

“We’ll bring this baby into the world together,” I assured her, and I meant it. She opened her eyes again, looked at me, and I could tell she was not a person who ever allowed anyone to get that close to her face. But she didn’t flinch. I looked into the roots of her hair, and they were beautiful. They rose up from her

scalp in the thousands, the tens of thousands, each one perfect and distinct and catching the light like the finest, minutest craftsmanship pieced together by surgeon's hands.

"Be strong," I said, and I wanted to add *I know this baby will be as tough and beautiful as you are, and I'd honor that steeliness every day, I'd nurture it and cultivate it, I'd love this baby like no one else but you could ever love it, if you gave it to me.* I pressed my hand to my stomach, then over my heart, trying to calm it down but not wanting to calm it down.

"I hope that wasn't meant to suggest we'll be taking in your father full-time," Dr. Griff said to Dr. Stinger. "You know we don't have the room. And moreover I'm not comfortable with that."

"I never said - !" Dr. Stinger was crouched between Ms. McDonald's legs but his blond head popped up. "He wouldn't want that, in the first place. He's proud of his independence."

Dr. Griff held a pair of surgical scissors up to the light. "Good. He has that, all right."

"But you know, it's cold in Buffalo, and he's out shoveling snow every other day in the winter... and it's so warm here, and there's so much sun, and so many other retirees..."

Dr. Griff opened and closed the scissors a few times, then, satisfied, handed them off to me. "They're eighty, and he's what, sixty? I do have to admit, he looks good for his age."

The door to the delivery room opened and Millard the Stork came in, ducking his head (and beak) through by sticking one stilt deep into the room and then leaning forward, pulling the other stilt in behind him. There actually wasn't enough clearance anywhere in the hospital, so he'd mastered a constant half-stooping position, looming over the children on the pediatric ward that it was his

job to visit with and entertain. He clapped his wings together once, then saw what was actually going on in the room and froze, or froze as much as a stork can when a stork is really a man inside a stork costume two feet off the ground. Ms. McDonald didn't even see him, she was concentrating so hard on expelling the infant inside her, its head being squeezed by her cervix. The doula turned white, as if Millard had just announced that in fact he was the father of the child about to be born. I jumped up and grabbed one of Millard's wings, spun him around and managed to fit him back through the door of the delivery room. He popped his head off and held it under one wing, the beak poking me in the shoulder, the pork-pie hat coming unglued from the fake feathers. "Wrong room," Millard said breathlessly. "Tell the mother I'm sorry. Was supposed to come see a little girl whose baby brother was stillborn, put on my little show, stilt-tricks, take her mind off the tragedy."

I told him it was all right and then excused myself. Dr. Griff was making an incision on Ms. McDonald's perineum while Dr. Stinger was checking the monitor to make sure the baby's heart was still strong. Ms. McDonald's hips were not wide, and I felt a pain in my chest as I imagined the baby's head grinding against her pelvic bone, unable to pass through.

"He's bald," Dr. Stinger said, rocking back and forth on his heels as he made a pushing motion with his hands.

"Who?" Dr. Griff asked.

"My father."

Dr. Griff frowned at Ms. McDonald's vagina. "I'm bald."

"I know that. I just meant..."

"Your father is in good shape. You have damn good genes. You've seen my father – for me, it's just going to get worse."

Dr. Stinger looked down at himself with a small smile, but only said "Oh, you're fine."

“It’s coming.”

I knew as soon as I saw its head crown that this baby was special. It was bright pink, like it had been colored with a magic marker. The baby rotated in the birth canal so that it was facing sideways, sliding out to the shoulders and catching there for a moment. It had a blotch of red above its chin like a soul patch, and I wiped it with the tip of my towel, ignoring protocol, so strong was my sense of kinship. Then the doctors encouraged Ms. McDonald to give it one last push, Dr. Griff accompanying his order with a stern nod of his head, Dr. Stinger gently persuading with a palms-open illustrative gesture, and the baby squirted the rest of the way out, thudding into my chest and my arms like a football. “Nice catch, Abe,” Dr. Griff grunted, and Dr. Stinger gave me the thumbs-up.

I towed off the baby, gave him a tap to get him breathing right, and watched as his face scrunched in on itself like his head was made of quicksand. His piercing yowl filled my chest and the fullness coursed down the length of my arms. I was in love.

I tied a piece of sterilized string around the umbilical cord, then another piece two inches further along, and sliced through the cord with my surgical scissors. The baby was freed from his mother; he was more mine now than hers. I looked at the amniotic fluid smeared on my scrubs, I slid my little finger into his palm and felt his instinctive, primal grip. I could be the father. It was like I was the father.

I fulfilled my nurse’s and Navel Architect’s duties without a word, calibrating the Abdominal Uniformity Apparatus, placing it over the baby’s stomach, attaching the ID bracelet, checking the eyes, ears, mouth, and genitals, testing the automatic motors of the limbs, and swaddling the baby in a Stork Medical Center blanket, all with put-on mechanical ambivalence. Ms. McDonald had almost bit her lip in two getting the baby out, but she was quiet now, and

seemed to know she had done well. The blood was already rushing back into her face and her arms. What a woman! She kissed the baby, and held him to her cheek, and cried with joy. “You’re worth it,” she said, referring perhaps to the lost hours of contract negotiation time, perhaps to the greater sacrifices she would be making in the future. Then I took him back and walked him over to the plastic crib with Plexiglass sides and little pictures of storks printed on its walls. I did not want to put him down. I did not want my time with him to be over.

“Nurse,” said Ms. McDonald. “He’s beautiful.”

“Yes,” I said.

“I know your great reputation for the Navel Arch, but I don’t care if he has an unblemished stomach or not,” she said. “It doesn’t matter. He’s perfect.”

“Well, I’ve already attached the AUA, so he should be belly button free in about a week,” I said. “But you’re right. Even if he were abdominally scarred he’d be gorgeous.”

The doulas began applying allopathic salves to Ms. McDonald’s distended parts, and Drs. Griff and Stinger began to get ready for their next delivery. I continued to hold the baby.

“My hairline’s receding, too, you know. I’ll look like my dad soon enough.” Dr. Stinger was washing his hands and arms up to the elbows, splashing the water around.

“It comes from the mother’s side of the family,” Dr. Griff reminded him, as he bent over with a low groan and retrieved the pen that had fallen out of his pocket.

“I don’t know why you’re so defensive about your age. You are, you’re defensive about your age.” Dr. Stinger flicked his fingers at the back of Dr. Griff’s neck, sending droplets into his hair.

“Well, I’m not twenty-seven. I’m not a tightbodied rookie.” Dr. Griff

started heading for the door.

Dr. Stinger turned to me, gesturing at my head. “You have all your hair, Abe, and you’re how old again? We just celebrated your birthday at The Bachelor.”

“I’m thirty-six,” I said.

“You’re probably going to have a full head of it when you’re ninety, aren’t you? You’re so virile.” Dr. Stinger winked at me. “The most virile nurse on the floor.” This was a running joke of his that he mysteriously found funny.

“How’s the foster parent process going?” Dr. Griff asked me.

“It’s not, really. Haven’t heard anything. Still waiting,” I said.

“It’ll work out, it’s just bureaucracy,” Dr. Stinger said, nodding his head at his own comment.

“Just hang in there,” Dr. Griff told me, patting me on the back, his large hands thudding between my shoulders.

“Yeah,” Dr. Stinger said, waltzing out. I had already been in the pool for four years. At first the case worker felt that it was too soon after Sam died, that I couldn’t be a good foster father having just lost a partner. Then a different case worker was concerned about my working occasional evenings and nights, so I switched to only days. And then a new woman, who apologized for all the turnover, explained that even now it would be a long road ahead for a single man. Only the most needy, most mentally or physically disabled children lacked other options, and I could not provide adequate care because I worked full time. I was a home of last resort as far as the state’s placement algorithms were concerned.

* * *

Ms. Levi lay on the bed, radiant and youthful, her perfect, even smile the result of years of braces, dental surgery, orthodontics. She was twenty-two, still slight in the upper body even after nine months of pregnancy, wearing a matronly, self-knitted sweater the color of a gourd. She had smiled at me from her bed when

I walked in. I washed my hands and put on gloves, and the LPN filled me in on the progress of Ms. Levi's body and her baby, while Drs. Stinger and Griff continued an argument they'd been having about their clogged shower drain.

"A drain is supposed to be a matted mess of hair. Water cleanses, the drain captures the filth that remains," Dr. Griff protested, fishing something out of the pocket of his scrubs.

"You could bend over and clean it out when you finish." Dr. Stinger was touching his toes, or touching the air about half an inch above his toes, dipping down, straightening up, and then dipping down again. "Can you imagine what it's like inside the pipe? Down there beneath our bathroom floor?"

"Hairy," Dr. Griff said.

I stood near Ms. Levi's head and she spoke to me, seeming thankful to have someone to talk to while her body was being pulled apart. She had a Minimal Impact Birth brochure next to her on the bed, which she had been trying to read before she became unable to focus. It said "Like Your Baby Came By Stork!" on the front, the words a bit crumpled. She told me a few things I already knew from her paperwork and a few things I didn't. Her parents had arranged the delivery, and her flight down from Massachusetts, and the adoption, all from her hometown back in Iowa. She hadn't told them about the pregnancy until she was six months in; they wondered why she didn't come home for Thanksgiving.

"Who is going to adopt the baby?" I asked.

"People from California," she said, as if she was uncertain of their number. "They're here. I mean, at the hotel, not in the hospital. I asked that they not be at the hospital. I couldn't do that."

"Why not?"

Ms. Levi's eyes were pale blue, like the socks the hospital used to put on baby boys. "I don't like them. They were sizing me up as if it was a job interview.

At one point I saw the wife lean into my closet and sniff my clothes.”

“How did your parents find them?”

“I figured out afterwards that she was probably trying to see if I smoked. Even though I’d told her no.” Ms. Levi paused for a second, her eyes going blank and the muscles in her neck tensing. Then she looked back at me. “It’s an open adoption. My parents picked them out of a catalog of people, and I said fine.”

Her contractions were coming at regular intervals now, the pain severe enough to make her bare her artificially even teeth at me. The doctors, having already checked on the equipment and the patient, were running their eyes down a chart another nurse had brought in, and speaking to each other in low tones.

“Here’s what I see,” said Dr. Stinger. “In the pipe below our tub. It’s dark, and gummy, and squashed, and bristly, and little trickles of water come through, and little pieces of us are all mixed in like the bones inside of an owl pellet.”

“There’s that stuff, Liquid Plumbing or whatever it’s called,” Dr. Griff said. “I’ll spend the six dollars and pick some up after work.”

“Maybe one thousand years from now, someone will find a piece of pipe in the ground and dig it up, and scientists will examine its contents and they’ll discover the last remnants of our bodies. They’ll say, We’ve found the physical remains of two males from the American era.”

“How long is this going to take?” Ms. Levi asked me from between tight lips. “I’m sorry, but it’s not pleasant.”

“You have a little while yet,” I said, drawing closer to the bed and accidentally bumping into a monitor. The delivery rooms at Stork Medical were large, to accommodate the considerable staff each Minimal Impact Birth required, but they weren’t designed with my proportions in mind. My weight had been another item flagged on the foster parent forms; I had to get a doctor to write a separate note stating that I was in good health and not about to drop dead of

coronary failure.

“I can’t believe I’m going back to class tomorrow,” Ms. Levi said.

“Minimal Impact means no excuse for not studying, unfortunately,” I laughed. “Are you planning to fly back to Massachusetts tonight?”

She nodded, a bit of water gathering at the corner of one eye like a clear spring bubbling up from soggy ground.

“Where do you go to school?”

“Williams.”

“I’m from Massachusetts,” I said. “That’s beautiful country. My parents had a horse farm outside of Worcester, that’s where I grew up. At this time of year, you would wake up one morning and the light would be different, more colorful, more green and yellow somehow, and you’d look out the window and see that all the buds on all the trees had opened overnight. That’s how it seemed – like it happened in one night. What I mean is, we had seasons there. I miss them.”

“I think there were leaves on the trees when I left last night,” Ms. Levi said. “But I can’t remember.”

“Try to picture the quad yesterday,” I instructed.

She had another contraction instead. “They’re pretty close together now, that means the baby will come soon, right?”

“Yes,” I told her. She seemed so fragile, I was afraid she wouldn’t make it, that the baby inside her would prove too much. I wondered about who the father was, about where he had gone, about whether he even knew.

“Maybe here’s what they’ll do,” Dr. Stinger said to Dr. Griff as he signed the bottom of the chart. “The scientists in the future. They’ll take the hair they found in the drainpipe, put it into some sort of machine, and reconstruct us. Bit by bit, piece by piece, we’ll fall into place. They’ll know what we looked like, they’ll know our heritage. They’ll know where we lived, where we were born. Maybe

they will even reconstruct our thoughts.”

Ms. Levi sighed, winced at another contraction, then turned her face to the wall. I frowned and pretended to check a machine. I wanted to infuse her with everything inside me, with my bones and muscles and nerves and tendons, I wanted to give myself to her so she could do this.

I wiped her brow with a patterned towel, the little storks rolling over the gentle curve of her forehead. She failed to dilate, and the doctors performed an emergency c-section, cutting into the pale flesh of her stomach. Her abdominal scar was a small inward dent; she was of the last generation before Navel Architecture was made available, otherwise she would never have been allowed to retain the imperfection. The baby was grey, and Dr. Griff administered two thwacks on the back before it took its first burbly breath. The baby gasped, shrieked, then went to sleep, still upside down. Dr. Griff set the baby in the electric bassinet, and returned his attentions to the mother, who was still groggy.

“Now I’m supposed to start working on my draft,” Ms. Levi said in a thick voice, her words blunted by drugs. “I’m supposed to write an essay on Italian Renaissance sculpture.” She started to cry.

I was attaching the Abdominal Uniformity Apparatus, and my hand slipped and pinched the baby’s skin a bit. The baby woke up and looked at me. “If you need some time to say goodbye, you will get that time,” I said.

“That time was budgeted in. One and a half hours,” she sobbed. “Then the adoptive couple takes over. They’re so nice. They met in *church*.” She choked on her own tears.

“Maybe I should look into a product that’ll save the little hair I have left,” Dr. Griff said to Dr. Stinger. “And that way you won’t find it underfoot when you get in the shower.”

“Going out to sea,” Dr. Stinger replied. “Or who knows where it goes. It’s

like a black hole. It goes down the drain and it's gone forever." The doctors finished up and waved at me as they left to attend to the next expectant mother.

A woman dressed in a slate-colored pantsuit came into the delivery room, making empathetic faces at everyone but clearly focused on Ms. Levi. "How are you doing?" she asked, then her mask of friendly concern slipped a little as she saw the tears streaking the new mother's face. "I don't mean to intrude, and I know this is all very fast, very sudden. I just want to check on how you and the baby are doing so I can tell the Applebees something. They're all in a tizzy waiting to hear how the delivery went. You can understand that, of course."

The pantsuited woman's eyes had passed over me with the same glazed pleasantness she'd used to greet the other nurses, but I recognized her. She was the first caseworker I'd dealt with, the one who'd said I shouldn't take in a child if I was still grieving. She'd been the woman from five years ago, even, the one who Sam talked to on the phone, that first call he made, when we were exploring our options, when we were just figuring out that we both wanted to be parents. He'd been breathless on the phone, asking question after question, and then he'd hung up, turned to me, and said "Her name is Joan, she sounds stiff as a board, but she thinks we should join the pool, if we're ready to take that step." That was two months before the accident. Joan must have left for a more lucrative job in the adoption private sector.

Since then, among my Minimal Impact Birth and my Free Clinic patients, I had helped deliver and unscar little babies, big babies, chubby babies, fat babies, delicate babies, shiny babies, mottled babies, sleek babies, hairy babies, babies born in the caul, girl babies, boy babies, intersexed babies, twins, triplets, quadruplets, black babies, brown babies, white babies, reddish-colored babies, babies with ten fingers and ten toes, babies with eight fingers and ten toes, babies with ten fingers and seven toes, babies with lolling tongues, babies with almond

eyes, babies with gastroschisis, club-footed babies, purplish babies, albino babies, Down Syndrome babies, FAS babies, babies with cleft palates, crack babies, babies that scream, babies that cry, babies that gurgle, babies that don't make a sound, babies that look you in the eye the day they are born, babies that put their hands up to their face, babies that seem to know everything about you the minute you touch them, that seem to know what you hardly even admit to yourself.

* * *

I started daydreaming as I worked, as I attached AUAs to babies' stomachs and disposed of umbilical cords. So many babies each shift, five shifts a week, week after week, and nothing from the foster system. I dreamed up little plots, little ploys, idle scenarios. In one I rigged the lights so they all went off at once, plunging the room into darkness for five seconds, during which time I'd place the baby inside a nearby file cabinet, to be retrieved later. In another I went to the men's locker room, yanked off my scrubs, and donned a rented tuxedo and shined black shoes, transforming myself from a Navel Architect to a cater-waiter bringing a wealthy Miami Beach mother something delicious after the successful delivery of her Clomid-generated triplets. I wheeled out a silver serving cart with a large covered metal platter on top, and whisked into the nursery, secreting the baby of my choice inside the serving dish. In my imagination I rolled the baby right through the main doors of the hospital, then removed it from the dish and carried it to the second bedroom in my apartment, already made up with blue-and-red sailboat wallpaper.

After one shift where I had helped to deliver sixteen babies, including two sets of Advanced IVF twins from mothers who told me tearfully they'd believed they were too old to conceive, I joined Millard at Cabbage's around the corner for a few drinks. (The man inside the Millard the Stork costume was also named Millard.) We split a package of Combos and slurped at the foamy draft beer, still

icy from a too-cold keg; he reminisced about how he'd ended up in Palm Beach. Grew up in a poor neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio, joined the army, served briefly, was honorably discharged without seeing any action. For thirty years, he worked in a suntan lotion processing plant before being laid off. He had seven children of his own with his wife Mildred. Their names were Maurice, Egon, Myra, Gilda, Herbert, Jessye and Boris. Mildred worked nights as a security guard at the plant Millard was laid off from. He didn't particularly care for his wife. He was a lapsed Catholic but she was a devout Baptist who dragged him to church every Sunday, and kept nagging him to get a job, pasting up Help Wanted ads all around the house. Finally Millard saw the ad for the job as his stork namesake and applied as a joke. Since he knew how to stiltwalk, he was hired immediately. He was fifty-three years old.

In exchange for his life story, I told him about my baby-stealing scenarios, including the various ways I'd developed for eluding Drs. Griff and Stinger. I was fairly inebriated, but Millard, who drank whenever he got the chance, especially after work, had seven empty glasses sitting in front of him, and alternated between laughing at my ploys and staring into space. Then he took a shot of something the bartender slid over, and poked his finger into my shoulder. "Why'n't you borrow my costume?" He hiccupped and then explained that it would be the perfect disguise for getting a baby out of the hospital. "The police'll all be looking for a giant stork, not a male nurse."

"I wouldn't fit in that thing," I said, draining another glass.

"I ain't small potatoes myself," he shrugged, balancing a glass for a second on his beer belly.

Another two drinks each and I was cramming myself into the costume, which couldn't quite be made to join in the back. I wobbled a little on the stilts but learned how to take wide steps and use my wings to brace myself against the walls

and the ceiling. A foot taller than Millard, I was bent nearly double trying to get under doorways, and fell off the stilts twice. I bobbed down the maternity ward and pushed open a door, entertaining only idle thoughts of passing through a few rooms in my unrecognizable state and then rejoining the by now nearly comatose Millard for one more round. But drunk as I was, I didn't realize I had entered a delivery room. Drs. Griff and Stinger were just finishing up; they took no notice of me.

"I bathed him this morning," Dr. Griff said, opening and closing his hands to get the stiffness out of his fingers. "Then I took a roll of paper towel to the tub."

"Tommy gets cold," Dr. Stinger noted, snapping his used latex gloves into the trash. "Maybe we shouldn't be bathing him as much anyway." Tommy was their new pet terrier, adopted from the West Palm Beach ASPCA.

"It's ninety-six degrees."

"It could be psychological," Dr. Stinger observed. He punched some keys on the bedside computer, then nodded his head at the results on the monitor. "He's a dog, he's being put in water, having it run under his tummy and over his ears, he gets scared. His body temperature drops from that. Shock."

Dr. Griff sighed, and reached over to lay a thick slab of forearm across the other doctor's taut shoulders. "Is this more guilt about the pet daycare?"

"You can't look in his eyes and not see that he's being affected. And the way his spine sticks out when his fur is wet. The nurse will be in to discharge you as soon as she can, Ms. Miller."

The doctors finished up and waved at me as they left to attend to the next expectant mother. The woman on the bed lay silent and half-smirking to herself. Her hair was flung out on the pillow around her as if her head had exploded. A Free Clinic patient. She looked right at me, as if she could see through the giant stork head, and I felt newfound sobriety like an icy jet of air conditioning.

“You got a cigarette?” she asked me.

“You know I can't give you a cigarette.” I shook my head, and my beak sliced the air in front of me.

“What the fuck is your problem? I ask you a yes or no question, you give me a yes or no answer. I didn't ask you to judge me, I just asked for a fucking cigarette.”

“This is a hospital, there are babies.”

“The baby's out of me, I can't have a cigarette now? You kidding me?”

I didn't know what to say. “I don't have any.”

“You don't know anything about me. You look at me, you see some bitch who cares more about her high than her child, right?”

“I never said that.”

“What if I told you this was my brother's baby? That he beat the shit out of me, held me down and fucked me, then a month later I peed on a stick that said, ‘Congratulations!’ What would you say then?”

I stood there on my stilts, looking down at her, silent.

Ms. Miller laughed. “Well, you could call me a lying bitch, ‘cause my brother didn't fuck me. I don't even have a brother! I don't know whose baby this is, could be any of the guys I fucked a while back.”

I lifted my wings, looked at them, then lowered them. “Have you considered tubal ligation?” I didn't know why I was saying it.

Something in the room smelled of asphalt. Ms. Miller picked at her teeth. “We need more children in the world. More people who will grow up to be like me. People like me make the world go round. Maybe more people who will grow up to be like you too. What are you? A whuhdoyahcallit? A pelican? Oh, I know what you are, you're a stork. Stork Hospital. I could give the baby to a bird. That would be funny, if I gave the baby to a bird. What are you supposed to do here, lay

eggs?”

I started shaking all over and the stilts almost went out from under me.

“What did you say? What did you say about the baby?”

Ms. Miller tilted her head and squinted at me, her forehead wrinkling up like drapery. “I said you want to take a load off my back?”

“You’d give it to me?”

“Look, I ain’t fit to raise the kid. I don’t want it. Do you?”

I couldn’t talk. My wings were quaking. I pulled the stork head off, sucking in air, identifying myself. “Y-yes.”

Ms. Miller continued to examine me, then laughed again, making a scraping sound like she was opening an enormous pop-top can in her throat. “What the hell! You’re a sport. They don’t want me here. They know I’m not hurting too much, they know the taxpayers are footing the bill for this, they want me out.” She shrugged. “So in an hour I get dressed, carry the baby out in my street clothes, you meet me, I hand it over. You play house with it, bring it to your nest or whatever, I go back to my place. We both live happily ever after.”

“Thank you,” I managed to get out. “Thank you.”

Ms. Miller’s blotchy face relaxed a little bit. The lines around her mouth faded from canyons to dimples. She shook her head, but gently this time, rocking it back and forth, almost as if she were lulling it to sleep. “You sure you want a baby messed up as mine is?”

I looked at her, this woman, and I understood that she had done something for me, something I could never have done for myself, something that many of us who worked to deliver these babies every day, every week, every year for most of our lives could never have done ourselves, something that we didn’t have inside us to give. “Yes, I’m sure,” I said. She turned her face sideways and pressed it into the pillow, closed her eyes, and gave me the thumbs-up.

And what ended up happening is that Ms. Miller told her caseworker she gave her baby to “that stork,” and they interrogated Millard, and they figured out it was me, and they decided that wasn’t strictly legal, even if it had been given to me willingly. Certainly I couldn’t continue to work as a Navel Architect in a maternity ward, not one with Stork’s unblemished reputation, although Drs. Stinger and Griff stuck up for me. But by the time it all came out I was gone. I had already taken the baby one thousand four hundred miles north.

The driveway was lined with droopy peonies, their own blooms too heavy to hold up, recalling the oversized heads of newborns. A cardinal bounced across the lawn, like the sparrows I’d seen drunk on fermented berries when I was a child. One of the pastures was all overgrown with wild grasses and pricker bushes, the twisting branches resembling coils of barbed wire, but the other pasture was bluish-green and clipped down, the old fence rambling along the gentle slope, turning ninety degrees at the mailbox, and slumping amiably to the woods on the other side of the property. The horses were gone, but a chipmunk scrambled into a hyacinth bush, and three or four fat, dull bumblebees lugged themselves from flower to flower.

I removed the beach umbrella from the backseat and planted it inside the pasture, driving it into the rocky Massachusetts soil with some difficulty. Then I lifted him to my shoulder and carried him onto the grass, squatting, crouching, and then thumping to the shaded earth.

I hadn’t been up here since Sam had died, and I saw it with my own eyes, nostalgic and comfortable, but with someone else’s, too, fresh and new.

“One more month of this, maybe, and then the leaves are going to change,” I said to him. He was asleep, his translucent eyelids motionless in his tender head. “You think you could grow to like it up here? With New England winters and all?” He even breathed small, barely audible puffs of air up his nose. I

pulled at the shirt he was wearing, exposing his stomach. I was just one man, yes, but he had a mother, and I'd left him with her mark still on him. I hadn't done my job, because I had a new one now; I could see that I would no longer be erasing or effacing, but building, bringing out. I imagined him being teased and taunted in the locker room, at the pool, and already I was drawing strength from the idea of the Jews, thousands of years ago, teaching their sons the meaning and the significance of their circumcisions. There with that beating heart pressed up against me, it did not seem too grand – a new religion of motherhood, but open to all who believed, who really believed, and, I hoped, open to him, and me.

THE SUBSTITUTE TEACHER OF ELYSIAN FIELDS

“Is there an animal in the house?” Jack was angry. He looked at Nancy and set down his suitcase. “What was that?”

“What?” Nancy said, even though she too had heard the yelp.

It was a puppy in a cardboard box. The puppy was brown. It wiggled when approached, backing into the sides of the box and denting them slightly outwards.

“Oh, you didn’t,” said Jack.

Nancy was not surprised, but her shoulders sunk a little with disappointment.

“Absolutely not,” said Jack. He walked out of the room.

Two weeks later, Jack was dancing with the puppy in his arms. He whirled the puppy around the room. It vibrated with joy and tried to lick his neck. “Yah-tah-dah-Yah-tah-dah,” Jack sang. “Rum-pum-pum-Rum-pum-pum.”

When Jack came home from work, he would talk to the puppy, which soon became a dog. He had a special voice that he used when talking to the dog. It was subtly familiar to her, and she tried to place it. It sounded like a cartoon character’s voice – maybe the voice of a creature she’d seen on Saturday morning television when she was a kid. The dog’s name was Courage. “What makes the Hottentot so hot? What puts the ape in ape-ricot?” Jack would sing. “*Courage*.” “What is that voice?” she asked him. He looked at her and shrugged. He turned back to the dog. “Which way did he go? Which way did he go?” he asked the dog, and the dog stood at attention and sniffed the air, then wagged his tail.

She was babysitting her friend Susan’s daughter one night, watching *The Wizard of Oz*, when she realized that Jack’s voice was the voice of the Cowardly Lion. She hadn’t seen *The Wizard of Oz* in twenty years. She wondered if she’d ever talked to Jack about it, but she couldn’t remember. She never liked it very

much. She thought the colors were garish.

Her friend Susan worked in a law firm where every employee had to be within reach at all times, so they were issued pagers. Susan's boss would page her to ask what kind of flowers he should buy his wife. He also paged her once at eleven o'clock at night and told her that he had lost feeling in his ears. Susan's little girl called the pager a "beep-beep." Once, she called it "that damn beep-beep," and she sounded just like her mother, except that her mother would have called it a pager. Nancy reprimanded the little girl, but did not really blame her. Susan swore in front of her daughter all the time. Nancy liked Susan but secretly thought of how she would have reared her daughter differently.

If Jack was ever home when Nancy was babysitting Susan's daughter, he never acknowledged the little girl. He would sit in his recliner with the big wooden lever on the side that required a superhuman effort to budge. His enormous socked feet rested one on top of the other. He often watched television till he fell asleep, his fingers wrapped around the remote control. When she tried to change the channel, he woke up. "Hey." She turned around, startled. "I was watching that," he said. "You were asleep," she said. "No, I'm not," he answered her. They had been married two years, and they still didn't have any children.

When Nancy first started sleeping with Jack, they had been dating for four months already. The relationship was moving at a glacial pace, but he called her every day the first two months, and saw her every day after that, and she trusted him. She knew that he was twenty-six and that he had never been married or engaged. She learned that the old lady who lived in the apartment above him had asked him to deposit her social security check in her bank account each month.

She liked Jack, but she didn't understand him. He would sit on his bed in his room and tell her about an Indian yogi who could do amazing things. You

could hold up a playing card, facing away from him, and if he was allowed to reach one part of his body around to the other side of the card, like a finger or a toe, he could tell you what it was. He could “see” the card with any part of his body. Jack would tell her about the yogi and then look across the room with a strange expression on his face, like he was both excited by a world with such people in it and heartbroken that he was not one of those people. One night, after listening to him talk about levitation and fasting, they finally had sex. After that they had sex a few times a week. She began to think that she was pregnant.

When she told him that she thought she might be pregnant, he covered his face with his hands. “But you’re on the pill!”

“It’s not one hundred percent.”

“Well...it’s okay,” he said. He hadn’t removed his hands yet.

“You say it with such feeling.”

“I’m trying to be supportive,” he said. “That’s what you want, right?”

“No,” she said, “Not exactly.”

She didn’t know why they had been having sex without a condom, relying on the pill. She hated being on birth control pills – they had a tendency to make her feel crazy. But she had gone along with it for some reason. Maybe because he seemed so incapable of forcing himself on her, of making her do anything in bed that she didn’t want to do. It was like he couldn’t have made her pregnant even if she had wanted to be. When she asked him why he had never bought any condoms, he shrugged. He said that it felt better without them and she didn’t seem to care. And then he said that he had problems – that he wasn’t sensitive enough when he had a condom on.

“You make faces,” she said, “when we have sex, like you’re pushing a boulder up a hill.”

“I sort of am,” he said. “It’s not your fault.” He covered his face with his

hands again.

“How many girls have you slept with?” she asked him.

He peeked out from between his fingers. “How many?” he said. He thought. “Two.”

She did not turn out to be pregnant. When she told Jack, he fell back against his bed and lay there sprawled, breathing out in heavy puffs of relief. He was wearing a pair of shorts and white socks and no shirt. She was repeatedly surprised by how large he was. The distance from the bottom of his shorts to the top of his socks was the length of her entire torso. His calves in the dim light looked as big around as her waist. He tried to disguise his size by slouching around and ducking his head, but stretched out, he was gigantic. “We can’t ever let this happen again,” he said, and she said, “Ever?” “No,” he said, but quickly added, when he looked at her, “not when we’re so unprepared.”

She wasn’t sure why she married him, but it was probably because of his size. He weighed more than twice as much as she did. It was like he was two people. And size seemed as good a reason as any. Never mind what a man said, or how he looked at you, or what he did or wanted to do with his life. The space taken up by a man was much different from those things. Every inch of flesh and bone was worth more than they were.

She married him a year and a half after the pregnancy scare. She asked Susan to be the maid of honor, and Susan had to tell her that maids of honor weren’t supposed to be married. On their wedding night they didn’t have sex; they were too tired. The next night they didn’t either. The night after that she asked him about going off the birth control pills. “What a thing to talk about on our honeymoon,” he said.

One Thursday Nancy told the kids she was substitute teaching to draw

pictures of their families. She was running out of things for them to do. Her children looked at her oddly. Didn't all kindergarteners do this exercise? No, she was told, they had never done it before.

Chester was the best artist in the class. He drew two houses. The sun hung oval and yellow right between them. Each house had a pair of stick figures out front. "This is my mother and my stepfather and my father and my stepmother."

Maggie's picture had a massive house without a door. One of the windows was much larger than the other two – so large, in fact, that it extended right off the side of the house and into the sky. There was a face without a mouth looking out through it.

"Maggie," Nancy said, "I see three people standing outside with such colorful clothes on! But who is this person inside?" Maggie wouldn't tell her.

Alice drew a picture of herself standing outside a house that looked like the letter A. Next to the house was a huge ship on which a mother and father stood. The cloud of smoke billowing from the ship's smokestack was larger than the house, or the sun, or what Nancy thought might be a mountain (though it might also have been a tree). The mother and father appeared to be waving good-bye. The Alice in the picture was not smiling.

Marcus's picture had a line scribbled in pink crayon linking two of the figures. Nancy did not think it was an accident. It looked like an umbilical cord connecting Marcus to his mother.

When Nancy was a little girl she tore through Crayola boxes. At least three a year. The first colors to go were sea green and dandelion and burnt umber. She drew pictures of people with horses, at stables, in corrals. The girls riding the horses had ponytails sticking out from beneath their riding caps. The ponytails were always visible because she could only draw people in profile. She could only

draw the horses in profile, too.

She sat down in her classroom during a lunch period and tried drawing a picture of her and Jack in front of their house. The house looked too boxy, and she added a chimney to mitigate this, even though they didn't have a chimney. Then she added a cat, even though they didn't have a cat, just the dog. The dog didn't come out too well: it resembled a small horse. The dog and the cat were both sideways, looking at each other a little awkwardly, perhaps having hit a dull spot in a long conversation. Then she drew herself and Jack. She wanted to draw them facing forwards, but it was difficult; noses on people facing front were so hard to draw. Her nose looked like a small bell hanging between her eyes, and Jack's nose looked like a pig's snout. Hands were hard too, as were feet. She focused so much on the difficulty of these appendages that she didn't realize until she was done that the scale was all wrong. She was the same size as Jack, taller, even. Jack looked waifish and short, and she looked like a man – all straight lines.

After seeing how the two of them had come out, she didn't see the point of trying for any realism at all, and added a little girl on the other side of her. The girl had a better nose and better hands and feet than she and Jack did because she had learned from her mistakes. The girl was going to have a butterfly net in her hand but she changed her mind at the last minute and made it a tennis racket.

She wondered where the drawings of her family that she had done as a little girl might have gone. Thrown out, probably. She remembered some hanging on the refrigerator in her parents' home. Their refrigerator always had magnets advertising local businesses: Ty's Trucking was one, Metairie Bank and Trust Co. was another. She was pretty sure the dentist she went to when she was little gave out magnets in the shape of teeth, with the dentist's address and phone number on them.

She couldn't remember what her drawings of her parents looked like. She

supposed she would have drawn her father in a suit (was there a navy-colored crayon in the Deluxe Crayola box?) He would have had short black hair – maybe just one quick line of black across the top of his head. Her mother would have been drawn with a dress on, slate blue or salmon or periwinkle.

She supposed it was fitting that she couldn't remember what her parents looked like in her primitive renderings. She couldn't remember what they looked like in real life, either. She could describe them – their height, weight, hair color, eye color – but after they died, the image of their faces in her mind starting fading immediately. Within a year of their deaths, from pneumonia and a heart attack, she had to refresh her memory by looking at a photograph. Otherwise, she saw nothing at all. Events that had occurred in her childhood took place with two tall adults with white orbs where their faces should have been.

Before they ceased to exist, Nancy's mother talked very little and her father talked even less. He was an accountant at a cannery in East New Orleans. She painted in her spare time a few landscape pictures she sold at craft fairs. She'd gone to art school for one semester before dropping out to get married. Nancy remembered that her father was always reading the newspaper and her mother was always cleaning the house. Dinners were silent. It seemed like an extension of the silence when her parents drove off one Saturday each month to spend a night in New Orleans. She didn't know what they did there. One night, one month after Nancy's tenth birthday, they didn't come back. Nancy did not sleep that night. The next morning she went to church alone, walking the six blocks and looking at every house along the way to make sure the whole human race had not vanished. Her parents were home when she came back from church, but there was something in their faces that made her not ask them what had happened. They did not tell her.

Nancy took the kindergarteners' drawings home to show Jack. He

shrugged. He was in the recliner, with the newspaper resting on his chest. She held up each of the drawings, and he moved his eyes, but not his head, to look at them. He was close to falling asleep.

“Is this your way,” he said, “of bringing up having kids again?”

“No,” she said. Then, later, “What if I got pregnant?”

“Got pregnant?” The phone rang. Jack got up and walked over to it, picked it up and slammed it back down on the cradle. He did things like that. “It would be unplanned.”

“Not if we planned for it.”

“It may not be apparent to you, but I have a lot going on outside of this house. I don’t have the energy for kids. I don’t think I even have enough energy right now for a serious conversation. You’re always so serious.”

“You brought it up.”

“That was a remark. Something offhand.”

Nancy was baffled. “You’re just as serious as I am.”

It was true. They were both serious people, a shared trait that wasn’t so shared when you examined it. Jack was serious about things like heaven and hell. Late at night, he would bring them up – “What do you think it’s like? No, not heaven – hell.” Nancy could not be serious about things like that, because they were abstract. She was serious about the meanings of expressions that flitted across Jack’s face, or the reasons why she and Jack had sex only once a month.

“So nothing has changed?” Nancy asked.

“Have I indicated that anything has changed?” The phone rang again. This time Jack ignored it.

Nancy thought about calling the dog over, pointing to Jack’s lap. “I’d thought something had.” She turned and looked at the wall. “Why don’t you just get a vasectomy then?”

Jack made a face, like he'd been touched by a cold hand in the small of his back. "I'm not doing that to myself."

Nancy showed Susan the drawings. "These are fun," Susan said. "So creative. And you're lucky. You could have had another Chad" – Susan's banker husband – "in your class. When Chad was just a little kid he used to take showers with his father. Apparently those were very memorable experiences for him because in art class in first grade he did a picture of his family and he drew his father with an enormous cock between his legs. He had to go to the school psychologist for mandatory sessions after that."

"I told Jack to get a vasectomy," Nancy said. They were eating watermelon on the porch. Nancy looked at the watermelon juice running between her fingers.

Susan swallowed a piece of watermelon before speaking. "But you want kids."

"But he doesn't. At least not with me. It was a test."

A fly settled on the watermelon. Nancy saw it but didn't move. Susan didn't see it. The fly moved its front legs up and down like it was dancing on a big pink dance floor. "Some test."

"He doesn't want a vasectomy. He holds out hope of reproducing with someone who is not me."

"No, Nancy." But Nancy was pretty sure. Susan stared at her for a moment. Then she snapped back to attention and waved her hand at the fly, who took off. Susan's little girl was playing in the yard. She was technically supposed to be in time-out, but the punishment had been forgotten. She was being punished because, according to her teacher, she had been encouraging the special-needs kids to eat staples. One of the special-needs kids had possibly even eaten one – no one was sure. The special-needs kid wasn't talking.

Nancy returned the pictures to the children on Friday. She gave everyone a gold star. She bought the stars at the drugstore for three dollars and ninety-five cents. This seemed like a lot of money for stickers, but in the absence of grades, she did not know how else to reward and motivate the children. The principal had talked a lot about the importance of fostering the children's self-esteem. He'd also said something about not rewarding them with candy. This went against everything she remembered from her childhood.

She did not think she could handle any more drawings. She found a Harry Chapin CD in a desk drawer and played it for the kids instead. They were less indifferent to the lyrics about aging and coming to terms with failure than she expected. At the end of the day she walked the class out to the buses.

She watched the stay-at-home moms pick up their children and load them into sport utility vehicles. If she had a child she would be a stay-at-home mom. She would not be taking these substitute teacher gigs to pass the time. She had been working twelve to fifteen days a month in various Metairie public school classrooms since a year before she met Jack. She had continued to do so while dating him for two years, and while being married to him for another two. She thought about how many children had sat in her temporary classrooms. She thought of them as slipping through her fingers like water rushing down a slope.

Nancy went to her gynecologist and he told her the bump she'd detected was a wart. She was relieved: a wart didn't seem like a big deal. Then he used the phrase "genital warts" and she remembered that that was a sexually transmitted disease. He asked her if she wanted to get tested for other STDs. "Do you mean like AIDS?" she asked. "HIV," he corrected her. "What are you saying?" she asked. He smiled nervously and held his hands up, palms out, as if showing her

that he, at least, had nothing to hide.

Nancy went home and went on the computer. She checked the browser history and looked through the websites stored there. Jack read the Wall Street Journal online, he checked the weather forecast, and he looked at movie reviews. She didn't see anything incriminating. No chat rooms. She wished she knew his email password. "Two girls," he had told her. What would he say now? What if he still told her two?

She kept clicking around, and realized something else. There was no porn. There were no XXX sites, no cumsluts, no barely legal teenage girls.

The dog came into the room, and she searched its eyes for any sign of collaborationist guilt. The dog, uncomfortable, looked away, listened to outdoor noises. Its tail moved once, then stopped.

She looked at the pamphlet the doctor had given her. She reread the section about how the warts were spread. Oral, genital, or anal contact. She tried to picture the person that Jack had gotten it from. Her mind would not allow her to do it. She could not picture the person.

She got up and walked out the door, down the street. She walked out of their neighborhood. She crossed underneath the highway and wandered through the park. This was the park where Jack's corporate picnics were held. Even though he worked in the city, most of his co-workers also lived in Metairie. At company picnics, Jack often took her arm, holding on exactly halfway between her shoulder and elbow, as if she had a handle. "This is my wife," he told the new hires each year, neglecting to mention her name.

On the other side of the park she got on the bus and rode it into the city. She walked down Elysian Fields. Few people were around. There was a man on a bike, wobbling between the handlebars, humming. The old houses on the big wide street made her feel small. She imagined them suddenly sliding towards her, two

walls of houses squeezing together like a trash compactor with her inside. She kept walking. Night fell. She found a pay phone and paged Susan, who called her back in ten minutes. “I don’t know how to get home,” she said into the phone. “Elysian Fields.” She looked around her. What was the cross-street? Maybe this was how her parents disappeared that Saturday night. Maybe they just found themselves at an intersection and neither street corresponded to anywhere in real life. “Can you come get me?”

Chad and Susan were both drunk. They drove up onto the sidewalk and Nancy had to give a little leap away. Susan was shouting. “Don’t forget we have to take Earheart Avenue! We have to get Jenny at Tae Kwon Do-” “I know that,” said Chad, staring at her instead of looking where he was driving. He didn’t look back at the road until a good ten seconds had elapsed. Susan hit him on the arm. “You missed the turn!” Chad burped. “I’m going the other way. The way I go every day after work.” “The hell you do! Your daughter is waiting for you. She’s sitting outside the studio right now wondering why her father has deserted her –” Chad was staring at Nancy now in the rear-view mirror, his eyes filled with disgust. “Let’s leave her there,” he muttered.

When she got home, Nancy found Jack asleep in the recliner. The dog looked at her from his bed on the floor. The television was on. There was a special report about a toy stethoscope that got stuck in kids’ ears. She went to bed without turning it off.

Jack drove an Oldsmobile when they first met. It was as big as a station wagon and swung around corners like a loaded canoe. The inside smelled of cigarettes and peppermint (the previous owner had been an elderly woman.) Jack drove hunched over the steering wheel and as close to the middle of the road as possible. On the highway he stayed in the slow lane and ignored trucks trying to

move over from the on-ramps.

“Let’s take this car across the country,” Nancy suggested nine months into their relationship.

“Where would we go?” he said.

“To New York.”

“Drive in New York? No thank you. I lack the masochism gene.”

“That’s the place I want to go the most.”

“New York is full of squeegee men. It’s no place to drive.” When they finally went to New York City, they flew. It was the late 1990s, and the squeegee men were gone, Nancy noticed.

In New York City they stayed in on Saturday night. Jack bought a *New York Times*. He explained that the Sunday edition got printed up and shipped early, minus the news sections, and you could get it after ten o’clock in the evening. They found a bodega with stacks of the *Times* out on the sidewalk, and carried the enormous bundle to their hotel, spreading it out all over the bed. She lay down with her head against his shoulder and tackled the crossword. She read clues aloud to him and he answered in his distracted, knowledgeable voice, until they both fell asleep with various sections of the paper covering them. That was happiness.

The next day, she pretended to be asleep when Jack left for work. An hour later, two men appeared with a large open-bed truck. They were there to spread mulch around the trees and flowers. They said hello to Nancy, then ignored her and started shoveling out the stuff. It smelled like shit. A spatter of it stuck to the jeans of the taller man, looking like a mixture of woodchips and the thick black muck you find in the diapers of infants.

When Jack came home that evening, she did not say anything about the mulch delivery, the doctor, or about him. She only talked about the dog. She said

that it smelled bad, that she thought it was due for a bath. Maybe it had rolled in something. The dog was in the other room, asleep. Jack said it wasn't nice to talk about the dog behind its back. "Courage," he called, "Courage dog." The dog didn't come.

"A cat," said Nancy, "would lick itself clean. The only parts a dog licks are its genitals."

Jack said he thought that was an unnecessary observation to make.

"Very necessary," she said.

"You just want to fill the house with various animals," he said.

"I wanted to fill it with something else," she said. "I wanted to have a family." He stared at her.

She felt she was listening to someone else's words, she was watching from above, almost, as she was saying them. Like a traffic correspondent in a helicopter hovering above a gridlocked intersection. "Can I ask you a question?" she said, and this time she ignored the utter seriousness in the air, she batted it away. "Why did you always come back home, back to me? What is wrong with you, that you didn't drive off and disappear?"

He didn't say anything, just squeezed up his face like it was going to break. His shoulders caved in towards his chest. She went into the bathroom, suddenly sure she was going to be sick, and leaned heavily over the toilet. Her hand hit the handle and it flushed; the water spun around in a circle. She heard him behind her as he came into the bathroom and shut the door. "You don't have to answer that," she said.

She was afraid he would. She stared at him but he didn't look back. He was slumped over, and his legs were buckled beneath him. She opened the door and walked quickly through the house. She went outside into the yard, where her feet sunk into the warm mulch. The smell of shit went up her nose, went into her

head. She walked down to the street and lay down behind the wheels of Jack's car.

He would not be able to get out. He was blocked in from the front by a minivan, there was no escape for him. She felt the hardness of the pavement beneath her. From her vantage point on the ground, she looked across the yard, at the slight impressions her feet had made in the mulch.

He came out of the house, leaving the door open. He walked down towards her. He was enormous, as tall as the house, as a tree. Was he going to get in the car? No. He came up to her, blotting out the sky. "Oh God," he said. "Oh God, oh God, oh God." She didn't say anything. "Please don't leave me," he said.

He stood there. The dog appeared, walking stiff-legged through the yard. It could sense the tension. It approached them, then circled a few feet away. Jack slid to a sitting position next to Nancy, and she sat up. They both sat there on the asphalt like inanimate objects. After a minute, Jack reached over towards the dog, but it nervously shied back. "Come here," he said in a husky voice. Nancy stuck her hand out and grabbed its collar as it dodged away from Jack's arm. She pulled it closer to her until it stood between them, whining a high-pitched note. Then Jack wrapped one big arm around the three of them. The arm was stiff and trembling, but, Nancy thought, in a picture you would not be able to see that.

LOOKING AFTER DUKAKIS

My father looked in on me crouched behind the puppet stage on the floor of my room. He was wearing his uniform, and his gun rested in its holster on his hip like a toy. My mouth was open to say “This birthday party is for everyone in the forest!” but I closed it when I saw him. I had a rabbit puppet on my right hand and a bear puppet on my left hand.

“Why don’t you go play outside?” my father asked me. “See if the neighborhood kids are around. Throw the ball a little.”

I slid the rabbit and the bear off my hands and stood up behind the puppet stage, destroying the illusion.

“Go do something competitive. Get some exercise,” my father continued

I slid down until my face was pressed into the floor. “I don’t want to,” I mumbled into the carpet fibers.

My father stood there in the doorway. I waited until he walked away, then I got up and put on my shoes. Outside, there were puddles in the yard from the night’s rain, bright green with drowned grass and moss. Retreating into the woods, I heard shouts: my neighbor yelling at a friend to go long. The trees around me were bright green, and as I walked past mountain laurel and crawled under pricker bushes, I felt like I could hear them growing. When I came to my favorite tree, I climbed onto a thick horizontal limb and sprawled, letting my legs and arms dangle over the sides. I stayed there until dinnertime, listening to the animals and pretending I was part of the tree, that I was absorbing nourishment from the roots and energy from the sun.

At dinner, my father told me and my sister to be ready tomorrow morning to drive up to visit our grandparents. He ate his steak in six bites. “What were you doing out there?” he asked me.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Don’t cross your legs. That’s a sissy thing to do.”

* * *

Granma and Pop were both smokers. They smoked Benson & Hedges and Winstons and Parliament Lights. I saw the packs of cigarettes in the wooden bowl on their table where most elderly couples would have placed plastic fruit.

My paternal grandparents lived in a former shoe factory town and suburb of Boston, on what had been a modest working farm when my father and his siblings were growing up. However, most of the land had been either sold off or turned over to roses, baby's breath, foxglove, irises, lilies, and pansies by my grandmother. Granma knew her botany. She spent hours tending the different patches and maintaining bloom ratios on flowering shrubs. But she never cut and arranged fresh flowers for her house, instead preferring to dry and press them behind glass.

My Pop never seemed to glance at the flower gardens. He loved swamps. He had been one of the first voices for the conservation of wetlands, back in the 1950s, when they were seen as wastes without economic, aesthetic, or environmental merit. Pop had two-and-a-half-foot tall rubber boots which came up to his hips, and he kept them in the front hall, giving them a brief rub when he went by. They were the boots he used to survey the bogs and marshes of Massachusetts, studying their flora and fauna and breathing in the heady mix of swamp air and mosquitoes.

When we arrived we found Granma smoking in the kitchen and listening to National Public Radio, while Pop puttered around and coughed. I greeted each grandparent with a hug, being careful not to burn myself on any cigarette ends, and Granma remarked that my hair was getting in my eyes. Pop smiled and said he’d heard I was a soccer player. When was my next soccer game?

"No, Blaine," Granma interrupted. "The kids play soccer in the fall. Summer isn't soccer season. Don't you know anything?" Actually, soccer was year-round in my town, and I was on a summer team, but I didn't want to talk about it anyway.

The conversation changed to local politics, as Granma held forth about the "boys in Boston." She was a staunch Democrat and seemed to know who had held every position in Massachusetts state government for the past one hundred years. Her knowledge of the intricacies of Michael Dukakis' political life was especially encyclopedic. Granma's feelings for Dukakis mirrored her feelings for flowers—she knew everything about him, but never expressed much respect for him, or disappointment at his defeat in the 1988 Presidential election. She simply tended to his legacy the way she tended her gardens. When Pop said "It didn't help much that the ticket was flip-flopped, consisting of a Number Two who had won the Distinguished Flying Cross, and a Number One who was an Eagle Scout," Granma replied, "No, Blaine," then paused to light a new cigarette. "Both Dukakis *and* Bentsen were Eagle Scouts," she told him, shaking her head. "That's the unfortunate truth." She caught me looking at her. "Come take a walk with me, Jake. Through the forest. Look sharp."

Granma lit four or five cigarettes during the course of our stroll. She carried a small portable ash container in her purse in which she would grind out and deposit each butt before using her minimalist black lighter to ignite another. She pointed out the landmarks between drags. All the aged buildings, fallen into disuse, had been integrated into landscapes of ivy and pine trees so that they looked not like remnants of an old farm but like elements of an unorthodox sculptural garden.

As we walked, Granma asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. "I hope you're not changing your mind every six months or so," she said. "The way most little children do."

"No," I told her. "I still want to be a writer."

"How impractical," she said. "You should reconsider that."

We were standing at the top of a little rise, and through the trees we could see houses going up on a new street that had been cut into the forest. "That was our land," she said. "We sold it off a few years ago." She pointed to the houses. "Aren't they unsightly? Why don't you want to be something sensible, like an historian?"

"Or maybe a park ranger," I amended. "I like watching animals."

"Passivity is an unattractive quality in boys," Granma said, and ground out her cigarette.

The rooms in my grandparents' house had views of the yards and forests and fields around them. They also had ducks. There was a duck carved from light brown wood on a shelf under the television set, a painting featuring a few ducks hung in a side room, a duck ashtray in the spare bedroom. A few pewter ducks chased each other across the sill of the window over the kitchen sink. A set of bookshelves in the living room held books on New England wildlife: the top shelf had the duck books but, until my growth spurt at fourteen, I was too short to see them.

The ducks were all presents for Pop, given because no one could think what else to get for him. We knew he loved ducks, the wood duck in particular, and had spent years of his life monitoring their migration patterns and populations as part of his work for the Massachusetts Interior department. Duck figurines and duck merchandise was easy to find, and it was "personal." I myself never gave Pop a Christmas present that wasn't a duck in some form or another.

That Christmas he unwrapped another duck from me, a green one with a secret compartment in its side, about the size of a pack of cigarettes. "Thank you, Jake," he said, the skin around his eyes wrinkling. He touched the top of my head

with his hand.

"Did you know," he said, holding my present, "that when the young leave the nest, they jump out—no matter how far it is to the ground?"

"Can they fly down?" I asked.

"No. They don't have fully developed feathers. They jump like sky-divers. Or what do you call them? Lemmings. But each immature duck weighs so little - just a few ounces - that they aren't hurt."

"How far is it?"

"Well, it depends. They've been known to nest at heights of over a hundred feet. And the mother duck, she lets them jump." He stopped to cough. When he had recovered: "She exits the nest, and settles somewhere else, and waits. And sure enough, they come jumping out. Like popped corn spilling out the top of a haywire popping machine."

* * *

My father made me go to indoor soccer three times a week. It was a forty-five-minute drive, and I hyperventilated the whole way, wishing a traffic pileup, a hurricane, or an atomic bomb would prevent us from reaching our destination. My teeth chattered and my limbs twitched. I didn't know that these were called anxiety attacks, because I was twelve years old and my father referred to even the physiological symptoms as "whining."

"We're here," he said. "Get out."

We were early. I hid in a stall in the bathroom so I didn't have to talk to the other boys. I leaned over the toilet in case I threw up. As I splashed water on my face at the sink, the father of a teammate said to me, "Hey, kid. It's only a game. You look like you just saw a ghost in your own shit."

When I went out to warm up with the team, Brian said, "Here comes the pansy." Kyle let his hand dangle like an autumn leaf at the wrist. He always

responded “Okay, Jake Brown” in a funny voice whenever I said anything, which made the other boys laugh. He’d once drop-kicked a ball into my face when I was sitting down. I couldn’t feel my nose for a week, and I had to keep touching it with a finger to make sure it was still there.

I was only subbed in for ten minutes during the first half of the game. My dad watched without cheering. At halftime, he tapped me on the shoulder. “Good job out there, but why don’t you go after the ball more? You let other people get it. You gotta be aggressive.” He shook his head. I sat on the bench and reached underneath my rib cage to fit my hand inside my chest.

* * *

When I was fourteen my grandfather got sick. First he was diagnosed with emphysema, then just two months later with lung cancer. My father relied on his brothers and sisters to tell him what was happening, but they gave him different accounts, some hopeful, others bleak. We went up to visit and found that Pop, previously quite mobile, could not move from one room to the next without wheezing. He had a wheelchair for when he needed to leave the house. The two inches of moon-white leg visible between the top of his sock and the bottom of his pants were as thin around as my sister's wrist.

My aunts were there as well, and someone decided that we should all go for a visit to a state park a few towns away. Pop's wheelchair was folded up and stowed in the back of a van, and he was lifted into the backseat. His breathing sounded like wicker furniture being ripped up.

When we got to the park we put Pop in his wheelchair and my aunt pushed him along the gravel pathways while Granma dropped further and further behind. I pretended to be fascinated by a few tree stumps and joined her. She was fumbling in her coat pocket and shaking her head. “Granma, are we going too fast for you?” I asked.

"No. You ought to be minding your own business," she said, then added, "but I know you can keep a secret." She found her pack of cigarettes and removed one, then tried to light it against the spurts of breeze. After three or four attempts, she stopped and looked at me. "Put out your hands," she said. I offered them as if I were Oliver asking for some more. "No, Jake. Vertical, not horizontal," she chided, and used them to block the wind. After drawing in a drag much stronger than her usual decorous inhalations, she said, "I think this whole expedition was in bad taste. Really."

"Why?" I asked.

"It's too final. Wheeling your Pop around in this park is your father's, and your aunts', way of paying tribute to him. Or maybe they want him to contrast the way everything's changed with the way this patch of the state has stayed the same. If it has stayed the same. I know for a fact there weren't rhododendrons here in 1965." She started walking forward, with purposeful strides longer than mine. "They wouldn't notice that. He will. But I suppose he won't mind much."

"Is this where he grew up?" I asked.

"In the park? What do you think?" Granma said. "He grew up not too far from here, and he was the one who had the whole place protected under the conservation laws."

"What's the name of it?"

"Mallard State Park," she told me. "Not exactly something that shows up on tourist itineraries."

When we caught up to the rest of the group, Granma had finished her cigarette and placed the butt in a small plastic bag inside her pocket. Her husband was talking about thirty years ago, about convincing the government to turn down lucrative bids to drain and develop the area, and instead "spend tax dollars preserving what they termed textbook Massachusetts wasteland." "No, Blaine," I

heard her say as I turned to look at the vast stretches of green-brown bog in front of us, "It wasn't renamed the Department of Environmental Protection until after Dukakis was re-elected."

The path turned into a boardwalk that ran over the wetlands. Trees growing out of the water or from little hillocks of turf spread their branches over us as we pushed Pop along. Everything was green, and the leaves were of so many different shapes and sizes that I was sure neither my grandfather nor my grandmother could name them all. The boardwalk twisted and turned and birds appeared around bends before flying off in the face of Pop's coughing and my aunts' chatter.

We passed through a section of dense growth before the underbrush opened up, the trees receded, and the water turned bluer and blacker, like a lake. Reeds and cat-tails lined the edges of the oval body of water, which the boardwalk skirted on one side before re-entering the swamp woods. There was a log resting on a hummock of mud and grass and extending out into the water about twenty feet from where we stood, and on it and around it turtles were sunning themselves and swimming. A little farther away a family of ducks pedaled through the water, the downy ducklings falling in line behind the brown mother duck, and the stripe-headed male cycling parenthetically alongside.

I walked over next to Pop and stood by him. I wanted to hear what he would say about the wood duck family. His breath scraped in and out of his mouth. "Look at the male," he said, catching my eye. "I wonder why he's sticking around. He should be long gone by now. Assuming it's the father, of course." He stopped, and the breathing continued, a bit thicker, as if this much had exhausted him. "He doesn't need to keep an eye on his offspring. They know everything they need to know when they are born. It's all inherited."

Then he said something about how he was worried the pond was going to

get choked up by some kind of marsh-grass, and Granma said, "No, Blaine, that's purple loosestrife. Don't you see the flowers? They're right there. Awfully hard to miss." The ducks paddled off towards an inlet and disappeared, one after another like a train floating into a tunnel.

* * *

Riding the late bus after soccer practice freshman year, I felt things hit me in the head. Something flew past my ear and stuck to the back of the seat in front of me: a piece of paper wet with saliva. I brushed the top of my head with my hand to clear the other spitballs from my hair and the back of the bus erupted in laughter. The bus jerked to the side of the road.

"Jonathan! Get up here right now!" the bus driver barked into the mirror hanging above the windshield.

Jonathan took his time, placing his hat carefully askew on his head, tightening the straps on his backpack. Then he sauntered up the aisle, sat down behind the driver, and moved his arms to indicate that admiration was due him. The bus started up again. A few miles later, a couple of his friends got up and joined him at the front. Soon they were pounding each other on the back.

When my stop came I clutched my soccer bag to my chest and didn't make eye contact with anyone. As I passed Jonathan's seat he stood up and pointed at me. "This kid is gay!" he shouted.

The house was empty. I put on a CD, skipping through the tracks until I found a waltz. I pressed the repeat button, and opened the French window to the deck. Outside, there was a breeze that ran over my crew cut. The trees were turning red and orange and yellow, and a few leaves floated down past my face. At first I spun slowly and silently, letting myself forget. Then I started humming and holding my arms like there was another person dancing along with me.

The music stopped mid-note. "That was way too loud. You're letting

dead leaves drift into the house,” my father said. He stood there uniformed in the doorway. He looked like he was going to write me a ticket for littering. “How was soccer practice?”

This time I couldn’t tell him it was fine. “I’m never going to play again,” I said to the deck floor. “I hate it.”

“Come on, Jake. This is high school ball you’re playing now. Naturally, it’s going to be tough. Don’t let yourself get so discouraged.” Light from the setting sun reflected off my father’s badge and into my eyes.

“I hate it,” I repeated.

“You don’t mean that. I’ve been taking you to soccer practice and soccer games every week for years now,” my father said.

“Yeah, and that’s why I hate you too,” I said.

“What is wrong with you?”

“What’s wrong with me?” Everything was blurry; I couldn’t see him anymore. I lurched down the deck stairs and pushed my way into the woods. I wished he had been shot by a criminal while on duty. I wished he’d veered into the oncoming lane during a high-speed chase and collided with a truck. I wished he’d walked too close to the bars of a cell and a murderer had reached out and snapped his neck.

* * *

Pop died that January. I was called to the office at school during first period, and my father told me over the phone. His voice was soft and rough, and I noticed how much he sounded like Pop himself.

The snow was about four days old the day of Pop's funeral. It sucked at my shoes as I walked into the church. My father's oldest sister read a eulogy in which she remembered Pop's struggles with Doc, the grey mule who lived for two dozen years and kicked him eight times. My father's second oldest sister read a

eulogy concerning Pop's efforts to save over twenty thousand acres from commercial development across the state. I couldn't focus on their words. I had the same scene in a loop in my head.

There was an old well behind Granma and Pop's house, inside a rectangular cement building hidden in the trees. I had seen and asked about it on many of my walks with Granma, but it was Pop who opened it up for me. I wanted to know why they had built a concrete shed around a well. "Because it was dangerous," Pop said. "Little kids could fall in and never be heard from again." What little kids? I asked. Neighborhood kids? "Your own father, for instance."

I asked if I could see it, if he had the key. Pop laughed, and said, "I wouldn't know where to find it after all these years," but then his brow furrowed under his white hair, and he went back to the barn and reached up to a place where a keyring that must have weighed fifteen pounds was hanging from a bent nail. We went to the well-building, and he tried about thirty of them before one came close to fitting. The lock was rusty, but it released. "Hold onto my hand now," Pop said, and opened the door.

Inside, the well was round and made of dark stones that were wet to the touch. We waited to look over the edge. Maybe we were both afraid of how deep it would be. But we couldn't see the bottom. Then Pop shouted down into it "Ready or not, here we come!" and turned to me, smiling. "It's a passageway to the other side of the world."

I looked up at Granma across the front row. She wasn't crying, and was in fact staring at me with her lips a tight line across her face, as if she knew what I was thinking about and disapproved, as if she were about to ask me, without amusement, what I expected to find at the bottoms of wells.

* * *

I stood in the hallway outside Mr. Porter's room, looking at the list of

names taped to the pane of glass next to his door. Under BOYS VARSITY CROSS COUNTRY there were seven names; the seventh name was JAKE BROWN.

I glided into math class and smiled at my teacher. I zipped the x's and y's around in my head like board game pieces, and kept raising my hand with the right answer. The year before my math teacher had asked me why I wasn't trying, why I was "just passing." Now she was putting a check next to my name in her grade book for extra credit.

We had practice every day after school for two hours. Hours of running dusty trails in the woods, cutting through people's lawns, jumping over the streams that sprang up after every rain, jogging across the dam, and doing laps around the sports fields on which the other teams practiced. We laughed and joked and breathed heavily over the sounds of tennis balls thwacked by rackets, offensive linemen slamming into blocking dummies, and soccer players counting off drills.

I got invited to a party in the state forest with the other runners, girls and boys. The fastest guy, Toby, a senior, gave me a ride. The kids swung open a gate that was closed for the night, and parked their cars in a circle at the end of a dirt road. I had my first beer (just one) and took my first hit off a joint. "Jake Brown is so shy and quiet," Toby kept saying. "We have to get him to come out of his shell." I watched the other kids. They produced guitars and sang songs in off-key, drunken voices. Toby and the first-seed girl turned on the headlights to his car and danced. A boy sat in another boy's lap.

I climbed in through my window that night and listened to the silence in the house. I had been expecting to find my father waiting for me, waiting to ask me just where I'd been. But he wasn't. When I'd told my mother I'd be out late that night, she wanted to know who I was going to be with, and where. But my father, in the next room, only looked up through the open doorway at my face, and stayed where he was, saying nothing.

* * *

A year and a half after my grandfather's funeral my father asked if I would go up to Massachusetts and stay with Granma for a while in order to do some work around the property. Apparently Granma was not able to keep things up like before. My father suggested I go for the last three weeks of August before school started, and I agreed.

As we drove along the winding driveway past the old barn site, the horse field (now grown up like a meadow), and the front lawn gardens, I could see that seed grasses were infiltrating the patches of flowers and shrubs. Blown-about pieces of newspaper were lying against the rock wall. There were even dandelions in the lawn.

Granma looked like she'd aged ten years, and her hair had shriveled away to wisps of white. She stood up to give me a hug, but then sat right back down on one of the porch chairs. She seemed shorter, and I couldn't tell if it was because I had grown or because she had shrunk. "Well, Jake," she said, and her voice was hoarse, "You look like a typical teenager." Once my father left, she lit a cigarette. I realized I had never seen a woman as old as she was smoking before. It was the most natural thing in the world for her to do, but I must have been staring, because she said, "I hope you're not wanting one yourself." I shook my head.

"Do you smoke?" she asked me. She motioned for me to sit down on the porch next to her. There was a small black ashtray in between us. It was clean. I wondered what she had done with the twelve or sixteen cigarettes she must have already smoked that day.

"No," I said, "I run." I looked at the stonework on the patio, where the mortar in between the bricks was green with moss.

I mowed the lawns, weeded the gardens, cleaned the sheds, and rebuilt the rock wall that was crumbling near the pasture. I cleaned out Granma's garage,

which had old signs from the McGovern campaign and one that said “Pettingill for President: He’ll Make Your Garden Grow.”

Then I went down to the cellar. I found trash cans filled to the brim with ashes and litter boxes that had not been cleaned for a month. There were also boxes of duck figurines, mostly carved from wood. I wondered how many of my gifts to Pop were down there. I started carrying the boxes upstairs in order to see in the light what was inside.

One of the boxes held not figurines but books, from the bookshelves in the living room. At the bottom there was a slim paperback with a black and white photo of two young men in a canoe pointing at a bird swimming by. The title of the book was *The Wood Duck in Massachusetts*, and the author of the book was Blaine Brown.

One of the men in the photo was my grandfather. I knew it was him because he looked just as he did in a picture I’d seen of him holding my father, a newborn baby, in his lap. In that picture my grandfather had looked like he would break with happiness.

We expect to see the wood duck floating near the shore, or waddling on the rocks, a small brown being, a modest bit of Massachusetts. We are not prepared for the burst of motion, the thrusting limbs, as the duck, startled, perhaps just eager, flashes across the water, takes to the air. We do not expect the change in element. Perhaps we are reminded, briefly, of what we so often aren’t, while nature’s creatures are: at home in the world, the whole world.

The book had been published in 1955 by the Massachusetts Department of Fisheries and Game. I read ten or fifteen pages and then I went into the kitchen and found Granma, sitting by the picture window, listening to NPR discuss literacy rates in various states.

“Granma?” I said. “I found this in the cellar. I never knew about this. I

never knew Pop was a writer. I never knew he had written a book.”

She looked at the book and dropped her cigarette. I had never before seen her break her composure while smoking. The cigarette rolled across the tiles and underneath her seat, and she bent over with evident effort to retrieve it before stubbing it out in an ashtray. “There were too many ducks in the house. It was overwhelming,” she said.

* * *

I found a postcard in the basement that had a picture of a man and a woman in old-fashioned bathing suits standing on a narrow strip of beach, and the words “Greetings from Onota Lake, Pittsfield, Massachusetts,” with no writing on the back. I sat in a wrought-iron chair behind Granma’s house with the end of a pen in my mouth. Then I wrote a few sentences.

When my father came to pick me up after three weeks at Granma’s, I asked him what was new. “Nothing.” We drove in silence. Nothing at all? “Well. I got a new job.” He said he’d be moving to a new police department in a different town, where he was going to be the chief of police. I said that was cool. He looked over at me before he looked back at the road.

When we got back to Connecticut, it was raining. There were no cars in the driveway, and my father said my mother and sister had gone into New York City for the day. I looked at the water hitting the sides of our house. I’d cleaned out and lined Granma’s gutters with mesh, and I said that, if it wasn’t raining tomorrow, I would go up and line ours as well, before fall came and the leaves started coming down. My father opened his mouth in surprise, then closed it. “Okay,” he said.

He went inside. I walked out to the street, letting the rain soak through my clothes. I opened the mailbox and saw a few flyers inside. No one had gotten the mail yet today. I pulled the postcard out of my pocket and placed it on top of the

flyers, and closed the mailbox. The postcard wasn't addressed. My note on the back began, "Hi Dad."

I thought about my father finding the postcard and reading my message to him. He'd hold it in his hands, then turn it over to look at the front again. "I met somebody named Tim who lives three houses down from Granma and was always running by when I went down the drive to get the mail. I'm gay." I pictured myself up on the ladder, a hammer in my back pocket and three nails in my mouth, and him below me, looking up. I had a funny feeling: like I could lift off the ground.

BACKWARDS

Once you pull the trigger, you can't put the bullet back in the barrel. It spins off toward its destination and rips a hole in space/in time at six hundred feet per second, in the case of a .38 Special. The air is cold, empty as I flick the butt out the window. I am a civilian, a woman, alone, getting back in the car, taking the last few drags. I take off my badge, unholster my gun and lay them down on the bench – I abandon them – hearing the whipcrack of distant pistol shots: the aftershocks of a war, the pebbles left skittering after an avalanche has settled. The stables get trained here but I see nobody this morning: I light a cigarette, same pack I've had for three years but I need one now. When I pull in to the empty cracked-concrete parking lot of the state shooting range in Marin County, I don't do any target practice. North. How far can I get before dark? Driving over the Golden Gate Bridge: lost in fog, fog everywhere, like soup made of cotton, like soup made of a cold sweat. I think of Sally there on the bed, legs pressed together, elbows folded in, *Annie, me too? You think it's me too?* I am leaving the city. I don't know where I'm going, Oregon, Seattle don't seem far enough, fleeing San Francisco in Our Year of the Lord 1978. I shut my face to Sally, the fluttering at her temples, veins, hair smashed against the sides of her head. *Don't leave. Don't leave me, your job, or your poor sick mother, your city. This is a special city don't you believe that? A special city? Despite it all a special city?* Looking across the Bay from Twin Peaks, row after row of Victorians, the hills scooping out neighborhoods and the size of the sky when you're at the top of it all. The windows. No other city has the windows San Francisco has, bright glassy eyes covering the walls of the houses. Sally's discolored from crying, not sleeping, her skin's bruised, a banana starting to rot from the inside. Me: *a lot of things I loved, I don't love anymore.* I get up from the couch and I put toast in the toaster and I swish/spit a mouthful of mouthwash

and I start putting things in a bag, saying to myself *Done Did It Do It: Done Did It Do It* and she hears and she stands in the hallway. She tries: *Annie it all works this way, the city works this way, life does, you know it.* The thighs extending from her underwear. Skin freckled/pale with veins beneath like the streets of a city you grew up in, you know, except now: you don't know them anymore, you don't know those legs. Dark, wrong, foreign, occupied, false. During the night ask my mother in my prayers to know – thinking of you. See her face against the gray billion-washes pillow and love her. But it isn't enough. Can't sleep: like my father, back when, and I never knew why, now I do. We go to bed Sally and I like usual: apart. She bedroom, I couch, my uniform draped over the back, not washed for days now, I can't. Day before: Jack knows it's all shit, he meets me, we get in the squad car and drive down Fulton silent, looking at the ocean – he says he's sorry. Nothing nobody else.

* * *

When no one is looking, I pick up a rock. Heft it in one hand. I don't want to stop this. Line of cruisers burning along Main like the lights to a runway: if a plane decided to land on San Francisco: land here. Flame against the night and the men and women seem black and white: all contrast. Cops are circles of face against invisible uniform. The people standing in the light of the flames look at me: my hair then my uniform, which side am I on. They want to kill us. This one: face like South Dakota farmer, underbite, scruff along his jaw – 16? 17? wants to kill me. Thinking, in my uniform, is he wrong? Thinking in the night as we keep formation (we: the police, the SFPD): what if the fire flicks a finger onto my pants, leaps up to my shirt, melts my badge, my police officer costume falls to ashes off my body? Feels that way. We hold formation, we keep the people in front of the Hall, we let them yell and curse and chant at the domed building sitting guilty in the night. Chunks of concrete flying through the air, launched by anger. Piece hits a woman

with a snap – she could be one of the Greasy Spoon waitresses, hefting a tray on one skinny arm. The men use a signpost to go through the windows of City Hall. Smash: smash: smash. The codes on the radio are 508s: Chief tells us to hold our fire, cops won't listen, will they listen? Jack's next to me in the line, nightstick to nightstick, we look at each other out of the corners of our eyes, he understands. Twelve cruisers lined up along Civic Center Plaza: set on fire. Pale peach-fuzz kids, nineteen twenty twenty-one, kick in windows with Frye workboots, splash gasoline across upholstery, toss in whole books of lit matches. I face Jack he faces me, he knows, he knows where my heart is, who it's with. He knows more than I know myself because I am just getting used to it, I will not give this up so easily, how can I put down my gun and walk away, this was, this is who I am too. Jack is my partner, I am Jack's, we still have the marks on our arms from the handcuffing together as rookies, we still have the place below our wrists where we wrote the numbers down that we wanted each other to know. There are two types of faces here – two types of San Francisco. One the San Francisco I grew up in, one is the face of the native, the pious, the sons and daughters of working men, the laborer face, with the option of working on the docks or being a firefighter or (what they chose) a cop. I know these men and women, these mostly men. The other is the face of the convert, the immigrant, the woman from Iowa or the man from Montana or western Texas or Virginia, the Methodist Youth Pastor and the Future Farmer of America, the sharecropper's daughter who knew she couldn't stay in Greenwood Mississippi, these faces that pour in, pour in to our city every day week month year looking for a place where they feel not criminal, not felonious. I know them too. Thousands of men and women pack the street. This is their home now, they have no other: this is my home, always has been. Empty hands punch the air; full hands hold rocks and bottles. Not cigarettes. Nobody is smoking. Atmosphere is all friction: a fist jabbed too fast and sparks could strike. Bodies thump against each

other, arms and legs prod unconcerned. This is anger: backs against the wall, they have to fight. No candles this time, no quiet mourning. Five thousand? Ten? Codes are 404s, radios are fuzzing over one another. My car's called up: get over to Civic, the queers are stinging mad.

* * *

No Ma, I say, *no, she's not here*, and she closes her mouth, shuffles back to bed, yet before she fades away again, drifting off to that place where my father has just died, where my father's absence is everything, I think I see something in her face fall. *Where is she?* my mother asks, *where is she, is she here?* and she touches my face, her hand moves back past my cheek to my hair, back down by my neck where it's very short: she hasn't touched me in a long time, in I don't know how long. She gets up, unsteady on her feet, she comes to me: I back up, before I even know I'm doing it. She looks at me now – she looks in my eyes now – then she throws the blanket off, throws it: white bone-clusters of hands flicking it away, she sits up in bed, she swings her sticks of legs to the floor. *I have to tell you something, I live with a woman, I want you to know this.* I unwrap a pork bun from Mr. Shu's bakery (it's still there, with all different neighbors) – her favorite, I hold it up to her mouth, she purses her lips but doesn't part them. She's the same as always, she looks worn away, shriveled around the edges, like there's a pit in her stomach that's sucking her flesh off her from the inside. Where is Sally? At home, avoiding me avoiding her. She avoids my eyes. She's afraid of exposure. Nobody knows about her and me. Speaking in cop-speak: said individual. I responded to. I did see. I know this language, I speak it, but I want to scream. What I saw. What I see now. I see it in the faces of the guys at the precinct. I see it in the face of my lieutenant. I see it in Sally's face when she closes her eyes, when she thinks there isn't anything to see. I see it all around me and I hate it.

* * *

I sit in the break room at the station: head between legs: gutshot. Jack comes over, he takes a ballpoint pen, he writes on his arm: I'M WITH YOU – and I give him a weak smile, thinking, *are you?* How'd we get roped into this, it must've been on purpose, the Sergeant's testing me. Don't know what to write down in my log, I ask to see Jack's, I want to see what he wrote: “[illegible] entered premises with bench warrant #578 issued 6/26/77 and signed by Judge Wapshot. While therein and effecting [illegible] arrests for ABC violation and attempting to leave premises with prisoners were confronted by numerous persons who made attempts to stop them from removing prisoners. Numerous persons became disorderly. In attempting to stop police officers 2 officers were injured.” We head back to the station, the professorial man is walking away, covering his face, he doesn't believe I want to help him, he just wants to disappear. *Stand up for yourself!* I'm screaming, *show your face!* but he won't, he only sees the uniform, he's older, he's used to this, he's just glad we won't be running his name in the paper tomorrow like they did what – eight years ago? *You won't talk to me? you won't make a statement? I've already got it mostly filled out, just say a few words, just tell the truth about what happened,* but he won't, I have no complainant, I crumple the paper in my hand.

Complaint Report

Date and Time Reported 1:35 AM 6/28/77

Date and Time of Occurrence Approx. 1:30 AM 6/28/77

Place of Occurrence 2222 Folsom St Inside

Type of Premises, Business, Etc. Bar

Crime or Offense Police Harrassment

Details as Reported by Complainant or Initial Investigating Officer Compl present at scene reports to Ptl O'Malley 12131 that compl

I write the words, knowing that you don't do this, that you do not file a complaint

against your fellow cops, don't care. The man keeps looking through his fingers down the alleyway, he wants to go, he wants to run, he shifts from one foot to another. *Hey, what's your name? never mind, don't tell me your name now, just tell me what happened to you, you okay?* I see one man, professor-style grey suit with elbow pads, hands to his face, wondering if he's hurt, if he got hit, he must weigh a hundred twenty pounds tops. The paddywagon's got the teenagers, and cops are standing around now, two of them discussing the spots on their chests where the bottles hit them. Jack and I stand there, not moving, I listen to the cops talk: *What in thee hell did they think they was doing chucking Bud Lites at you? They're getting feisty these days, just like every other group with its grievances and its manifestos and its lawyers and shakedowners. Hate going in places like that, feel filthy when I go home to my wife. A profound change has occurred in the streets of San Francisco and in its government and it offends my sense of values. I seen this city deteriorating as a place for the average decent people to live.* One moment of excitement – one moment of me feeling something like hope – two mustachioed teenagers throw a couple of bottles at the cops, yelling something like *Rights now blue meanies!* before four big guys take them down, each skinny kid disappears beneath their uniforms. Raid's over in five minutes, those that get out the back get out, the older slower ones get some orders barked at them, the kids drinking get booked for intoxication, in a bar. They're not drunk, they're afraid, and even when they see me, when they see me hanging back, slouching, not wanting to be see, they are afraid of me. We're going along with three other cars – three cars – to check a liquor license they say, but I know something's wrong, what do we need three cars and – I see it as we get out – there's a paddywagon, I thought this was over, I thought we weren't doing this anymore. Sergeant tells me as I'm fingerprinting a woman that he wants me and Jack to go with the ABC boys down to Folsom tonight, he doesn't say why: just tilts his head, eyes me, says *They're waiting for*

you. Fingerprinting: the most intimate activity you do with a perp: you get behind her and you put your arms around her and you hold her hand in yours and you roll the pads of her fingers across the card. Women cops do women perps, this one's a disorderly conduct though now she's mellowed out, a Haight-Ashbury leftover I think, but all I can think is that I feel nothing, I am professional, I am doing this just as well as any other woman cop would: press, roll, press, roll, I am professional, I want them to know that I am professional.

* * *

Me: I miss it too.

Annie I miss how we used to be. Silence for a while, me looking from bed out the window, the blinds down in all the other houses. I couldn't do that Annie, I'm not a public defender, it would be suspicious, at work they'd want to know why I cared about this, maybe somebody married could do it, not me.

Me: No – couldn't we do something to stop this, couldn't you take a case, you know the law, couldn't you do some kind of work to stop this?

Annie maybe he was.

Me: The men and women moving here, the numbers of us are making it better, the cops aren't better, the cops are worse, my father was never like this.

Annie everybody knows that, it's getting better.

Me: Things have been rough at work, do you know what cops do, still do in 1977, the bribery, the raids, the way they pickpocket gay people and gay people still take it?

Annie look out our window all that fog everywhere so much fog, you can't see the city even though the window is bigger than our bed, bigger even than our bed.

Me: I got a worse feeling than when Jack and I went in that Filmore project together.

Annie remember when we rode the trolley and you didn't want to because it was

touristy but we saw downtown and we saw all of your old neighborhood, all of it, and you could see your childhood bedroom window and you said it was open? And we both knew there was no place like this city on earth, that it was special, a special city?

Me: *Sally how about you turn off the light I'm beat.*

I love you too Annie.

Me: *I love you.* Day before: I say goodnight to Jack, I leave it at that, I'm leaving myself open, this I have to do on my own. I say *I'm not taking the money.* He has the decency, or the shame, to not bring up his wife, his two kids, Catholic school tuition, rising rents, but he could and I could forgive him, because he's got my back, he's the best partner I could hope for, and he asks about Sally and he sticks up for me with the Sergeant. He nods, he understands, he knows what my decision is. My mouth is set, my uniform feels like wool. *I'm taking it,* Jack tells me, *I'm dirty, but they leave me alone, they don't distrust me.* I want to tell him it's okay, but I don't feel like it's okay. They want to have you, they want to make sure they stain you too. *They expect you to take it: raises flags if you don't take it: they've been asking me if you take it.* Some crummy old bar basement level off Folsom, been around for decades, probably there're elderly gay men who've been in the city since World War II still having a drink down there every happy hour, who accept its stink and darkness and cops coming through to get their payments or to harass someone if the money's slow in coming. *I'm just reporting, I'm not telling you to do anything, Annie.* *They're paying, I guess since the forties, a guy named Lucreci handles it.* *No, they don't raid anymore really, it's getting better, they just fine the place for serving minors if the money doesn't come.* I shake my head. I know it's happening, I know what they do, but I didn't know Jack was doing it, I didn't know that everyone was, that I'm the only one who isn't. I don't want to be different. I used to get the boys at the station to forget I wasn't one of them by talking about

my father: thirty-year vet, passed away while still on the force, loved the city, loved its streets – till they forgot I was Annie, till I think they started to see him not me. Was my father on the take? was he booking men for dancing with men twenty years ago?

* * *

It's because I stopped in after work, I'm wearing my uniform, she latches onto it in that way she does now. She lays there in the bed clutching her comforter, every year since my father died she's skinnier, the nurses threaten to feed her intravenously. Speaking about my father: *They said the needle was empty, they said he contracted nothing, but I don't believe it, he was never the same afterward, that thing gave him something. Filth all over him, all over his shirt and his pants, green filth, I can't speak of it, it gives me chills, it hurts me. That man killed your father, I know it, he was never the same again, that man was the beginning of the end for your dear father. That man had a needle in between his legs, sewn into his pants, and he was screaming and yelling and flinging his – his excremities and when your father tried to put him down, to subdue him, he grabbed that needle – I can't. I can't.* She's coughing and I hold up a glass of water but she doesn't even see it, she talks at me but she hardly looks at me these days. *I can't. Homeless and indigent and with the young lady by the arm, the young lady screaming, your father runs over, the crazy man (she whispers) has his pants around his ankles. He hears a woman scream, he sees a young lady and a big dirty black man, he's got her, he's got her in the street. The filth your father had to deal with, that filth gets on you, they want to get it on you, it makes you sick. Your father saw the city change, it might not have been easy some thirty-five years ago but it's gone all the way downhill now, all these people coming in from God knows where, all these immigrants, and the pedophiles and sickos and the cultists who don't know God, who worship everything but God. These people are going to find themselves in a*

hot place. Oh Annie she looks at me through the rheum: her fingers move like she wants to crawl over to me. I touch her arm my hand trembling. *Keep away from those people. I mean people like that. Keep safe. Are you going to church? Don't be a hero Annie. For me.* I am here to see my mother, to spend a few hours with her to keep her company, but I want to argue with her, I want to say when she talks about Jesus and the church and makes me promise I'm going, that her Jesus, her Jesus who died for us and who we have to feel guilty about, who we have to speak right and live right and mind our manners for, isn't the Jesus I remember: I remember a man who travelled and mixed with everybody and was out on the road and in the city and I remember him telling Peter *There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life,* I remember those words, and when I was a little kid when I pictured Jesus, when I pictured Jesus not on the cross but before, but on his feet, he looked a lot like my father, and I still feel that today, I do not want to give that up.

* * *

The women at the other booth sound a little sad they weren't there last night, but Sally's friends don't want in on a *male-dominated* (*what a redundant phrase*, one chuckles) movement. Sally flushes when I tell her about the speech, the refrain: *I'm angry!* She wouldn't come: afraid of being seen, her job, her big-bucks job. I was afraid myself: I was one of them in my getup, my disguise: off duty, hood squaring out my face, jaw thrust, couldn't I be a man? But I found the women there too, the knots of us among the bearded mustached males (more men than women, many more – the men keep coming, filling up the Castro, South of Market, and everywhere else: the women, here and there, but nothing like the men's

numbers). One blonde girl, looks newly shorn, exposed ears like saucers, fumbles her cigarette almost drops it, I'm there with the lighter and *Thank you* she says, little overawed, with twang in her voice. Watching the men speak, watching the crowd too, the women and men. I hear words repeated again and again: repression – disobedience – struggle – bullies – rights. I know that somehow they are talking about me, they don't know it, but it's me – my uniform which I am not wearing. Pigs – racists – homophobes – they mean me, they mean my partner Jack, they mean my father. I want to say what about: safety – honor – dignity – protection – service? I feel like I'm on the wrong side, this feels like a betrayal. There's a guy was in my Academy class – left the force after two years – now he's in straight-leg Levis, Frye boots, leather jacket. Same man, same quiet man but he doesn't look the same, he wouldn't be the same to anyone who only just saw him. Maybe never really wanted to be a cop, maybe he never wanted that for himself – but I feel like asking him, how did you give it up? How could you give those things up? The rally's in my old neighborhood, front of Most Holy Redeemer Church, my mother's church, my church Sunday after Sunday of stiff uncomfy prissy clothes. A man commandeers a megaphone. My family doesn't live here anymore, these streets are familiar and unfamiliar. The girls down at the Greasy Spoon – my friends Sally's friends – call each other family, *chosen family* they say, but they've left their own families behind, they've left small towns to be here, I'm from here. I can't separate the two, my own mother still lives in the Parish, complaining of headaches and putting her slippers on the wrong feet and refusing to eat unless begged. Sally and I are known now at the Greasy Spoon, we're an item – they're happy for us – they tell me to ignore it when they talk about institutional change, about the police state, *Annie we don't mean you*. We eat hamburgers or veggie burgers and curly fries late at night and talk and the staff comes and sits with us on breaks, they invite us to the back, where we sit on old bourbon crates that the bread comes in, everyone's a

woman, woman-run and operated, it feels like another version of work, of the station, where it's me and maybe a couple woman and fifty men. I start feeling like I have two lives – I don't like it. I'm going to the protest, none of the Greasy Spoon women want to go, they don't want to work within the system, they say the problem is the system – but I think of my uniform, and I know I am the system.

* * *

I've still got his number on my arm. We're alive. I didn't have to shoot. Scarred man shoved into the back of the patrol car: head down practically to his collarbone. Flashing lights painting our faces, Jack breathing heavy but he manages to nod at me, corner of the mouth smile. *Done Did It Do It*. The backup arrives as Jack hoists the scarred man to his feet. They're on the ground, Jack's on top of him, Jack's got his arms, Jack's got the handcuffs on. Spinning around: *Police Don't Move! Hands in the Air Hands in the Air!* Gun at the woman cowering against the sink, my fingers white against the black grip and barrel. Door thrown open: into a body behind it: into the wall, man with a scar around his ear knocked flat, the gun in his hand dropping to the floor. Wham! Jack's shoulder into the door: fast as a quarterback: takes it down. We're running up the stairs, we see him disappearing into an apartment, pushing the door shut, have to get there before he locks it. Up the stairs, like a vertical sweep only timed, only with no time, only with the end of our lives maybe waiting for us at the top. The housing project has glass doors covered in dirty pieces of tape, peeled off labels from forty ouncers. Inside there's no one, nothing, sounds of music behind closed doors but no people. *Wait* Jack says: *Wait, one second, just one second*, he pulls out a pen, he starts writing on my arm - and he's never touched me before never done anything like this, I am too stunned to move - he writes a long number, he thrusts the pen at me. *This is my home number, this is how you get my wife, if something happens to me, I want it to be you who calls her, you call her, you promise?* He rolls up his sleeve,

bare his wrist at me: *And now you, write down the number. Write it down.* And I look at him and I write down my number and he says *who will I be talking to* and I say *Sally, you'll talk to Sally.* And he nods and as he takes the pen back he gives my hand a little squeeze, and he says *Let's go. Done Did It Do It Done Did It Do It.* Our fourth month working together and we're on nights: call comes over for Geary Houses, we're right there, we gotta go: woman just saw a man get shot in the hallway. New partner's name: Jack, little older, quiet, married, about twice my size but holds his arms close to his body like he'd never use them on anyone: maybe if he really had to. He shakes my hand. Old partner got promoted: desk duty: what he always wanted.

* * *

And I've learned that those freckles don't stop at the nose and cheeks but go everywhere, run all over her all over all of her. Works in a skyscraper downtown that went up just this year, wears pantsuits and skirts and she makes a face she doesn't even know she makes when she's embarrassed and I love it. We get a soda together, a pop she calls it and then we go to Mission Dolores Park which is the one place in the city of San Francisco that day where it's not raining. I try to be a little classier and keep the copspeak out of my conversation and she asks me about work and I tell her: she's impressed, I think she's okay with it. That's on my day off, sick of my partner, Gallagher, double shifts with him and I'd rather work alone. He looks at me, kinda sore, but lets it go, because we're stuck with each other, at least until one of us gets reassigned – he's trying to get moved down to Ingleside. *I got a headache so how about you can it* I tell him and I am not smiling. She's almost gone from view now around the corner but her hair moves across her shoulders like she's thinking of turning her head and she does: one look: and right after she disappears I know I can't listen to him say another word. Gallagher: *Wasn't so many of them then. Plus and they were thinner, yknow, willowier. Didn't put up a*

fight never. You rounded em up and they gave you what they got in their wallets not to print their names in the papers. Real simple operation and no one got hurt mostly. My father told me all about. Many a time. He retired couple years before I joined up, but in the fifties, sixties, normalest thing you could do. Every cop did it. So lemme continue what I was sayin. She waves goodbye, something seems to come off her arm, her hand, at me: warmth. Gallagher's back with his hot dogs, face already red from the hot mustard: his eyes on Sally, I move in between them, I square my back to him. Proprietary: mine. Her windbreaker is the same color as the sky: I'm staring at her hips: I look away but then back, I want to get as much of her as I can now. I check with her that we're still on for a walk together, she smiles awkwardly, says yes – she didn't know I was a cop – now she does. *A long walk. Perfect.* She smiles and shrugs her shoulders, gestures at the sky, thin light blue like a fresh cotton sheet. *Take you more than half an hour. You want Russian Hill – Lombard Street between Hyde and Leavenworth. That's a hike.* She indicates her flat-soled shoes: she's walking. *Can you tell me how to get to the infamous crooked street?* She's got a newspaper under one arm, a camera dangling from her neck: I say I can help her. *I think I'm lost. This is a special city, isn't it?* A special city. *So you're a police officer?* and I nod. I can't believe it's her: she can't believe it's me. I can see her take in the uniform first, then there's recognition, then she sees it's me, it's Annie, it's the woman she agreed to walk around with last Friday. Gallagher stalks off towards the dog pushcart, throws a *you don't want nothing?* over his shoulder but I don't respond, I'm watching someone cross the street towards me. He pauses in his diatribe, rubs his stomach. Gallagher: *You walked in the queer bars, you know, the fag bars at night just like the ones now just darker and quieter and they didn't never have windows, you went in and you had your nightstick out, didn't never have to use it much but you wrote down in your notebook that there was men dancin with men or women dancin with women and*

*that was enough and you pointed em toward the paddywagon but you let em go for the cash they got: cept if it was an election year and then you booked em cuz that looked good for the top brass. My father didn't ask no questions, he didn't bust no balls, he did what they all did and he kept the streets clean, ain't saying they don't got a right to live here or nothin, but he kept them clean, out of the streets, off the streets, out off the streets where you got families walkin to, to church and to school and doin what they have to do and they don't need to see that, now they got to see that wherever they go and back in the day it wasn't like that at all, maybe we've always had the fruits and the kooks in San Francisco but it's all gone to hell in a hurry these days, these days ain't nothin like my father's time, the beats I walk ain't like the beats he walked, no sir, things've changed. Don't make any money doin this. I mean for what you go through. Ain't nothin. Not the respect, specially now from the minorities and the blacks and them. You put your life on line for civil servant pay same as what some of them make sittin in city hall in clerk jobs, nowhere near what they get in those downtown skyscrapers they keep puttin up, you know it ain't right, there's dirty money, I mean the narcotics, the narcotics money, but my father wasn't never into that, never touched it, he only took what could be spared, they had it there they had it to spare, they ain't got kids and families anyway. Good for a hundred bucks a night. I got the shoulders I got cuz of the steaks it paid for. Tuning him out, I'm thinking – I've met someone: last Friday, after work, down at Jo's house South of the Slot. Sally. Green eyes auburn hair, freckles across her nose and cheeks and faded on her forehead. She's new in town, four months ago she packed up from Michigan, she tells me *You see, I haven't had any time because of the move and work to even see the silly things, let alone really explore: I have to admit I've barely ventured out of my own neighborhood.* Her fancy legal-eagle business card, embossed, gold. Sally. I look at her: I know from her face she's going to say yes: she gives me a card. I say *Let me show you**

around? Listen I know these neighborhoods, I grew up here and now I walk them for work. I'm introduced to a woman, Jo tells me as she hands me a stuffed mushroom that she's new here, name's Sally, shy and a lawyer and doesn't know anyone: hasn't even admitted in so many words she's gay. Right now: beat work along Webster Street, Fillmore, partner going on and on and on, and I can't listen, not to him, not to him who doesn't notice me doesn't know anything about me, but today I'm not. All these cars got immunity, never get no tickets. Because they deliver the votes, them and their people deliver em like that. Like them social security checks. They come in the mail, every month they come in the mail, you get em, never fail, you know any geezers? Nothin so reliable like a social security check, yes sir. You see all these cars there, Jim Jones' people, they're like that social security, cept the mayor and the DA and all them gettin the social security, so they look out for the social security, you get it? Don't touch the car. They do their own policin. That's the car of a Jones man. That car gets no tickets. Unwritten. Naw they're not on the pad, this is higher up stuff, this is immunity. Beat takes us up Geary, him still jawing.

* * *

One of the things I learn as a rookie is the paperwork. Holy hell. Here's what I hear: weapons discharge reports are the worst. Filing one and the associated forms: you're looking at a whole shift. I examine my gun: hold it in one hand then the other: because a bullet is forever, a shot is irrevocable, a gun has the power to rip time, break the thread and I have this thing, I have this power, having it holstered to me changes everything. My mother cries, she doesn't understand it, she doesn't understand me but she loves me, she loves me and she's afraid. I tell her *Mom I'll be all right I can take care of myself I've wanted to do this always, you know that* and she says *Oh Annie goodness, why a cop? You could be a steno or, or an attorney, goodness, a lawyer if you wanted to work in the law and have a job and*

not get married, but why a cop? what sent you to your father's early grave, I'm convinced of it. You were the apple of your father's eye, the apple, and he wouldn't like this, maybe your brothers but you? Your father is rolling over in his grave, God bless him, think of your father, think of your father who isn't here to stop you. Maybe your brothers, maybe Tom maybe William but you? But me. I'm just like my classmates in the parish: Joe and Joseph and Keenan and Patrick and Aiden and all of them who joined the force out of school. They're moving in, says the woman in the kerchief to her husband, I hear her on my way out to Academy classes. She's talking about the groups of men taking apartments on either side of the house. The groups of men from all over America, from every single corner of America who all have one thing in common. Right next door, now. We can't stay in this neighborhood. The invaders' ground zero at Castro and Market. Irish families dropping their Victorians for nothing, fearing the Haight-Ashbury scenario only worse. It wasn't the Castro then, but Most Holy Redeemer Parish. The neighborhood that's produced the highest percentage of the city's Irish American police officer cadets for years. Like me. My mother never gets up from the couch, from her bed, except to switch from one to the other. I cut her hair, I tell her, Ma, you do this, you can do this, you can go down the four blocks to the beauty shop, but I know she won't. Pieces of hair all over the table, the floor, stuck to her cheeks, her forehead, her eyelids, no move to get it off. She sits and blinks at me with her own hairs in her eyelashes like she can't get up the strength to brush them out. Hair like dirt on a child without the presence of mind to clean himself off coming in for dinner. No crying: eyes all red and dried out, but she must be doing it alone, by herself. Like me. No crying at the funeral, no crying at the hospital, no crying when my mother first told me about my father, just in my bedroom, at night.

* * *

The way he treats the gun, I think of church, of the priest holding the aspersorium

and the aspergillum. My father pays attention: he moves cleanly, like water, no jerks, no hesitation. Watching himself, thinking through each movement. I want to move like that. Takes time with the gun. Takes time with me. The lessons float around my head, make me stiff and nervous and tentative, overwhelmed with his voice – soft and sure and expert. So much to remember. Shooting glasses and earmuffs. Check ammunition type. Is it clean? Make sure it's unloaded before you do anything else. Hold it down and away. Know your surroundings. Who is present? Who's around you? The gun never leaves your hand or your sight. Make sure you've identified the target. What's beyond the target? What's behind it? Control your breathing. End of the exhale. Feel that respect you have for the gun now? Don't ever lose that respect. That respect is what keeps you safe, what keeps everyone around you safe, what keeps us all safe. Don't lose that respect. Don't jerk the trigger, don't harass it, don't twitch it. Squeeze it, feel for its break. Center mass. Sight picture. Sight alignment. Feet shoulder width apart. High grip. Keep your finger off the trigger. All guns are loaded, they are always loaded. You sure you want to do this Annie? You seem pretty sure. You are something. I love you. I keep thinking: When I pick up that gun, when I shoot, will I be like my father? Will I be like that woman? Will I seem taller, will have what they have? *Why do police officers wear uniforms?* I ask. *So people can identify them, so people know who the good guys are.* I want to know, *Do you like the uniform?* *Sure. I like how I feel when I put it on. I like how it makes me stand up straighter. Taller. That's responsibility. That's what responsibility does for you, when you get to be a certain age. You're still young, you're still growing, but when you stop growing a job like does wonders for holding you up.* Ushers me through the police station: maze of corridors, covered-over windows, exposed vents, old furniture, typewriters leaking ink. Steering me through the sweaty uniformed thicklimbed men and women, and I can tell he's proud. "My daughter." We go to the shooting range one day, the

indoor range deep in the bowels of one of the stations, men walking by silently with nods thrown at my father like low balls from a stiff pitcher, and one woman with hair pulled back from her face, neck tight, single black sweatband around one wrist, who looks at me for a second, and I can hardly look back. I'm just thirteen years old, and chomping at the bit. Catholic school, black skirt, black stockings, black Mary Janes, white shirt, grey vest, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, and I get home and I tear off the skirt and the stockings and I tear off the vest but I leave the shirt on untucked and I put on my middle brother's slacks and I put on the tennis shoes I stole out of the boy's locker room and my mother yells at me *Annie what are we going to do with you? Annie, you make things difficult for yourself, you do dear, you do. Try to make some friends with the girls on the block, or the boys for that matter, but your own age, there's plenty of 'em, too, I saw Shannon and Ginger and Polly selling lemonade on the corner today, give it a try, huh? Stop bothering your brothers, who are older than you and busier, because they come to me and I don't wear to it. Worried enough about your father. It's natural for boys to play cops and robbers but the reality's another thing. His heart. There's those that think cops are adventurers and they're mostly children, and there's those who know it's a job like any other job except worse. Cabbage again. We eat too much cabbage. I pull the leaves apart with my fork: yellow-green tissue paper soaked to ripping. First you have to eat your vegetables. Brothers have more corned beef than me: far as I can see "growing boy" means "gets away with everything."* I make my demand: I get the same as they do, portion-wise. My dad putting his Colt into the locked drawer next to the bed, sees me and stops, knows I like to hold it, makes sure it's not loaded, *Here. Now you remember the rule, right Annie? I remember Dad, the gun is always loaded even when it's not, it is always loaded so you never point it at anyone unless you plan to kill him. That's right, that is a gun, that is the most serious thing you can hold in your hands, and you can*

never make a mistake with a gun. Dad, have you ever shot someone? No, Annie, I have never shot someone, and when we go to church and we pray? Every time I pray that I never have to shoot someone, Annie, every time. Brothers putting model airplane together, so careful with the glue, but it's glue, stupid boys.

Boardinghouse across the street's water heater busted again, old lady is out on the sidewalk in her bathrobe and slippers and her hair all frowsy yelling and waving her arms, then grabbing back at her robe so she doesn't lose it. Mr. Olive two doors down sitting in his lawn chair across the brick wall, legs apart elbows on thighs, passing the time, whistling: "Tuxedo Junction," my father tells me when I ask. Mr. Shu got broken into last year, I remember him standing out in front of his bakery, so small, the broken glass so big: spiderweb of fractures and cracks, him a bug in the center. Then he started picking up pieces, bent over, even smaller, piece after piece after piece in his gloves. Asked my father: not in his precinct: doesn't think they ever caught the man who did it. I cut all my hair off because I want that scrubbrush bristly horse comb hair of a police officer, cut close to the scalp: hair that if you push on it it won't give. We live piled in a house with two other families, one above one below, and Mom cooking for the Hibernian City of San Francisco meeting while Dad comes home in his uniform with his hat all cockeyed and pulls on my ear with his free hand. We are happy most of the time and we love our city. Baghdad by the Bay. Holding my baby doll under one arm and making a gun with my thumb and index finger: Blammo! *I want to be a cop* I say to Sister O'Malley *like my father.*

Riding up and down elevators with Anya. Most of them were small, pinched, with circular windows on the doors just big enough for us to see the floors go by. We stepped into cubes of grey metal and rose into the air, while I looked at my scruffy face reflected on the walls. The vertical movement made my stomach or my head uneasy when I was drunk. The elevators had round silver buttons that either lit up or didn't light up. The ones in the big municipal building at 1 Centre Street turned bright red at the slightest pressure. The ones in shabby eleven-story structures in Washington Heights had to be punched twice. The elevators screeched, moaned, made scraping sounds, then beeped as the doors opened. In the George Washington on Lexington and Twenty-Third where I lived for two years while in art school the elevators would lurch, fall a sickening inch, then catch themselves and continue up, workhorses of verticality. Mostly we were visiting Anya's friends with fire escapes and roof access, looking for new perspectives on the city. She would take me in elevators in TriBeCa, the Lower East Side, Astoria, elevators that had cryptic messages or web addresses scratched onto their walls and the faintest smell of cigarettes.

We rode down an elevator in a Hell's Kitchen apartment building. A man joined us with a small brown dog in his thick arms. "Is it a puppy?" Anya asked. "No," said the man. "She's eleven years old. She's a mixed breed—that's why the large ears and feet." "Aww," said Anya as the man stepped out. "Weren't they a pair?"

We went to the park and let pugs and Boston terriers jump into our laps, wheezing and snorting. In late June, Anya wound bedsheets around my body and my head, adorned me with long strings of Mardi Gras beads, and trimmed me with fringe cut from her old roommate's old curtains, then set me behind a folding table

near the dog run. She made up a big sign that said "Dog Psychic: Help Your Best Friend Discover His Destiny." Underneath she wrote "\$2 Per Reading. Thank You Very Much." I sat alongside the table in my flowing garments, and reached gingerly for the paws of the beasts that were led up to me. Anya was my cheerleader. She brought the hipsters with their too-small or too-big mutts to my feet, and fed me lines to pronounce in my deep psychic's voice: "In the near future you shall trip over your own ears." As she pocketed half the money she said she felt like she was back in college. I had never done anything like this ever.

The summer was both long and short at the same time. The weeks ticked by like seconds on a clock, but long Saturdays and lazy Sundays stretched out for us, Anya with her camera and I with my surprising willingness to climb through windows onto fire escapes, walk dozens of blocks in neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens looking for photogenic buildings. I'd known Anya from before that summer; I knew her from various dinners, nights out, social events with our mutual best friend Ari during our years in school, but now there was no intermediary, now there was time, and now we could watch Woody Allen movies on my computer at night, me wondering about her body next to me on the couch, warming visibly to the actions of the characters onscreen and the settings which reflected our own lives with the added romance of a frame.

I hooked up with a few guys: a short blond whose mouth I had to cover with my hand to get him to stop talking politics, an Indian guy from Virginia who sold dentistry equipment online, and an NYU kid who I kicked out of bed when he said he was a Communist. "One of my roommates has family who were disappeared in the USSR in the sixties," I said. "You don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

I usually had sex with guys when I was drinking. It was easier than with girls, and when I tried to get myself interested in girls, I found myself thinking of Anya. The girls were inevitably not as interesting, or funny, or warm as Anya. The guys weren't either, but it was easier to forget to make the comparison.

The night she moved into our place, Anya, full of energy and not the least bit tired from carrying her bags up the stairs, coerced us into a photo shoot. She unpacked and discovered that she'd wasted precious cargo space bringing paper plates. "These are from the two months I spent in Vermont, living in an unheated cabin with Rain," she told us. "Let's use them." It was eighty-nine degrees out. "Put them on," she decided.

She set up a bright light and a white screen while Ari and I undressed and taped the paper plates over our crotches and behinds. I was willing and drunk. "They're too boring," she complained. "They need illustrations." Ari drew a poodle on his, explaining that the only things he knew how to draw well were poodles.

"Let me see that," Anya said. She wrote underneath his picture the words LOVE, ARTHUR, IS A POODLE'S CHANCE OF ATTAINING THE INFINITE, AND PERSONALLY, I HAVE MY PRIDE. "Celine," she explained. "*Journey to the End of the Night*." She looked through the viewfinder. "Ari, pull that chair over to the window. I want you to stand on it and peer through the blinds. The poodle plate goes on your ass. Michael, grab a pen. You're going to be writing the words."

We posed. My pen hovered over Ari's left buttcheek. She fiddled with the light, snapped picture after picture, directing us, muttering. Ari kept checking to make sure he wasn't exposing himself. I wondered at how I could sit there, without

my clothes on, and feel so at ease, like I was collaborating on something with a higher purpose, creating Art, even.

“The expression on your face, Michael, is – I wish you could see it,” Anya told me. “You look like you’re writing something of the *utmost* seriousness.”

When she showed us the photographs three weeks later, I saw that my body was mostly out of the frame, but my face was lit up, and I did look like I was doing something I could not articulate in any other way. I’d never seen myself with an expression like that. Anya had brought something foreign to me, or showed me something foreign in myself. I told her I wanted a print to hang on my wall so that I could look at it whenever I wanted to.

Just after she moved in at the beginning of June, she asked me about my willingness to sleep with either sex. She wanted to know what my "split" was. "Are you fifty-fifty? Sixty-forty? Have you ever had a boyfriend? Do your parents know?" Once I had answered her, wanting to make her feel more comfortable, she confided to me that the only male bisexuals she knew were intense guys with eyes that bugged out of their heads. She even called it the "bi-guy stare." I told her that I knew a few of those myself.

At one point I touched the inside of her wrist, to reassure her that I wasn't offended by her ignorance of Other Sexualities, and her skin quivered the tiniest bit, like a rabbit's. We were drinking bourbon that my mother had sent because she "was thinking of me." There was a moment in which Anya sat still, looking at me, and I did not move. Then it disappeared and she slid away, slightly, an inch or two.

Swirling my drink in its glass, I stood in the doorway and watched Anya spray the back of a large black and white photograph with glue. "Careful," she said. "It's toxic. Don't breathe."

"What is that a picture of?" I said. "Let me see."

She turned it towards me. It showed a cantaloupe in extreme close-up, a slit in its side, with a delicate web of seeds oozing out like a bloom of blood vessels. Then she mounted it on a piece of black paper.

"Want to play a hand of gin rummy?" I asked.

"No thanks," Anya said. "I have to do five more of these. And I'm tired."

"Just one hand?" I said. "You'll massacre me anyway. You'll crush me. You'll fool me with your unreadable face."

She held up another photograph, this one with the seeds peering out from the bowels of the fruit like curious unborn children. "Are you drunk?"

I shook my head and swallowed. "Nope. The bourbon still burns a bit." I stepped over towards her just as she squeezed the nozzle of the spray-glue can. "Ooooh, that's cold," I said as the mist hit my bare legs.

Anya frowned. "Why don't you stand back," she said.

"I'm going out with everybody from the agency tomorrow night to celebrate landing the new electronics account," I told her. "Rocco is paying for an open bar till eleven, and I'm sure we'll go somewhere afterwards. Why don't you come?"

Anya asked what the account was.

"It's an entertainment console that runs DVDs and CDs and video games from different systems all on one system. It's a labor-saving device."

Anya squared the corners of the photographs on the black paper, running over the edge with her long white fingers. "What labor is being saved? The labor of sitting on your ass?"

"It's a big account," I said. "Lots of magazine space, huge ad buy. Will you come tomorrow night?"

"I don't think so," Anya said. "The show is Friday. Tomorrow I'll stay in and read."

She continued to look at the photograph. I stepped out of the room and into mine, but left the door open and stared at her in my mirror, pretending to be thinking something.

"Looks like Michael Bolling is not going to spend the night alone," Teddy called out as we made our way down the street. I looked over and saw that I was holding someone's hand. It was a girl. She was short and had brown hair.

Everyone was in a group behind us. It was humid and the city felt like a giant locker room. The girl holding my hand said something I didn't catch.

We stepped into Ziggy's. Everybody else from work sat at a large table. Teddy was leering at me. The girl and I sat down at a different table. I had no idea who she was. I had no recollection of speaking to her, or of ever seeing her before.

I was starving. It must have been about four o'clock in the morning.

"So it's like their genitalia and their brains are not lined up, they're out of alignment," the girl was saying.

I blinked. Then I smiled. "That's funny."

"No, it's not. It's sad," she told me.

I wondered if we were talking about some kind of animal.

"It's like what you were saying before about your mother," she said.

Time to change the subject. I didn't want to ask the girl's name because I was pretty sure I was already supposed to know what it was. "So what do you do?"

"I work in production," she said. "I studied Graphic Design in school. I like what I'm doing, mostly, but sometimes the mechanicals get boring. I don't know."

The waitress was walking away. I took a long drink of water.

"Where do you work?" I said.

"J. Martins Hooberman." She was looking toward the door.

I took another long drink. The water tasted delicious. Everyone from work was looking at us and sniggering, so I flapped my hand at them. "And what do you do there?" I asked the girl.

"I... work in production," she said.

"Oh yeah." I had the hiccups. I drank more water, feeling it press on the inside of my stomach. The girl frowned at me. I set down the glass and saw that both were empty.

"Your burger is in your lap," the girl said. I looked down. The cheese was drippy and white on my pants.

"Aw, man," I said.

"I have to go," she said.

I picked at the cheese. The waitress was walking away again. My co-workers were standing up. "Michael, ladies' man *par excellence*, as always," Teddy said.

I tried to say something back, but hiccupped. Teddy was sarcastic all the time. Even in bed. I followed everyone out onto the sidewalk, where the buildings looked as if they were leaning over the street. New York was dark and sprinkled with knots of people who stumbled towards home. I wanted very badly to lie down.

I held a photograph in my hands. It was a Christmas tree standing in a tiny windowless room, the walls covered with bookshelves, the books old and cracked, with pages that had been unevenly cut by the printer. The Christmas tree was spattered with glass ornaments, and beneath it were an umbrella, a small bicycle, and a newspaper in Russian with a bow tied around it.

I was standing in Anya's room, which was the apartment's common room but had been converted to a bedroom when she moved in, at the end of May, almost three months ago. Her air mattress took up most of the floor. Her portfolio sat upright in the armchair, and her suitcase lay open and overflowing on the couch. Two piles of books had been building steadily on either side of the door between her room and mine, like pillars marking the entrance to a temple. Half the books were in Russian, the other half in English.

Anya's room had no windows, and the doors on either end were always open, but when I'd come home that day, the one connecting hers to mine had been pulled shut. I'd called her name, then pushed it and stepped through into her space, feeling the little tingle of nerves I always got when I was among her things. Ari had told me not to fixate. He'd said "You need to stop asking me what she likes, what you should say to her, what she's said about you to me. I don't want to be involved." I asked him why he wasn't there for me. "She's my close friend too, you know. I have to be there for both of you. Pick someone else." Ari was gay and Anya would sometimes get in bed with him and talk to him in a soft voice.

"What are you doing?" Anya's voice was behind me. I turned around. Her mouth was tight and her hair was pulled back forcefully away from her face. She had on a faded navy blue hoodie that was covered in light pink bleach stains.

"I was just looking at this," I said. "And trying to think of why you chose those three things under the tree."

"I didn't choose them," Anya said. "They were there. I just took the picture." She circled around me and sat down on her bed, kicking her shoes off so they went flying across the room.

"Oh, okay," I said. I stepped closer to her. "I was thinking that they were supposed to represent a simple life, lived without amenities like cars or computers."

"Sure," she said. "I like simplicity. That's fine with me."

"What did you do all day?" I asked, and then said "I missed you last night—" just as she began to speak.

She stopped talking and raised her eyebrows at the ground. I hovered and waited for some kind of softening. I knew it was not going to come.

"Remember when we slept up on the roof?" I said. "And how hot it was in the morning, at six-thirty, because the sun was shining down on us so brightly?"

She nodded, but didn't say anything.

"When is the show?" I asked. "...It's all right if I come, isn't it?"

She hesitated before she said "Sure." The hesitation hung in the air so that we both knew she didn't want me there.

I went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator, then closed it. My mother had called that day and asked me to help her move. The divorce was going to happen. I'd only met the guy five times, since I didn't go back home much. The marriage had lasted two years.

I was working with my partner on the SpiritWater account. SpiritWater was colored high fructose corn syrup being marketed as a health drink. We weren't supposed to say just what made it healthy, because that would be a lie. We were simply supposed to create a general aura of healthiness in our advertising. We'd settled on the tagline "Water... Plus More."

"You shouldn't keep drinking it," my partner said to me. "We need some for the photographer."

"My head hurts," I replied.

I spent most of the afternoon furtively posting on craigslist in the "men seeking men" section. I liked to try for completely different types: one day I'd ask for guys with southern accents, another for closeted college students, and often for redheads. That day my ad read:

23 Year Old Jew for Bear Downtown

23 year old bisexual Jewish guy, six feet one hundred fifty pounds, wiry build and wiry-haired, looking for NSA hookup with hairy, beefy dude, tattoo on the bicep a plus. Pics move this along faster. Can host or travel.

I sorted through the various misspelled replies and by six o'clock had settled on a lawyer who told me to come to his office in the Empire State Building. He said he was the only one there. His picture was too small but he looked decent enough in it—olive skin and a benevolent half-smile on his face.

When I called him on my way there I discovered to my chagrin that he had a thick Long Island accent, and he kept repeating "you're so sexy" until I hung up on him. I stopped in a suit and tie bar and took two shots one after the other before I reached the Empire State Building. I wandered around trying to find the non-tourist elevators. Finally I was steered through a metal detector and I rode up to the fifty-fifth floor.

I knocked on the office door. I could hear a vacuum going inside. The door opened and an overweight guy with an upper lip that was too short in the middle to reach his bottom lip appeared. "Hey, man," he said. "Come on in." The photo was either five years old or faked, not hinting at his shiny skin or the ripe smell under his aftershave. I stared at the cleaning lady behind him. "Oh, she'll be out of here in a minute," he said. He was sucking on something.

He led me into another room, a conference room with a table and chairs and a view down towards the East Village. He said something to me, which I didn't pay any attention to, and then leaned in and went for my face. His two front teeth clinked against mine. He grunted, while the vacuum outside whirred and whistled, and the candy he had been sucking on made its way into my mouth. It tasted delicious. He started pulling off my clothes, and I tried to focus on something that might actually turn me on. When I'm with a man I think of men: I guess it's a failure of imagination.

We started standing up and then moved into a chair and then, when that proved uncomfortable, onto the floor. He kept saying "What do you want to do?" About five minutes in I said, "Okay, let's wrap this up," and he brought me off with a meaty hand.

He tried to tell me that he'd gone to Princeton, even though he thought it was in New Hampshire. I nodded and grabbed a handful of candies from a dish on the front desk. He'd used a towel to wipe up our come, and then hung it back on a rack in the office closet. I told him I could find my way out, and bumped into the old, half-dazed cleaning lady in the hall, who took hold of my arm to steady herself with the gentlest, frailest touch.

I met Ari and Anya at 71 Irving Place for coffee. Ari had his hood pulled over his head and was reading a paperback while Anya stirred her tea with intense concentration. Ari was tall and skinny and had the dark brown beard of a graduate student in the humanities. He started to complain about his job in publishing almost before I had sat down.

"There's nothing creative in it," he said. "I'm just pushing shit on people. Books that would make more sense as magazine inserts or commercials for a certain kind of consumerist lifestyle."

Ari was drinking steamed milk. I got up and got a beer. "Careful what you say," I told him when I sat back down. "You're talking about my livelihood as much as your own."

"At least yours is honest about it," he said.

"I'm honest?"

Anya looked up. "I'm moving to New Orleans," she said to the air between Ari and me.

I didn't say anything. Ari took a sip of white froth. "None of us are actually drinking coffee," he observed.

"I have nothing tying me here," Anya continued. "New Orleans is the most beautiful city in the country. And there are volunteer organizations that set you up. They'd give me a place to live and feed me. I wouldn't be going through money like I am now."

She was still talking to empty air. I downed my drink and felt it in my belly. "That's cool," I said. "I—I think it'll be an amazing experience for you. I can already see you there." I could, too. I could see her taking pictures of little piles of debris, lit from behind so that they seemed to glow and rear up like accusations.

"I already bought the plane ticket," she added. "It was cheap. I don't know why. Maybe no one is going there." She took a small sip. "You guys can get your common room back. I'm going to make you take some rent money. Three months is a long time." She was speaking solely to Ari now. "Another good reason to do this: I don't have to keep looking for an overpriced New York City closet to live in."

"I wish I could go," Ari said. "I wish I didn't have a lease and student loan payments like yokes around my neck."

That night I stopped into a gay bar in Alphabet City and drank some Heinekens. I thought about subway trains I'd ridden with Anya. There was the R train, which in Brooklyn was filled with small, silent Chinese men and tired Mexican women; there was the F, with its carloads of twentysomething Jewish nonprofit employees from the Lower East Side and Park Slope, reading novels by other twentysomething Jewish residents of the same neighborhoods. When the F rose above ground after the Carroll Street stop, and swung to the left over the Gowanus Canal, with the unpretty but in the summer glowing buildings of Red Hook in front of the train, it felt like a celebration of our New York. On the 1, heading uptown, Anya would often see someone she'd gone to Columbia with, and on the C, we would be surrounded by teenagers, playing video games and smirking at each other. Once Anya had seen an ex-boyfriend of hers sitting on a train running alongside our train, and I realized he was talking to a girl I'd gone on a date with my freshman year of college. They pulled up alongside us, then paralleled us for a minute, then started to fall behind, and they spoke to each other and gestured, unaware of us, as if acting out a story on a television screen that needed its antennae adjusted. They disappeared behind us, sliding away, wiped off the windows of our train, and Anya kept looking back.

I leaned over the bar and got very drunk on beer. At one point I looked up and realized that a previous hookup of mine, an art director from another agency, was sitting next to me. He blinked a lot and looked confused; I remembered he'd blinked a lot and looked confused the night I'd gone back to his place, too. He'd also called me ten times over ten days after that, a call a day, as if any more would make him seem crazy. By number nine, he was telling me that he was crazy about me. "I don't know how it happened. Really, I'm crazy about you," he said. Now he was telling me something new. I kept looking up and seeing him, still there,

talking in a very soft, angry voice. "You hurt me badly," he said. "I felt like there was a little animal with long claws running all over the inside of my stomach."

I remembered him in bed. He had a large black star with a red outline tattooed on his chest over his heart. The hair on his chest was dark brown, but against the black ink of the tattoo it looked grey, or white. I had been drunk then and I'd kept looking at the star as if to orient myself in the middle of a vast stormy lurching sea, the waves tall as buildings, skyscrapers even.

GARDEN VIEW

When my 9:30 arrives, I show him the basement apartment and tell him that the lights will be fixed in the next few days. The place is a conversion, industrial to residential, and he grunts his approval of the bathtub big enough for three men, the gas station restroom-style toilet, the trough sink with a drain at one end. He pushes open the back door with his shoulder and looks out into the alleyway. The winter light on his face whitens his cheeks and inks in his beard. His name is Tag.

“How much?” he asks.

I tell him.

He checks the lock to make sure it holds. “It reminds me,” he says, “of a cargo hold with all the cargo gone.”

I think of how I described it in my ad. I said it was like no place in New York. “Does that mean you don’t want it?”

He turns his head to face me, keeping his shoulders squared, as if he is holding back a dangerous amount of horsepower inside his body. He’s shorter than I am, and smaller, but when he looks into my eyes I have to look away. “No. I’ll take it.”

“Do you want to go back to the office and start the paperwork now, sir?”

He laughs: “What did you just call me?” I blush. He runs his thumb over his lips, which are bright red, and I stare down at the fist-sized set of keys dangling from my left hand.

* * *

Lev arrives from New Orleans for the week before Christmas. When he shrugs off his coat I see he’s wearing a tie-dyed t-shirt with a pi symbol and the word IRRATIONAL on it. “I smell, Buck. I need to take a shower.”

When he gets out, I can see beads of water suspended in his crew cut. He shakes his head and a few of them mist against my cheek. “The butt wore out of my last good pair of jeans, did I tell you that? I’m down to cords.”

“Where are you living now?” I ask.

“I have a place by the French Quarter. Me, two Bard dropouts, and nine brass instruments. Come visit – misery loves company. Your apartment smells good.” Lev is using my scissors to cut extra-long hairs out of his beard.

“I quit smoking.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Was it excruciating?”

“I was on the gum, but it was no good. I’d soften up two pieces at a time between my teeth, then press the wad to the inside of my cheek with my tongue, mainlining the nicotine. So now I’m on this medication that disables the nicotine receptors in your brain. It doesn’t give you satisfaction – it deprives you of the ability to be satisfied.”

“And it works? When’s the last time you had a cigarette?”

“Forever.”

“Let’s go out tonight.”

“You want to go to the bear bars.” Lev is a big guy.

“Yes please.”

On the way to the train I am almost run over by a black Mercedes speeding to make the light. Lev puts his hands underneath my arms and hoists me onto the curb, away from danger, while pedestrians with stony faces adjust their trajectories to avoid us.

Lev used to wrap his arms around me in a similar way, lying with me on a twin mattress in a dormitory room in college. We were two NYU freshmen just

arrived from the South. He was wide-eyed, hopeful, almost swollen with possibility, as if his excitement were mounded into muscle under his skin, but I looked pale, shrunken, numb, like what the city does to widows who've lived alone in studios south of Delancey for thirty years. My twin brother was lying unconscious in the hospital. Doored by a taxicab, he went over his bike and over the door and broke his head open against the curb: eighteen years old, just four weeks in the city. All the energy and sense of possibility inside Lev made him feel protective of me, and he told me he loved me, and we lay on that mattress together for a year, Lev moving against me, me not moving. My brother died without ever waking up. Lev realized that my impotence was more than grief, was something broken in me. "You're like ice," he said finally.

The black Mercedes has disappeared down Eighth Avenue, and Lev lets me go. Wind blows down the street and the avenue in all directions at once and swirls my scarf tighter around my neck. We're walking again, Lev steering me with his shoulder, like old times. I passed my classes that first year of college because he laid a forearm thick as a football across my back and pushed me toward my exams, and I didn't have the spirit to resist. "So I was listening to *This American Life*," Lev is saying, "and it was a war vet from Iraq and he's talking about how over there the American soldiers tase each other for fun."

We pass a bakery, sugar cookies winking at us under the Christmas lights. I see what look like Loch Ness Monsters made of mounds of frosting atop cupcakes. The monsters are different pastel shades: blue, pink, green, yellow, like polo shirts. Lev points into the bakery window. "Let's get one."

The place is closing for the night, and the woman behind the counter gives us a cupcake monster for free. It is pink with white eyes and an open mouth. The inside of its mouth is blue. "We can't eat it," Lev says. "That would be like clubbing a baby seal."

“It’s all frosting,” I say. “What should we do with it then?”

“Set it free in the Hudson.”

It’s leather night at the bear bar, and there’s a cover. Lev rolls his eyes and is about to turn around, but the doorman puts up his hand. “Wait. Go ahead,” he tells us, grimacing and cracking his knuckles as if we had better not refuse his generosity. We walk through the door and past the coat cage. The bar is packed with men in harnesses, dog collars, and suspenders. The bartender is not wearing any leather, but his jeans are unbuttoned.

“Six dollars for beer,” Lev sighs. “Bullshit. This is why I hate New York.” He drinks half the beer in one swig. “I don’t like the guys here.”

Just then I see Tag and he sees me. He has on a leather jacket that he unzips as he approaches. “Look at you,” he says. “Man, it was cold walking over here, so close to the water.”

Lev watches us. I should introduce them. I have a drink, gulping until the beer is gone.

“I’m glad the apartment worked out so well,” Tag says, “for us both.”

I agree.

Lev is still looking at us, even as he wanders off. Tag buys me another drink – a whiskey – and tells me about being a sailor.

“They crammed us into these cabins that were coffins. Bunks so tight that when you breathed in, your chest scraped the bed above you. One ship, they didn’t have enough room in the hold for all the cargo we were moving. They stuck some of the crates right in the sleeping quarters with us. Didn’t even know what we were carrying that leg – crates were just marked ‘GOODS.’ Big black word stamped on the side. One night a crate slid over and almost crushed me against the wall.”

An hour later, I have finished another whiskey, throwing it at the back of my throat, and Tag is twisting my nipple beneath my shirt. His fingers are strong

and unhesitant. “I like you out of real estate mode, Buck,” he says. “You’re sensitive. Am I hurting you?”

He nods when I answer. “I want you to come over sometime,” he says.

Lev returns looking tired, unimpressed with Tag’s possessive arm. “I think I’m about done.”

“This is my friend Lev. He’s staying with me,” I say. “Lev, this is Tag.”

Tag takes his hand away from me to offer it up. Lev shakes it. “You’re it,” he says. Tag grins, but I suspect he’s heard that one before.

“Don’t forget,” he says to me.

On the walk back toward the train, Lev is thoughtful. “So who,” he asks, drawing out the question as we tramp along, tucking our necks into our coats, “is that?”

“He’s somebody I rented an apartment to.”

“He’s more than that.”

“He’s an importer-exporter.”

“No, really.”

“He used to be a sailor, but now he handles shipments coming into the city.”

Santa Claus weaves across the street and stumbles toward us. He is singing the Alvin and the Chipmunks Christmas song as best he can despite his deep voice. Lev and I part as he walks through us, then we reunite. Snow is falling and the wind blows the tears out of my ducts like a massage therapist kneading pain out of muscles.

Lev starts sticking his hand out as a cab goes by, and I smack it down with my arm so hard that he strikes his hip. “I’m not getting fucking in a cab,” I spit. “Fucking getting. Whatever.” The cab passenger who opened the door into my brother walked away while my brother bled into the gutter from both ears.

Lev apologizes. The subway comes quickly despite the late hour and I feel better once we are speeding uptown. I put my head on Lev's chest. "I'm sorry you didn't have a good time tonight."

"It wasn't a terrible time," Lev says. "I found out you have a leather daddy."

* * *

A man named Freddy responds to an ad for a studio on West Twenty-First. I used Tree #13 for the ad; I have twenty-two pictures of trees on my computer that I use in my online ads. They're all trees in front of buildings on Riverside Drive. They are good trees, and people respond to them – much more than if I were to use pictures of the insides of the tiny apartments I'm actually trying to rent.

Freddy comes to my office to see the place. He's about forty-five, a foot shorter than me and has a little bald head like a turnip. "I'm a computer technician," he tells me, "and I'm just so sick of Shirley, Long Island, that I'm determined to get a place in the city - " he searches for a suitable euphemism - "where the action is."

We head over to the building, Freddy bouncing alongside of me like a dog. The apartments my company rents here go only to the especially desperate. Freddy exclaims all the way to the place about how close it is to the Eighth Avenue bars. When I open the apartment door, I watch for his reaction.

There is a collection of fixtures stacked atop one another – a cupboard, a sink, a microwave, a shelf – with a two-top stove on the left and a refrigerator on the right. Above it all is a lofted bed, the mattress thin as a paperback. A door on one side opens to a bathroom: a miracle of efficiency. It is entirely a shower – a curtain can be pulled across the door – and the toilet is right in the middle, the shower drain next to it on the floor. There's no bathroom sink. The kitchen sink does double duty.

Freddy doesn't say anything for a few minutes, even though two seconds is all we need to take in the place. Then he sets his jaw with determination.

"Okay," he says. "It's got everything I need."

Back at the office, he signs the documents and talks about how important it is to be right in Manhattan. "You're not getting any younger," he tells himself. I wonder how he's going to have sex with anyone in that lofted bed. There isn't room for him to put his legs over his head.

Freddy's credit is terrible, but I try to approve him anyway. If the landlord doesn't pay attention I might be able to get away with it. I imagine Freddy's life in Shirley, Long Island: he is alone, no one loves him. But when I imagine his life here, it's the same. Only here he goes crazy, begins flailing his limbs against the walls of his apartment. He suffocates. He becomes a doddering old man, talks to anyone unlucky enough to get into the elevator with him.

* * *

I meet Tag for dinner at a Chinese restaurant. He steals my fortune cookie and crushes it in his hand. Pieces fall from his fingers into the remains of his noodles. "You are going to learn something new about yourself," he reads. He fixes me with his eyes. "I mean that. We're going to make sure that comes true." He produces a pack of cigarettes, and packs the pack by slamming it with one hand into the palm of the other.

"Does being a real estate agent give you fulfillment?" he asks.

"No."

He looks at me, expectant. I must elaborate.

"I wasn't raised with the idea that work is what gives you fulfillment," I say. "Work didn't have anything to do with fulfillment in my family."

"I want to have a cigarette."

We go outside. I tell him about the smokers' rights group I joined to see if

he's interested in attending a meeting with me.

"But you don't smoke."

"Yeah," I say. "I quit." I watch the red end of the cigarette as it swoops from Tag's side to his mouth and back.

"Well, then, what do you care?"

"Cigarettes have other uses." Tag looks at me. He smiles a half-smile. The cigarette is between his knuckles now, almost gone, the fire close to his skin.

* * *

His last night in New York, Lev and I sit at a bar so deserted the bartender himself must be summoned from the basement. Lev drinks Bud Light draft and hums Christmas carols while I take a phone call from a woman who insists that there are thousands of one-bedrooms in the Financial District for less than fifteen hundred a month.

"It's good to see you," Lev tells me between gulps of beer, "with somebody. I mean Tag."

"Yeah."

Lev is looking down at the table now – we both are – at the space between us where we have already lined up three empty glasses each.

"I'm glad we're still friends," he continues. "You're the only guy I've ever been with who's still a friend."

"That's because you forgave me."

He looks at me as if that is not exactly true. "Are you having sex with Tag? Do you still have the same problems?"

There is a loud sound from the basement, where the bartender is stacking boxes.

Lev's face is broad and open as he waits for me to answer. "Sex? Of a sort," I say. I don't know what to do for a minute, then I fumble with my fingers

and take hold of Lev's knee under the table. In college he told me he loved me, as we laid there on his mattress, the same as every night before, and just like every night before, I couldn't get it up. When he told me I was like ice in his bed, when he told me he just couldn't do it anymore, he was angry, and I thought he was going to hit me – his fist big as my head almost – and I said "Go ahead, hit me," and he said, "No." And it was just exactly like that old joke about the masochist and the sadist, and I laughed bitterly.

Now Lev is saying, "How often did you go into New Orleans, when you were growing up?"

"Not a lot. We lived two hours away. We talked about it, mostly, my brother and I, we'd talk about how we were going to play in a band there. Jazz music. Neither of us could hit a note on anything. New Orleans was the place we aspired to get to."

"Not New York."

"No."

The next day I walk Lev to the train, carrying one of his bags for him. As we walk south we pass the bakery with the monster-cupcakes. We detour inside when we see a little sign saying ONLY TEN DAYS LEFT. "The trans fat ban goes into effect for the New Year," the lady behind the counter tells us. "The frosting we use for the little guys is going to be against the law. We've tried replacing the offending ingredients but then the creature collapses in a puddle in temperatures over sixty degrees."

We look at the monsters. Their open mouths seem to be emitting a silent cry.

Lev says good-bye at the subway entrance, and wishes me a Merry Christmas. I think of Tag, and I hug Lev hard and hand him his bag. It's only after he's gone that I realize I want to go with him, head South for the winter, get out of

the city, and my brain fires up like a string of blinking Christmas lights with the sudden desire to return to what I had so many years before. It is bitterly cold, with wind blowing up the legs of my pants and into my open mouth. I'm walking north, away from the office, letting the wind push me from behind. I cross over to Ninth Avenue, passing the last few Christmas trees still unsold on the sidewalks, and the poinsettias outside the florist shops. I can't remember it ever being this cold in Louisiana. I touch my forehead with a gloved finger and think about my Russian Orthodox friend Anya. They celebrate Christmas in January, and when Anya was little she thought the place you got your Christmas tree was on the street for free.

My phone rings: the office. My appointment is there waiting for me. I say that I can't in good conscience rent another apartment on this island. "All right. You're fired," my boss says. "Come in tonight or tomorrow to clear out your desk. Do it before the twenty-fifth."

I pass a pet shop, a Thai restaurant, the Amish market, a bodega, a makeup store. People walk along the sidewalk, in and out of doors, across the street. A taxi flies down the avenue: it could kill someone: it doesn't. I look at the people, and their faces are lit by the Christmas lights strung up over the businesses that line the block, the red and green catching their foreheads and chins and noses.

At West Forty-Ninth, I'm buzzed in. The door to Tag's apartment is cracked, so I push it open. I walk down the hall and then descend the staircase with the iron railing. It's so warm I know the furnace must be somewhere nearby in the darkness. Tag is standing in the basement, smoking a cigarette.

"I'm getting it ready for you," he tells me after a long exhale. He looks at the lit end. I can feel where he put the last one out, inside my left armpit. When I was a kid, I learned that your skin is the largest organ. Right now almost all my skin is covered up against the cold. As I begin to strip down, removing the protective layers, the helmet that my brother wasn't wearing is what I'm peeling off

myself.

“You know,” says Tag, and he kisses me on the corner of my mouth, “I have a house in Montauk, where I usually go for Christmas. Out of the city. On the ocean.”

“I quit my job.” My brother was the fastest swimmer in our high school, the water beading off of him like little pieces of glass. “I want to go sailing around the world.”

“I’m retired,” Tag grunts. “And all this is just for fun, you understand? You’re going to have lots of good sex after me.” He eases me into a kneeling position in front of him, then pauses to think. “But maybe I can set you in my little dinghy, out on Long Island, facing the Atlantic, give you a push.”

And as I open my mouth I am floating by the Outer Banks, rounding the tip of Florida, drifting in among the delta flats of the Mississippi. My home state looks green and treacherous, full of the sounds of blackflies, rain, and jazz. I pull myself from the river like an alligator, and take a few steps onto the shore, where someone is waiting for me. I can just make him out.

MY SIDE OF THE STORY

“And Katie was asking me about the article too,” said Amy, picking at her mashed potatoes. “The one in the *Register*.”

Dan frowned at the meal he had cooked, the chicken and starch and vegetables arranged equally on the plate. “Well, I’m surprised the case has been getting as much press as it has,” he said. “I don’t appreciate it. There’s a lot of sensationalism. A lot of twisting of the facts.” He hadn’t read the article. He no longer had a subscription to the *Register*.

“I didn’t know what she was talking about.” Amy put down her fork. “And Katie can be kind of a moron. But the article said you got questioned about this other thing.”

So that was it. They’d put the kid in the article. That day in court had been bad enough: the defense attorney much worse than the journalists, never letting him explain anything, always cutting him off after each ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ Like his ex-wife, except even more maddening, because on the stand he had to remain calm.

He looked away from his daughter. There was no room in his kitchen for inefficiency. The table in the center of the room stood upon a single trunk-like leg that housed plates and bowls; the four chairs around it pressed against the plastic countertop, the wall, the garbage can, or the refrigerator. He didn’t mind the tight space when he was alone; most of the time three of the chairs were extraneous. But even one visitor was enough to make the walls press in closer.

There had been a great deal of space in the house he’d lived in with his ex-wife, his son Carson, and Amy. The real estate agent emphasized this when she showed it to them: “A family can grow here,” she said, “Children have all the space they need to grow up.” As if kids grew sideways as well as upwards, as if they

became giants.

When Dan had gone to pick Amy up that evening, at the house he used to live in, he'd stayed in the car and honked the horn. It had become a ritual: he never got out of the car. Even rolling down a window meant potential exposure to his ex-wife's carefully worded interrogations. Sometimes the dog trotted over, wagged its tail, and then wandered away; Dan remained motionless. If his ex-wife came outside, he did not look at her. He was sure she spent hours thinking up ways to distort their marital history, their economic situations, slanting everything against him, yet she was buying Amy expensive, urban-looking clothes.

Amy mumbled, "How come..." and stopped.

"You mean Cameron Jones," he said. He looked down at his hands, and saw that they had balled themselves into fists on either side of his plate. "The defense attorney, she brought it up. That was all she questioned me about. Has nothing to do with the case—noth—" He stopped. The second 'nothing' had come out as a grunt. He was frustrated. Having to explain this, when Amy had surely already heard the alternate version, the version designed only to smear him, was so maddening he could hardly talk. "The defense attorney, she's a lawyer. She's not in any position to question me on the forensic evidence. So she has to attack me personally."

"You never talked about it before."

Dan got up and put his plate into the sink. It made a loud noise, and he winced. First the grunt, then this.

"It was a long time ago. You were... what were you, a year old? I wasn't in forensics then. I was putting in my years as a street cop, doing basic police work. I had a beat to walk in New Haven, a dozen blocks or so, a foot patrol."

Amy was pushing her food around on her plate again. She's already against me, he thought, and then, Why doesn't she eat her potatoes? Why won't

she finish her dinner? God knows she's skinny enough.

He continued to explain: he had been on a block in a bad neighborhood. Two shootings in the area in the last month. And he was working without a partner. "A bad call on my supervisor's part –" He sounded too defensive. But he wanted Amy to know how things had really been. He did not tell her that, the morning of the incident, his wife had asked him to call in sick. She wanted his help cleaning the leaves out of the gutters of their new house, their new two-story house with trees planted all along the edges of the property. The gutters had clogged and rain was dripping down the sides of the house. She had asked him, and he had said no. But it was a coincidence. It was irrelevant.

"I was working alone, walking a dozen blocks north of downtown. And I was in the parking lot of a drugstore."

"A drugstore," said Amy, prompting him to go on. He was reminded of the defense attorney.

"Look, nobody ever has all the information. Nobody ever knows exactly how things stand. I was on duty, and I had to make a split-second decision, and I did not have all the necessary information. You understand me?"

Amy was silent. She didn't care about the mitigating factors. She wanted him to confess, to tell the story over again. Was that the only reason she had come tonight? To throw this in his lap? Now she was reminding him of Carson, of Carson's unspoken insolence, his veiled suspicion. "Where's your brother?" he demanded.

"Didn't he tell you?"

"He told me he had to go back to school for practice with the music teacher, but I don't buy that. This late? What is he doing that he can't be here?" Carson's very absence felt insolent, like an extension of the absence, the holding back, Dan felt even when Carson was physically present.

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?”

“I’m asking you. If he doesn’t want to come over, he can tell me directly. But why is he lying to me?”

“As far as I know, he’s at choir practice.”

There was something in Amy’s tone that told Dan she was covering for her brother. Dan didn’t understand his son, and he often tried to use Amy to figure Carson out. Once he asked her if her brother was getting into fights. This was when Carson was eleven or twelve; he often had spots of blood on his shirt, and Dan had seen him pinching his nose shut once as he ran from the backyard into the bathroom. He knew that Carson would be an easy target for bullies, but Amy told Dan that Carson wasn’t getting beaten up. She said he nervously picked his nose until it bled—that he tried to do it secretly but she and her mom both knew he did it every day.

Role-playing games, shaggy hair, talking to strangers through the computer – everything Dan regarded with suspicion, his son cultivated. But Amy, though recently given to stubborn silences and absences, had always been a compliant child. She reminded Dan of her mother, before he married her, before the kids. When Amy was little, she would make herself look cute for him, do her hair up in a side ponytail with a big red bangle hanging off her head, and say “Daddy, look!” But now he felt that, just like her mother, she was starting to ask those obstinate questions he didn’t want to answer.

“You don’t know what he’s doing, but you tell me he’s at choir practice. Which is it?” Dan said.

“*I thought* he was at choir practice. I don’t *know* for sure. I didn’t bring him there myself.” The butter on Amy’s mashed potatoes had solidified into a sickly yellow syrup. “God,” she added, but under her breath, as if afraid to openly challenge her father with that word.

“From now on, I don’t want you carrying messages for him. He can speak directly to me. He can tell me what he’s doing on school nights that he can’t come here.”

Dan didn’t want to talk about it anymore. He didn’t think Carson was doing anything other than staying at his mother’s house and reading. Carson was a bookworm, not a troublemaker. “I just want him to be straight with me.” There was nothing more to be said about it.

“You were telling me about what happened,” Amy prodded. She flipped her hair over her shoulder. For a second Dan was taken aback. What was she doing that for? He quickly realized it was only a subconscious gesture of self-assertion, but at first, it shocked him. Flipping her hair at him? When had she started that? And her hair was just the right length, too, falling onto her bare shoulders.

“What they’re trying to do is make me look like—“ He stopped again. He wasn’t taking the right approach to this. The defense attorney and the journalists and all the women from the local networks, *they* were after him, but Amy hadn’t accused him, and he shouldn’t be going out of his way to plant the notion in her head. Of course the article surely made him out to be a bigot, but she hadn’t said anything like that, yet.

He felt he was being too hard on Amy. He remembered a period of time before the divorce, the first time he and his ex-wife had taken separate bedrooms. It was for a three-month period when Carson was seven and Amy was six. During those three months, when Carson or Amy awoke from a bad dream, Carson would always pad past Dan’s door and climb into bed with his mother, while Amy would sometimes sleep with her mother, and sometimes with Dan. Was she still that little girl? He wasn’t sure. He hoped so.

He continued, willing himself to be calm. That day he had seen a woman

come running from the drugstore as fast as she could. He couldn't see her face from where he was, but it looked like she was running away from something, or someone. She ran straight across the lane without looking in either direction. Immediately he was on his guard, aware that he would have to act, that he would have to listen to his instincts.

Amy had her eyes leveled at his. He cleared his throat, making a deep, thick sound.

He went on: the woman ran straight towards a station wagon. She was carrying a big purse, and she yanked the keys out of it and frantically shoved them at the driver's side door. He was in a neighborhood where people got robbed and got killed and he saw this woman scrambling to get in her car. Not just any car: this was a poor neighborhood, and it was a Lexus. And it all happened in one, two, three seconds. There was no time to think about any of it. He had to do what they're warned him about repeatedly in the academy, in training: make a split-second decision.

Dan paused. He felt he hadn't impressed upon her the intensity of the moment. He stared at her plate, and resented her for wasting the food he'd made. "Why don't you clear that before it gets rock-hard," he said.

She picked up the plate, swiveled in her seat, and began scraping the potato into the pail directly behind her. She then carried the plate to the sink and laid it on top of her father's. She ran the water on it for a few seconds, and went and stood by the door, waiting for him to continue.

"Now, look, this was a predominantly black neighborhood," he said. "That was just a fact. And the woman running to her car was white. She wasn't from there—she didn't seem familiar with the area. Now this was a neighborhood—"

"But she was running to her car," Amy interrupted. "How could you tell

she wasn't familiar with the area?"

Dan sighed. "She clearly wasn't *from* the area. The neighborhood was black. She was, well, you could tell in a second, she had money. She was out of place. It was not the safest place for anyone to be, much less someone who was on foreign turf."

He'd looked to see what she was running away from. And out of the drugstore came a teenager, sprinting straight for her. She was scrambling to get in the car, and the teenager was seconds away from her. Dan hadn't had *time* for leisurely contemplation, he hadn't had *time* to make sure he was being politically correct. Everything that had happened had happened in less than five seconds, and in another two the teenager would be at the car, on top of the woman. Any other cop would have done something too.

Did she understand him? Was she seeing the incident in the way it had occurred? Amy appeared to be thinking, but why did she need to think about it? What was she trying to do, poke a hole in his account? "Could you see his face?" she asked.

"Look, Amy, he was running full-speed at this woman, and he was *fast*. There wasn't time for me to see his face." She was not going to understand. She had already been given the newspaper's story. He didn't deserve this, to have his own family attacking him. He might have expected it from Carson; from their mother; but Amy, he had hoped, would be on his side. She had come over, true, but she was wasting his food, and interrogating him, and making his small apartment feel smaller.

"You understand what I'm talking about?" he said.

"Yes," Amy said, but he didn't believe it.

The teenager was a black male, running at a white woman who was trying to get into her car. There was nothing to indicate that these two people knew each

other. Certainly no sign of family connection – of relation. Absolutely nothing to indicate that anything other than an attack was about to happen right in front of Dan. He'd yelled immediately, "Stop! Police!" And he had drawn his gun. The teenager turned to look at him, and Dan saw something black in his right hand. There wasn't any time to tell what it was—the teenager was still running straight for the white woman, running just as fast as those sprinters in the Olympics—he turned and looked straight at Dan while he was running, and that black thing in his hand swung out towards Dan, and Dan saw it glint a little bit in the light from the streetlamp.

And he was going to say that it terrified him. That he had almost screamed like a little boy.

Dan shot him before he could—before he could do anything with what he had in his hand. He wanted to *stop* him. He didn't think about killing him, he thought about stopping him. Dan had only been on the force for about eighteen months. He had never pulled his gun in a crisis before, let alone fired it. He shot the teenager because everything in his training, and every bit of common sense, told him he had to do it. The inquiry afterwards found—the entire committee found, unanimously—that he had not acted improperly. Internal Affairs ruled that there was no misconduct. If Amy was going to blame him, she should blame the whole damn force.

He could feel his voice deepening further with emotion. "You think I'm proud of it? I'm not proud of it. It was a bad situation. Everything was breaking down."

He was yelling now, not on purpose, but despite himself.

"I had to act, because chances were—chances were overwhelming right then that if I didn't, I would be dead. Do you know what they tell recruits in the police academy? They say, What is your first duty as a police officer? And the

answer is not, To Protect and Serve. It's this: You come home *alive*, you have a duty to come home to your wife and your kids alive. And there wasn't any time. There wasn't any time to do anything other than assume the worst. You *can't* understand it unless you've been there. You had to've been in my very shoes right then to understand."

Amy was still standing by the kitchen door. She stood straight, with one hand flat against the wall to her right, pressing on it a bit, as if steadying herself against the side of a ship.

"You thought it was a gun?" she asked after a few seconds, in a flat voice.

"Yes, I thought it was a gun!" Dan yelled. "Of course I did!" He almost hit the table with his fist. He wanted to hit it, but he knew that would look terrible. He couldn't hit something right in front of Amy like that.

"He was running too fast and pumping his arms. And I couldn't get a good look at it." He concentrated on the center of the table. There was a bill there, next to the salt shaker, from Carson's psychologist, which his ex-wife had sent in the mail along with a lengthy note reiterating how she was getting "screwed" by him, she with her colonial four-bedroom with the cobalt shutters he had painted and the oak banisters he had sanded. He only looked at the bill to steady himself, but he found a thought surfacing in his head, like an oily bubble: Why do I have to pay seventy-five dollars for Carson to tell someone his problems? What are Carson's problems?

"So what happened," said Amy.

The teenager fell down, right next to the car. Dan couldn't hear anything because the gun was so loud. He could remember just standing there, waiting for the sound to come back because he didn't know what he was supposed to do. He felt intensely aware of every division of every second but he felt walled off from the world, from what he could see clearly in front of him. He saw the black thing

in the kid's hand bounce on the pavement, and come rolling towards him. And as soon as he saw what it was, the sounds started coming. The woman was screaming. "And I swear to God, it had looked like a gun in his hand..."

He couldn't figure out how to explain just what it was. She probably knew already—it was probably in the article—but he couldn't tell her. "I mean it, when I say that this all happened a lot faster than it takes to tell. It was a—it was one of those things they use in relay races, a baton, a black baton. A short stick-thing, made of metal."

Amy had been looking at him, but she looked down during the silence. "A baton?"

"Yeah."

"Why was he holding a baton?"

"Because God wanted to fuck with me that day, I don't know! He was a track-and-fielder, ran for Choate, carried it around like a good-luck charm or something. He was racing his mother to the car. He gave her a head start, because he was so fast, and was racing her to the car." And he thought, That's not bad luck, that's something else, a mother and her son racing to the car like that, a mother and her son conspiring to do something like that, the whole setup, that wasn't just bad luck, that was God *trying* to get me. It was everybody trying to get me.

They were racing to the driver's seat to see who would get to drive it, because the kid had just gotten his permit. Now what were the chances of that? Dan should have thought of that in the split second, literally, he had to decide what to do? *No one* would have thought of that, nobody. They're lying if they said they would have. Not somebody black or somebody white.

"I drove him to the hospital myself," he continued. He studied Amy to make sure she'd heard him. "I took him and I put him in the back of my car and I drove him to the hospital." He still felt as if she hadn't absorbed his words. "I did

everything I could have possibly done for him. I carried him, this six-foot-two teenager, in and out of the car!”

Amy only looked at him some more. He didn’t want her to say anything, but he didn’t want her to look at him either. He didn’t know what he wanted her to do.

Dan had shot the kid in the kneecap. He was never unconscious. He was out of the hospital in days. It has nothing to do with the trial, nothing at all. Dan spread his hands out on the tabletop; they were white around the knuckles, and the veins stood out like mountain ranges.

“Was he able to run track again?” Amy asked.

“For Christ sakes, I didn’t kill him!” Dan yelled at her. “It was his goddamn knee. That’s it.”

Again, silence. Amy acted as if he had answered her question, and he guessed he had. He got up from the table and bent over the sink. He jammed the faucet as far to the left as he could, and watched the scalding water rip the dried food from the plates. He could feel her eyes on his back, and he wished she’d stayed at her mother’s tonight. If she were going to sneer at him, she could do it there with the rest of them.

After he finished drying the dishes, he went into the living room and turned on the television. *Law & Order* was on. He stared at the screen until the commercial break, trying to figure out what was going on in the plot. Amy came in, clutching a cordless phone to her chest. “Dad,” she said.

He grunted.

“David invited me on a trip to New Hampshire this weekend. With his family. So I’m not going to be able to come over this Sunday.”

“A weekend trip?” Dan questioned.

“Yeah.”

“Is this the seventeen-year-old David?”

“It’ll be with his family—“

“I don’t know anything about him. Why is he inviting you up there?”

“He’s going with his parents and his older brother. They have a house up there. The leaves are supposed to be really nice—“

“You’ve known him for how long?”

“He’s really nice and mature. In the National Honor Society, I think he’s the vice president. I would really like to go, Dad, and I’m sure it would be all right with Mom. We’re just friends—“

“I don’t care what your mother thinks of it. I don’t think you should go. Why is a seventeen-year-old boy asking a fourteen-year-old girl? No – no overnight trips with boys.”

“I shouldn’t have told you anything about it,” Amy suddenly snapped. “I should have just gone.”

“You mean lied to me? I make my living investigating crimes. You think I wouldn’t figure it out?”

“You don’t know where Carson is.”

“So you are covering for him!”

“No I’m not. I don’t know where he is either. But he’s somewhere.”

Dan stood up, knocking the remote control to the floor. “You are a girl. You could be taken advantage of. Carson doesn’t have to worry about predatory males. You look and act too old for your own good—how much time did you spend on your hair this morning?”

Amy stared at him for a few moments, while a tinny voice squeaked from the earpiece of her phone. “Carson doesn’t have to worry about predatory males?” she repeated incredulously. Then she laughed. “You don’t know anything about anybody.” She turned and left the room.

Dan sank back into his chair. The television show was back on, but he'd already deduced the twist, and he couldn't care about it any more. He sighed and put his hands to his stomach, which was having trouble digesting dinner. He also felt claustrophobic. The four-foot couch positioned across from the chair and next to the television was close enough for him to kick, and the coffee table filled the space to his left. He wanted to sprawl out somewhere until his stomachache went away, but there wasn't room. He felt as if he were sprung in the same trap that had been laid for him before. He felt as if Amy were turning on him, in the same way her mother had, in the same way Carson had always been against him, and while part of him had seen it coming, it was with her judgment of him in the Cameron Jones shooting that she openly signaled her revolt. He was not a racist. Was that what she wanted him to say? That he was not a racist? She knew that. He was not going to give her the satisfaction of saying it to her.

FAMILY STYLE

I got off the school bus and there were strange designs written in sidewalk chalk at the end of our driveway. They were letters that had been turned into smiley-faces and slices of pizza and houses with chimneys. There were more letters chalked onto the front steps, but these weren't disguised by extra marks. They said IT'S OVER. Inside the house the message was repeated a few times in black magic marker: on the door of the microwave, across the top of a tub of margarine.

* * *

There was a hole exactly the size of my littlest toe in the linoleum under the kitchen table. My father had dropped a cigarette on the floor.

* * *

I remember showers with my father. He turned the temperature control as far to the right as it would go, the showerhead hissing and steaming, the atmosphere tropical. He used washcloths and plenty of bar soap, scrubbed till he turned pink. We stood sideways, my head at the level of his stomach, the muscles of his abdomen swelling like frogs in the first heat of spring. His penis, hanging in front of me, made me feel that everything going on was deadly serious. What would happen if I did something wrong when my father's penis was right there, seeing everything?

* * *

My mother was a nurse and my father a New Orleans policeman. My mother was always looking for more comfortable shoes. My father kept his gun in a locked metal box underneath the bed.

* * *

The room in our house where we kept camping supplies and old coats

suddenly had a mattress and an alarm clock and my father's uniform hanging in the closet. The sheets were all tangled up and twisted around on themselves. I never saw anyone enter or leave the room, and the door was always shut, as if there were an animal inside that couldn't be let out. Once, when I was very little, I had a guinea pig that I kept in a cage in there, but I forgot to fill its water bottle for a week and it died.

* * *

My mother kept photo albums in a chest at the foot of her bed. They were numbered 1 through 23. I was born halfway through album 13. My parents went to Florida, to California, and to New York City; they had a cat, and a rabbit, and another cat; and they documented six Mardi Gras celebrations, all before album 10. The covers were strangely sun-faded even though I was the only one who ever took the albums out, and the photographs had the dated, almost exotic brownish-yellowish tint that old cameras from before the 1990s gave to pictures. The first five books required me to peek through my fingers, squeezing my eyes shut at the naked photos that peppered the pages.

* * *

I shut myself in the closet when I heard the yelling start, and then I knocked something over in the dark and a pile of large unknown objects fell against the door. I banged and shouted but they couldn't hear me over themselves.

* * *

"Come to a yoga class with me," my father repeated. Finally I did. A woman with blonde hair and brown roots waved to us as she spread her legs. "This is Linda," my father said, and then they talked about something – the weather. "She's very flexible," my father told me. The yoga studio smelled like menthol and there were three times as many women as men in the class. Later my mother found a number written on the peeled-off label of a beer bottle. She went through the

phone book to match the number to a name and an address. She didn't have to look very long because Linda's last name happened to be Abrams.

* * *

The porch door got slammed so many times it broke off. My mother left it flat on the stones but my father propped it up against the doorframe to keep out the bugs. When my mother wanted to slam it again she just picked it up and threw it against the house.

* * *

"You're going to burn the house down!" my mother screamed at my father. He was standing in the doorway, silhouetted against the setting sun, a cylindrical bulge at his side where his gun was holstered to him. "I carried a dead fifteen-year-old today," he replied. "I carried a dead baby," she screamed loud enough that the boy who lived next door asked me about it on the bus on Monday.

* * *

I remember my first memory of my father. He is holding a red rose in a white vase. The rose is bright red and the vase is dull white. We are bringing them to my mother who is in the hospital about to give birth to my sister.

* * *

My mother threw my father out of the house and called the locksmith on the phone, but instead of asking him to change the locks she yelled at him until he hung up on her.

* * *

I was down in the basement, ineffectively lifting ten-pound weights, chinning myself on a beam that left spider guts on my palms. I heard someone coming down the stairs and, embarrassed, I put my shirt back on, sat down on the concrete. My father squatted next to me on his heels, staring around the darkness. He asked if things around the house had been tough for me the past few months,

and I shrugged and mumbled that things were way tougher at school. The water heater came on, sounding like it was clearing its throat. “Your mother’s telling me to leave,” my father said, and he started to cry. I was embarrassed for him. I felt like I was ten years older than he was.

* * *

I visited my father at the place he was living near Jean Lafitte Park. His house was in the backyard of a bigger house. It was lined with chocolate-colored wood paneling interrupted by small windows, and it smelled like bayou and cigarette smoke. He had his weight bench in the middle of the living room. He told me the drive into the city was better from there. We stood around until his neighbor came over to return a bright green bottle of margarita mix, explaining that she’d only needed half of it because she was known for serving drinks to knock you flat. She wiped her hands on the dishtowel hanging from my father’s oven door and exclaimed “Hey there!” when she saw me, making a pistol out of her thumb and forefinger and pulling the trigger.

* * *

My mother sold the house and we moved to Kenner, where people left their Christmas lights up through March. The family who lived behind us, five kids to a three-bedroom, burned a hole in the side of their garage with firecrackers. Their cat climbed in and out through it.

* * *

My mother told me that my father once made her get an abortion, back when they first were together. She said at that time she was so in love that she would do anything for him. “I don’t want you to ever make that mistake,” she said.

* * *

My mother made me get a job. I found one, but I lied to her about it. I handed out fliers at the corner of Saint Ann and Bourbon Street. When the fliers

were gone I went into Lafitte's and ran ice cubes across my wrists and temples. The barback had a claw that he clicked all the time, the way old-man barbers keep clicking the scissors even when they are not cutting hair. He lifted cases of beer and bags of ice with the claw, and then when he had a moment to himself he leaned against the bar and clicked until I slipped him a cigarette and took his other arm, the one that was whole.

* * *

I remember (older) lying in the tub, my two legs propped like logs against the wall, my chest submerged. I was an aquatic habitat. The pondweed covering my legs was matted and flat at the waterline. A loose sliver of soap floated through algal strands of pubic hair. My body disappeared behind a reflection on the surface of the water, and I poked a finger to break it into fragments.

* * *

That year for Mardi Gras I was a cop. I bounced around Bourbon and Chartres with a hat, a squirt gun, a pair of handcuffs, a plastic badge, and a real nightstick my father didn't know was missing. A bartender at Lafitte's taught me how to take the caps off of beer bottles using the nightstick and the edge of the bar. I was drunk and barely wearing any clothes and I kept lighting the filter end of my cigarettes, but I made one hundred and twelve dollars in tips tucked into my belt. I carried the money home in my underwear, sliding in through the back door at six forty-five in the morning, and my mother, standing at the kitchen table drinking a can of Diet Coke before she left for work, stuck a hand out to stop me, pressing the beads I was wearing into my skin. "What are you doing," she said, her fingers pulling at the handcuffs and the plastic gun, "you know your father came home at this time one morning, drunk as you are, crawling across the floor." But I was too big for her now: she couldn't get her arm all the way around my torso.

Rob was a little startled to remember that he was in uniform, with a gun holstered to his side, with a destination and a job to do. It was four-thirty a.m., and the hospital was a maze of white and grey at right angles, empty of activity. The real source of his disorientation, though, was the refrain pulsing in his head and repeatedly dispersing his thoughts: *Sebastian wants to kill our baby.*

Their baby. He already thought of it as theirs. This was dangerous: the baby was hundreds of miles away and inside of a woman, a surrogate, he'd met only three times. It was translucent and insentient and the size of his thumb. It was not their baby yet. It was nobody's baby yet, that was the way to think about it. He had made a mistake, taking that baby for granted, which Sebastian did not understand, and Rob felt that misunderstanding as a physical distance from Sebastian. He felt like Sebastian, who slept on the left side of their bed, was farther away than the baby in Los Angeles.

Rob was met at the end of the hospital hallway by an orderly and a security guard, who gave him a locked metal box and a key. "Gun's in the box," the guard told him, and the orderly showed him into a small white room.

The man lying on top of the bedsheets was short and so skinny he looked malnourished. He had a dark brown carpet of hair on his head and a dusting of sharp stubble across his jaw. His face was as white as the walls of the room. He was wearing a hospital gown, but his frame was visible through the thin fabric, the clavicles protruding like hooks on a coatrack. Rob couldn't tell if he was eighteen or thirty-eight – his slightness contrasted with a face marred by yellow, misaligned teeth.

"I'm Officer Lichtman. How you feeling?"

"Bad." He had a Southern drawl.

“You from around here?”

“No.” The man rubbed the top of his head, and left a dent in his hair as if it were artificial turf. Rob asked him a few basic questions, without writing anything down or taking any notes: the man’s name was Brian Campbell, twenty-nine years old. He was from Louisiana, an economics graduate student working on his thesis at Yale. He’d been celebrating St. Patrick’s Day the traditional way, drinking with friends, when he went outside for a smoke and got stabbed.

“He go for your wallet?”

Brian seemed surprised. “No.”

“Wasn’t a mugging? Were you provoking somebody?”

Brian said he’d been minding his own business, then he made an involuntary whimpering noise.

“Yeah? Minding your own business? You had a gun on you. Maybe you had reason to believe that someone was out to get you.”

Brian looked down at his chest. A nurse came in with some paperwork, but she just checked Brian’s bandages and left when Rob nodded at her.

Rob said he guessed it wasn’t something to do with Brian’s line of work. Studying economics didn’t usually require a handgun. At least he had never heard that it did, but what did he know? More likely Brian had some kind of extracurricular activities going on. So they could talk about what those might be, or they could look into the firearm, and the sentence that illegal possession carried.

Brian was silent, and he continued to look away. Despite his boniness, there was something soft about him, something that made Rob want to inspect his wound, be sure he was really all right. He could not believe this man had been carrying a gun.

“A detective will be coming in here after me. Probably more than one, since you’re a Yalie. That gives you some power. If you help us get the guy who

did this, we might overlook your indiscretion. That is a good deal. Take it. Show a little entitlement, yeah?”

Brian rolled onto his side, wincing.

“What do you carry a gun on you for? This something you’ve been doing since your days in Louisiana?”

Brian said yes, he’d had it since Louisiana. Rob looked at his body and his teeth, at the skeletal legs extending from the hospital gown and the wrists he could have collared with a thumb and an index finger. It must be drug-related.

He asked about Brian’s family, and Brian replied that his mother was in the hospital and his sisters had their own problems.

“What are your problems, Brian?”

But Brian just shook his head and repeated, softer and softer, “I can’t talk.” Over Rob’s radio came the voice of a detective who was trying to find the correct hospital room. Rob gave the detective directions, then licked his lips and said, “I’m going to give you my card. If you ever feel unsafe or want to tell me anything. I can protect you, if you work with me.”

Brian said he didn’t want to talk to a cop. Rob told him he could talk to him as a guy off the street then, covering his badge with his fingers.

Brian looked around the hospital room, and shrugged. “I guess I’m in God’s hands now,” he said.

“I’m taking you off His hands,” said Rob. He was surprised at himself. It was not like him to say something like that.

He met the detective in the hall outside the room. He told him what he knew about Brian, and turned over the gun. He didn’t tell the detective about the card he’d given Brian. He was not supposed to do that.

He finished out his shift, but at seven o’clock, instead of going home and going to bed, he decided to hit the gym. He’d been working out since he joined the

police force, two hours every other day for five years. Sebastian loved his big arms, but he'd never done it to attract men. It was a penance, a way of reminding himself that he wasn't the same person he'd been before, that he needed to stay vigilant.

But even benching his own weight wasn't enough to distract him. In two weeks everything had changed: Maria went in for a regular examination, some basic tests, and then the doctor called her back and told her that the baby might have Down syndrome. There were false positives all the time – most positives were false positives – but they had to check. They did amniocentesis to follow up. The confirmation call came in a blank voice, like stating a category on a driver's license – weight or eye color. This baby does have Down syndrome. For sure. The first thing the doctors said about the results was that over eight out of ten families “in such a situation” did not go through with having the baby.

Sebastian had immediately recalled the surrogacy agency's contract from memory. The contract stated that if prenatal testing revealed certain conditions, they could choose to relinquish their legal right to the child. At that point, they knew, Maria would almost certainly have an abortion. Rob hadn't read all the fine print in the contract. Sebastian had - he was the lawyer. Sebastian had said, “We can start over. It's okay. We can just start over.”

Rob hadn't known what to say. He said almost nothing to Sebastian. He asked if Maria would be willing to have an abortion, and Sebastian said she had agreed to the language of the contract. He suggested that Maria, who was Catholic, might believe that abortion was murder. Sebastian pointed out that she was having a baby for a gay couple. Rob then shut up and went to the computer. He knew what Down syndrome people looked like but he didn't know anything about it. Mothers over thirty-five had a much greater risk of having babies with Down syndrome, according to one site. Maria was thirty-seven. Then he remembered

that it wasn't Maria's egg.

He wanted to ask Maria how she felt about it herself. He ticked off the things he knew about her on his fingers. She was blonde, overweight, and already had three kids. She was Catholic. Each time they had met, she had complimented Rob on his crooked nose, and the character she believed it gave him, but she said little else to him. They were paying her fifty thousand dollars, but as Sebastian said, "that's quite cheap considering she lives in L.A." Sebastian knew more. He handled everything dealing with the agency and the surrogate.

Sebastian worked for Yale and made hundreds of thousands of dollars every year. He'd studied at Yale before working there. Rob had never given much thought to the aphrodisiac powers of a police uniform, but they met when he caught Sebastian's eye while doing first-year-on-the-force beat work handling traffic during freshman move-in week. Sebastian was coming out of the gym. His short, styled blond hair was still wet and his linen shirt cupped the muscles in his chest. Six feet four inches tall, he held his shoulders and chin like they were cathedral spires pointing to the sky. When he met your eyes he was looking down on you from a great height. Rob stared at him, without even knowing he was staring, and, without hesitation, despite the fact that it was an on-duty police officer he was approaching, Sebastian adjusted his trajectory and his smile and headed toward Rob. Rob had never been come on to so confidently even in a gay bar. This was broad daylight at the end of the summer and the corner of College and Elm. Sebastian looked like an actor. His skin glowed like light shining through milk. He stopped in front of Rob and said "What do you think of this year's crop, Officer?"

He asked Rob to get a drink with him after Rob's shift was over. Rob managed to make it coffee. Sebastian paid. He asked Rob about being a police officer, sensible questions like "Are you out to your co-workers?" and "Have you ever fired your gun?" He told Rob that he was forty-one, that he lived on St.

Ronan's in a house that was too big for him, and that he was in charge of protecting Yale's endowment from lawsuits brought by the parents of kids who drank themselves into comas or were kicked out of the university because they went to a school psychologist and said they thought about pushing their girlfriends off the roof of the science center.

Rob said he was twenty-six, and one of only three Jewish cops in the New Haven police. Other than mentioning he was a recovering alcoholic, he did not tell Sebastian about his history, about what he'd been like a few years before, about high school and college and immediately after. His own story was something he hid from people. He had never practiced delivering it as part of an introduction.

They started seeing each other every day. They slept every night at Sebastian's house. They said *I love you*. On their first Christmas together Rob had to work a double. "All the rookie cops get a shift on Christmas but I told them I'd take two because all these other guys are Catholics, and for me, it's just another day."

"It's not just another day for me," said Sebastian.

Rob apologized. He said that he worked at a job that was probably always going to pull him in weekends, nights, holidays, and that he didn't make much money and needed his overtime.

"I make enough money," said Sebastian, and Rob understood that he was being offered something he had never expected to get for himself.

Sebastian had been going to Provincetown every summer since he was in law school, and had a cottage lined up for the week of July 4. Their place was two blocks from the beach, on a main thoroughfare along which men streamed, en masse, an ambling parade. Many of the men reminded Rob of Sebastian. They had such good posture – posture that indicated they didn't worry much about having to flinch, or duck, or dodge something, the way, he realized, he and his co-workers

did.

They walked up and down the street drinking mojitos out of plastic cups, Rob's without alcohol. He wore a t-shirt Sebastian had bought him, shorts he'd gotten while shopping with Sebastian, flip-flops that Sebastian had given him. He knew that he looked good in Sebastian's clothes, young and muscular, but he still felt out of place. Sebastian occasionally ran into acquaintances from Yale, who either talked about mergers or how much they disliked the President's foreign and domestic policies, before suddenly realizing they had to run – late to meet a friend at a bar.

Then on their last day Sebastian led Rob a little way out of town, down among the dunes, and past signs that said KEEP OUT – BEACH CLOSED. Rob turned his head to keep watching the signs, as if they might start flashing and beeping, alerting the authorities to the intruders. He said something to Sebastian, but Sebastian just flapped his hand, a roll of the palm like a wave. They approached a fresh, lonely stretch of shore. They spread their towels out and chased away the odd gull, and Rob lay back with his shirt over his face.

"Did I tell you," came Sebastian's voice, "about how Don wanted me to do the Officer Jones thing again on Thursday?" Don was a co-worker of Sebastian's at Yale, a married man with a young son who sometimes got out of control. Don told Sebastian one day that his kid was driving his wife crazy asking to go to a friend's house, and then begged for Sebastian's help. He wanted Sebastian to make his voice extra deep and call the kid pretending to be a police officer – a character they often used called 'Officer Jones' – to tell the kid to go to bed.

Rob said no, Sebastian hadn't mentioned it.

"It works like magic. The kid really respects this made-up person."

"I wouldn't want to disobey you," said Rob. Then he heard footsteps in the sand. He still had the shirt over his face.

Sebastian said hello to someone – to two men, who introduced themselves. One voice had a tiny bit of Memphis drawl, and when it twanged “My name’s Wade,” Rob felt his limbs turn cold despite the sun. He thought about remaining motionless, his face hidden, but he had to know. He peeked out from beneath the t-shirt. There was an older man with a deep tan and silver hair, and a twentysomething sleepy-eyed blond. It was Wade, who saw Rob, stared lazily at his face for a second without recognition, and then froze. “Oh-“ he stuttered, pulling back.

“You know each other?” Sebastian asked. Always quick to take control of situations, he seized on an innocent explanation. “Work together at the police department?”

No one said anything for a minute. Wade’s face was so white it was blinding. “You’re a cop now? They made you a cop?” he sputtered. Then he grabbed the older man’s arm and yanked him away, stumbling down the beach.

Rob said nothing. He thought of the men back in town, the men streaming in both directions along the street: Swiss watches, Italian sunglasses, bronze skin, white teeth flashing, cameras flashing, men posing and grabbing ahold of each other and drinking expensive, cold, bottomless drinks. He did not belong here, and there were people who knew that.

Sebastian grabbed Rob by the shoulders. “What was that about?” he said. “What did you do to that guy?”

“He’s from back in college. Not my college. He was a Yalie from Tennessee. I’ve told you about when I drank. He’s when I drank.”

“He looked like he’d seen a ghost.”

“I was broke. I was living in his apartment because I’d been evicted from my own place and my parents had kicked me out. He was nineteen and just out of the closet. I think he thought having a boyfriend was so exciting that it made up for

the fact that his boyfriend was a drunk.” Rob paused. “There is a reason why I don’t drink anymore. It’s not just because ‘I don’t like myself when I drink,’ or ‘It’s unhealthy.’ I hurt people. I meant to and I did.”

“How?”

“I don’t want to tell you.” Rob closed his eyes. He wished a wave would come and drown him. Sebastian loves me, he thought, Sebastian loves me, and the words seemed like balloons, floating away into the sky.

“His dog kept yapping at me and my head hurt. I got angry with him. Stupid fight about my drinking. I smashed him across the head with a backpack full of books. I knocked him down. Bag cut a line open across the side of his head.”

Rob’s eyes were still closed, but he could hear Sebastian breathing as he absorbed this.

“He’d been nagging me and he had all that money when I had none, and I didn’t just knock him flat. I held him down and fucked him bare.”

Sebastian started to say something, then there was just the sound of the waves. Then, “You got away with it?”

“I got away with it. He must have never gone to the police. I started sleeping in my car.”

The waves again for a minute.

“But before that. Before sleeping in the car. After I got done with Wade I got scared. I slammed open the door and left it open, ran to my car, and floored it. But his fucking dog had run out of the apartment and drunk as I was I didn’t see it until I’d run the thing over.”

From inside the car he’d been able to hear the noise the dog made – the sound of impact, then the scream like a child’s, abruptly cut off.

Now even the waves seemed quiet. Rob didn’t open his eyes. He waited

for some sound. Or maybe there wouldn't be any, maybe Sebastian was gone. But then he felt a hand on his neck, up by his ear, just resting there.

They talked about Wade and the dog a lot that night, and the next day's whole long drive back to Connecticut. Sebastian did not stop loving him. Sebastian talked about it like it was a different person who had raped Wade and killed his dog.

Rob got the feeling that Sebastian never really believed what he told him about how he'd been when he drank. Sebastian would draw out of him, over a period of months, stories of the things he'd done to each of his family members and friends, the lying and stealing and breaking and knocking to the ground, but Sebastian would also periodically offer him wine, forgetting, or make reference to college as if Rob had gone to Yale, too. Sebastian would say "You have such gentle eyes. You have the eyes of a basset hound. You could never hurt anyone." And Rob would tell him never mind his eyes, his nose was the nose of a boxer – not the dog, the kind that punches people in the face.

Rob moved into Sebastian's house, and they began to make use of the word "partner." Sebastian said he worried about who would carry on his family name. He was the last remaining male descendant of a family that had been in Connecticut for three hundred years.

"It matters to me," said Sebastian, "because I'm the end of the line. And I'm going to die someday too and then that will be it."

"So you want to knock me up?" said Rob.

"I want a boy," said Sebastian. "I want us to have a little boy to raise."

Rob did want to have kids with Sebastian. Having kids with Sebastian meant enrolling them in private schools, taking them on trips to France in the summertime, driving them to art and violin lessons, helping them polish their applications to Yale as fifth-generation legacies. Having kids with Sebastian meant

Sebastian had picked him, had entrusted him with his name, and his future.

Sebastian who never made a false move thought that Rob would not screw up his progeny.

That was nice, but late at night, falling asleep, Rob pictured something simpler. The beach in Connecticut: he threw a ball, underhand, and his son caught it and threw it back, while Sebastian played announcer from a nearby vacant lifeguard chair. That was enough for Rob.

He thought: I am going to be a father. And I am going to be a good one. And sometimes he caught himself really believing it.

Since neither of them had sisters to ask, they found an egg donor, and Maria to be the surrogate. They used an agency that catered to gay couples with lots of money. They both donated sperm, and the doctors used both of their contributions in the fertilization and implantation process. When one fertilized egg took, and they got the call that they were effectively pregnant, they decided they didn't want to know who the father was. Sebastian said they should think of it as the product of their sperm mixing, like they were reproducing with each other. Rob felt that they would be able to tell. He didn't look like Sebastian. The kid would be the product of one or the other.

The day Rob first interviewed Brian Campbell in the hospital, he slept all day, waking at seven, then went to the track for a five-mile night run. When he got back Sebastian was making some steaks and a salad. Sebastian did most of the cooking and grocery shopping. One time in the grocery store, Rob had picked up a head of iceberg lettuce and put it in their cart. "What the *fuck* are you doing?" Sebastian said, amazed. He picked it up and stared at it as if he'd never seen such a thing before. "Iceberg lettuce?" He didn't trust Rob to boil water after that. Rob had grown up on canned soup, frozen vegetables, and white bread, but he found that after two or three years with Sebastian, he couldn't eat any of those things

anymore.

They ate listening to NPR. “Let’s call her,” Rob said.

“Who?”

“Maria. Let’s talk to her about the baby.”

“Let’s talk, ourselves, first.”

Rob didn’t like arguing with Sebastian; he didn’t even like disagreeing with Sebastian. Their disagreements always made him feel stubborn and stupid.

Sebastian asked what Rob thought they should do although it was clear he already knew the answer.

Rob suggested they prepare. They talk to doctors, they read books, they learn what to expect. Maybe they could find a group to join.

“So we accept this?”

“What do you mean? As opposed to what?”

“As opposed to trying again. They tested the fetus early for this for the purpose of identifying it when we can do something about it. It’s a medical advance.”

“The fact that we can have a baby on the other side of the continent is a medical advance. Killing it is not a medical advance.”

Rob waited for a minute while he felt his heart work inside of him. For the second time that day he had said something out of character.

“You used those words the other night. You said I want to kill the baby. You aren’t religious. Why this dramatic language?”

“How do we know,” Rob said, “that if we say no to this baby, and then we have a healthy one, that it won’t be run over, or abducted and murdered?”

Sebastian said they didn’t know. But they knew that this fetus had Down syndrome. There was a difference between operating on information they didn’t know and operating on what they did know. Didn’t Rob want a healthy baby?

Wasn't that what anybody would want?

"I want that," said Rob. "But this baby, this one right now, is more than I ever thought I was going to get."

"That is not a good reason to go through with having a child that is going to be mentally handicapped."

Sebastian said that he knew having a baby would be very, very hard. He said he did not want to minimize the enormity of trying again after already being pregnant. Then he said that their baby would be the baby they actually carried in their arms. He reached down to Rob and held his head between his hands. He held it gently, but Rob wondered if he was trying, somehow, to find the rebellious part of Rob's brain, to pull it out.

Rob told him he didn't understand. "Before I met you... I've told you how I was." He was a drunk. He hit people – friends, strangers. He shouldn't be a police officer, it was just that he was lucky, very lucky. When he was twenty-three, he was unemployed, living with a forty-five-year-old man named Carl. He told Carl that if he kicked him out, he'd kill himself. If he didn't give him money to buy booze, he'd kill himself. If Carl had just picked him up, dropped him on the stoop, and slammed the door, which he should've done, he'd be dead. But Carl didn't do that. Instead he sat down with his briefcase and did his work at his little desk, he went through the paperwork for welfare recipients that he had to process each night, and Rob drank himself to sleep on the floor. "That was me – no, I mean, that is me. Who I am to turn up my nose at this baby? Who did I think I was?"

A tear was cutting down the left side of Sebastian's face. "Why are you acting like this?"

"I don't know. I forgot myself for years and I'm just now remembering. This has all been faked, it's all fake."

Sebastian told Rob to shut up. The past wasn't relevant. Rob was good at his job and a good boyfriend and hadn't taken a drink in years. And he had put his life back together himself. And he was going to make a great father. Sebastian ticked the points of his argument off on his fingers, and Rob just shook his head and waited, and then corrected him. Recovery didn't mean forgetting about what you had been like before, it meant remembering it, it meant living with it.

He thought about asking Sebastian, do you love me because you don't really know who I am? Why do you love me? He could not understand it. And he could not explain to Sebastian that if he killed this baby he should not have lived past twenty-three.

Two days later he showed up at Brian Campbell's apartment at nine o'clock in the morning wearing a suit and his gun stuck in the waist of his pants. Before leaving work, Rob had sneaked a look at the file on Brian. He'd found out Brian's address, and that Brian was a crack addict who'd been in and out of clinics in Baton Rouge for a few years and had apparently relapsed – he had gotten himself in a money hole here in New Haven and had started carrying a gun for protection from dealers.

Brian had on a wool hat with a pattern that looked like either reindeer or dogs with bent ears. He also had a backpack that was stained all along the bottom.

Rob explained (lied) that he had been assigned to undercover duty: he would walk Brian to school and look out for him. "And you can talk to me or not talk to me, it's up to you."

He looked into Brian's apartment. A picture of what Rob assumed was the Virgin Mary was tacked to the wall, with Mary's eyes rolled up in her head. He wondered if Mary was praying in the picture – if she was supposed to be looking up to God. More like she was trying to look at the surface of her brain. The table

and chairs in the apartment were gouged up, and a water stain mushroomed from the ceiling. Rob noticed a plant in a pot beside the window. The plant's big green leaves were ugly, but it looked like it was in good health.

"I don't have to TA for another hour."

"Fine, let's get breakfast."

"I don't have any money."

"I'm paying for it."

"You think I'm a valuable witness or something?"

"It's fifteen dollars. Anyway I'm covering it myself."

Brian said he didn't want Rob to pay for him.

"My partner makes a lot of money. Don't feel bad for me."

"Why does your partner make more money than you?"

"Well, he's a lawyer. I'm just a cop."

"I don't get it."

"Not my partner on the force. My boyfriend."

"Ah." Brian looked at him for a moment with surprise, and slouched a little less; Rob thought the disclosure had worked.

They sat in silence. "Tell me about yourself," Rob said. "Tell me something – the name of your childhood dog."

Brian made a face, like he'd been asked to explain an obscure economics concept he'd learned years ago. "I had a couple of dogs."

"Elaborate."

"The first one was Garvey. He was a blue tick hound my father left behind, but he was old and he died when I was eight. Then my sister got another dog but she never took care of it so it became mine – it was a cocker spaniel, Abe. Someone ran him over with a car, but we don't know if it was deliberate or not."

"Where was this? Baton Rouge?"

“Melville. Northwest of Baton Rouge.”

Brian barely touched his food. Rob walked him to class, then came back two hours later and met him again. On the way back they talked about school.

“I’ve gone to my advisors. But they don’t really get it. Economics professors... they don’t make mistakes, they don’t fuck up like this.”

“Don’t know any economics professors. Is that what you want to be? An economics professor?”

“Yeah. Macroeconomics.”

“Like what?”

Brian tried to explain, then dismissed it as boring stuff. But, he added, he wanted to study the economic factors that affect family size. The way a family’s finances affected how many children they have. It was interesting, a perfectly inverse relationship between money and size. Families with lots of money waited to have kids, or had just one, or didn’t have any. Families without resources had them early and often. “It has repercussions for whole populations.”

Rob asked him what made him care about that.

“Economists, if they have one flaw, it’s being too logical. I like illogic. I prefer studying that.”

When they got back to his apartment, Brian took off the wool hat, and Rob noticed that he was starting to go bald, just above the temples, the white skin extending back on his skull like a frozen pond. He wondered if Brian found tufts of hair on his pillow when he woke up.

Brian paused at the door to his bedroom, listening, before he entered. Rob looked past him, into the room. It was just big enough for a twin bed and four more plants, green and awkwardly reaching sideways toward the window.

“You know you’re supposed to rotate those, right?”

“How do you mean?”

Rob showed him how to turn the plants a quarter-turn each day so that they didn't get a chance to stretch horizontally toward their light source. It was something he'd learned from Sebastian.

"What's with all the plants anyway?"

"Um. You ever read how if you want to get a dog but aren't sure you're up to taking care of it, you should get a plant? And see if it's still alive in six months? The plants are sort of a test for me."

"You want to get a dog?"

"No... The best way to explain it, Rob, is, as long as I take care of the plants, it's proof I can take care of myself."

Over the next week, when he wasn't working, Rob continued to walk Brian around New Haven: to the Yale campus, to diners, to the library, back to his apartment. He never saw anyone threatening. He didn't press Brian any further for information on his dealers. Instead, they talked about Louisiana, about economics, and about God. Rob had to draw the Louisiana and economics information out of Brian. But when God came up, Brian asked some of the questions.

Rob said he was Jewish, but he'd never gone to synagogue much. He thought that God operated on him the way they teach you in school about how the branches of the U.S. government function. Checks and balances. If he got too cocky or sure of himself about something, God would step in and remind him of who he was. Alternately, if he assumed the worst, and imagined himself failing miserably, God would look favorably on him and protect him. Every time he responded to a call while on duty, he would picture himself shot in the head by a gang member, flopping down onto the pavement in a splatter of blood. He imagined the way Sebastian's face would look when he heard the news. And so far he had never been shot.

Late in the evening on Sunday Rob and Brian wandered into one of the Yale

quads, empty and quickly darkening, and sat on the grass. Brian was talking about New Orleans. “When I lived there there was a big crumbling warehouse behind my place near the canal, by the Lower Ninth. The warehouse was full of old floats from Mardi Gras past. Some dog had puppies underneath one float, on a piece of torn cloth. It was a big, mangy-looking mutt dog, but she wasn’t bad-tempered. She let me pick up the puppies and hold them. I took one, the biggest one, thing could barely open its eyes, and I laid back and put it on my neck. It squirmed for a little while and licked my face and then fell asleep. It was springtime and real warm.”

“You should have taken one of the puppies and raised it.”

“I wasn’t in any shape to. That winter I didn’t even have heat in my house. It was New Orleans, but still, it can get cold.”

“I’ve never been there.” Brian turned and looked at him. He reached over and grabbed one of Brian’s ears. His ear was warm.

He brought Brian back to his apartment and turned around and went home. He had informed Sebastian, and Brian, that he was working overtime, but really he had Sunday off. His gun was cold against his waist. He reached into his jacket and pulled it out. There was noise behind him: Sebastian was coming into the room.

“I had to be Officer Jones again. I worked myself into full Officer Jones Mode, too, but maybe I overdid it. This time I think the kid started to cry when he heard my voice.”

Rob liked hearing about Sebastian being the Sebastian he was still in awe of. “Maybe *I* should start calling you Officer Jones.”

Sebastian smiled a small smile, then he changed the subject. “Why do they have you working doubles for a solid week? Are you avoiding me?”

“A Yalie was stabbed. A graduate student.”

“I was hoping,” said Sebastian, “that today we could sort things out.”

Sebastian was looking at the gun, not at Rob. Rob imagined the gun accidentally going off and Sebastian falling backward while blood rained across the ceiling in a constellation. He pointed the gun at the floor and removed the bullets. He held it in one hand, and then in the other; it didn't feel any lighter to him. He kept the gun pointed down.

"Why are you holding that?" Sebastian said.

"Do you want to hold it?"

"No."

"Well, someone has to."

"Put it away." Rob put it down on the nearest surface, which happened to be the top of the television set. It made a loud noise on the plastic, and he jumped.

He looked at Sebastian. "I'm going to call her," he said. He found her number and dialed it.

Maria seemed surprised to hear from him. "Sebastian's been very good about this," she said in a wary voice. "Very good at such a time."

"Don't do anything," Rob told her, "don't do anything to the baby." Next to him, Sebastian looked at the phone, opened and closed his hands, and sighed.

"I'm sure this has been a stressful situation for all of us," said Maria. "Let's remember what the language of the contract was. I can understand you being emotional."

"Maria, this is my baby."

"Rob, why don't you have Sebastian talk to the agency." Maria's voice was very thick now. "Or I mean, why don't you talk to the agency. Tomorrow. We have to think these things through."

She hung up. The gun was still on the television. Sebastian picked it up. He slid out the drawer underneath the television, which was filled with old issues of the *New Yorker*, dropped the gun inside, and closed it. "Why did you want to be a

father?" he asked. "Why did you ever want to do this at all?"

"For the wrong reason."

"What's that?"

"The wrong reason was to have a kid who was perfect and to show that I could have a kid who is perfect. The right reason is to love someone just because he's yours, no matter what he is."

"So the right reason is unconditional love."

Rob nodded.

"Rob. I do not understand why you believe that you have to love unconditionally something that you have never seen or touched and that exists only as a concept. You do not have to."

"Some people aren't like you! Some people cannot be loved any other way. It has to be unconditional. That is the only chance they have. And if you can't do that for something that comes from your own body, that holds your genes, that is half you, then you shouldn't be a father. Or at least I shouldn't."

"You don't know that it's yours. It might be mine."

"I know that it's mine." Rob put his hand in his pocket and touched the bullets. Sebastian left the room and went upstairs.

The next day Rob drove down to Brian's apartment on his lunch break and rang the buzzer. Nothing. Brian must be out. He went around again after work. Nothing. A middle-aged woman with stringy hair came out and he slid into the building before the door closed. He went up to Brian's room, and when Brian didn't answer his knocks he tried the door. Locked.

He went home. He was sleeping on the couch because he didn't want to sleep with Sebastian, even though there were two extra bedrooms he could have slept in. Sebastian was working until eleven, making money.

He did not know what was going to happen. He had the day off Friday, so

he went to Brian's apartment again. Again, no response to the buzzer. This time he had to wait an hour before someone entered the building and allowed him to slip in behind her. Again, no response to his knocking. He used a credit card to fiddle with the lock and got the door open. The apartment was silent; Mary continued to stare up at her brain. He began to get the feeling that when he wasn't looking at her, her eyes rolled down and she looked at him. He walked into the bedroom and looked at the plants. They looked fine. Their leaves were bright green, and stretched just as enthusiastically toward the window, like the plants had sprawled out to tan on a beach somewhere. He did not know if Brian had been rotating them or not, but if he had they'd reverted back this week to the same horizontal alignment they'd adopted before. He turned each of them, then went back to the living room and rotated that plant, too, then went to the sink and filled a mug with water and watered them.

He sat in a chair and waited for Brian. He knew Brian had disappeared but he didn't know what else to do. Brian did not come home.

That morning in the gym he had benched more weight than he ever had before. Between sets he read a magazine. He found an article about a man with Down syndrome who had season tickets to the Washington Nationals, read the Post sports section every morning, and had a job at a stadium. It did not say what that job was. He wondered if it were cleaning toilets. Then he realized that this was not a life that would have sounded so bad to him if Sebastian had not made him believe it was bad. He did not think that he could go back to the way he was before he met Sebastian, and he did not disagree with Sebastian, but he would not have felt that way if he had never met him.

When he got home at the end of the day, he surprised Sebastian on the phone. Sebastian hung up almost immediately. Rob pulled the article out of his pocket and gave it to Sebastian, who took it but didn't look at it. Suddenly it was

like the light exploded in the room and Rob could only see the outlines of things. He almost fell over. “She had the abortion,” he said. Sebastian was talking about how there was a third person involved, and that ultimately he had to tell Maria something. Rob could hear him but he couldn’t see him; everything was black and white. Sebastian kept talking: it had been in the contract, it was Maria’s body, this was what responsible people did. Rob began to walk away, half conscious of Sebastian calling to him. He walked out the door.

He went to Brian’s apartment building, pressed all the buzzers for all the apartments, and somebody buzzed him in. He forced Brian’s door again and lay down on the bed.

He went back to his house on Monday when he knew Sebastian would be at Yale and got some clothes and his toothbrush, then he went to work. He was told Sebastian had come into the station earlier to ask about him, but he only shook his head. After work, he went back to Brian’s. He watered and turned Brian’s plants, and he straightened the picture of Mary so that her eyes were looking directly upwards. He thought that the only way, now, he would ever be a father was if God planted a child in his stomach.

On Wednesday night something scratched at the door like an animal, and he got up from Brian’s bed and listened in the dark. The door opened and a small, emaciated shape – Brian – slunk into the apartment. Then it stopped. “It’s me, it’s Rob,” said Rob. The shape suddenly went down to the floor. Rob couldn’t see what had happened so he turned on the light, his fingers banging into the wall a few times before he found the switch. Brian had fallen, or collapsed. He picked him up, hefted him in his arms. Brian’s eyes were wide open and he was hyperventilating, his head lolling about on his tiny shoulders. Rob pressed Brian’s head to his neck. “Say something,” said Rob. “Say something to me.” The top of Brian’s head only reached to Rob’s chin. “Where have you been? What happened

to you? Are you using?" Brian's nose was running, a mixture of mucus and froth, a consistency Rob had never seen before. He wiped Brian's upper lip, then brought him to the bed and laid him down. "I'm going to take care of you," Rob said.

Brian lay in the bed looking at him and breathing fast. He talked about seeing the same man, the one who had stabbed him, on the street, and getting on the train to New York to get away from him, and doing something with someone he'd known in Louisiana, who he didn't recognize anymore. The words spilled out of Brian's mouth like foam. His eyes were so bloodshot that, even as wide as they were, Rob wondered if they were functioning. "Do you know who I am? I'm Officer Lichtman." He pulled out his badge, held it over Brian's face. Brian kept talking, sweat pouring out from the white patches of bare skin above his temples, dripping into his hair. He twitched atop the covers, each arm and leg a separate small animal. He talked about never ever going to be able to do anything, never ever going to be able to be alive, never ever never ever. Rob watched as Brian's mouth moved sideways and up and down across his face, disassociating itself from the words, until it was snarling, baring two jagged rows of urine-colored teeth set in dark gums. He could not support himself on his elbows above Brian's prostrate form anymore. He thought about reaching for his cell phone, about dialing, but then he looked at the badge in his hand, and he felt like someone else. "Brian, you listen to me," he said. "This is Officer Jones."

A MOTHER'S, A DOG'S, A SWEETHEART'S

Brandon had been living outside since the heat wave began. I watched him from the window as I chopped vegetables, saw him drag a lawn chair to the edge of the property, as if the house itself were the source of the rising temperatures. He read his book and did his sit-ups there, and came into the house only to sleep, all the windows in his room open and two fans blowing streams of air across his bed. The sky had been bleached of blue by the heat and we had only one ancient window-box for air conditioning.

The night before I left for Vermont, he came home with his jaw muscles clenched. He gave me a hug as usual, his big frame swallowing me up, and asked me about my day, but he was upset about something. A lot of people probably called him inexpressive, but that wasn't right. Just because he was dependable, it didn't mean that, inside and outside, he didn't change.

"My day was sweaty," I said. "But not as sweaty as yours, I bet. I took two showers. David invited me up to Vermont for three days to visit his store. I think he wants the trip to be romantic but I just want to escape the heat for a while. It has to be cooler in Vermont, doesn't it?"

"I don't know, Mom." He lowered himself into a chair at the table. "I got cramps from drinking ice water too fast at practice." He sat, motionless, while I combed through the sweaty overlong hairs at the nape of his neck. "I told Coach today that I don't want to be co-captain."

"Why not?"

"Because," he said, "I thought about it and I don't want to do it." He swung one hand slowly over to the opposite wrist, like an enormous phonograph needle descending, and scratched an itch. It was hot enough in the room that if either of us moved too fast the air might catch fire. "I don't want to be leading

them or have to address the whole team like that.”

“But you’re the running back.”

“They asked me if I was having an early attack of senioritis.” Brandon looked into space like he was looking at something inside his own head.

“You feel self-conscious?”

“When I’m supposed to be talking about a play, or about strategy, or even just who’s hosting pasta night, something gets in the way. It makes me distracted, and I feel like I’m not a part of the team.”

He twitched, and his shoulder moved beneath my hand like a controlled earthquake. “I’m probably dehydrated. Can you get me something to drink, please?”

“I thought you had cramps from drinking too much.”

He just shook his head. “It’s not senioritis.”

After I fed him and poured Gatorade down his throat, watching the tendons in his neck pulse with each swallow, he went outside, took off his shirt, and alternated sets of sit-ups with turning the pages of a novel. I didn’t think he was really reading it. I stood at the window and watched different muscles slide up and down his back when he moved. An hour or two later, he came in again, kissed me goodnight, and told me that he would return the videotapes and water the flowers while I was away in Vermont. My friends with teenage boys of their own often said they were jealous, but only the ones who didn’t know me and Brandon very well.

* * *

It was so hot that the mole tunnels which crisscrossed our property had blistered and cracked open, as if the earth had long, meandering sores. David picked me up at noon. When we drove by the high school, with the football goalposts sticking up into the sky, David said, “Brandon’s lucky he doesn’t have to

practice on a day like this.”

“He does,” I said. “For three hours. Double sessions start in a week.”

“He’s big for a running back, isn’t he?”

“He’s six foot three.”

“What is he, seventeen? Yeah, that’s a big kid you got there. A good kid too. What’s your secret? You could bottle it and sell it to moms everywhere.”

I observed that it was nice to have a big, strong man around the house.

David didn’t say anything. He was my height and stocky. He told me he played football in high school himself, but I couldn’t see it. They must not have cut many kids from his team. “Remember when you had me come over,” he said after a minute, “when you heard something running around above your head? I got the Maglite, and I went up into the attic, and it turned out to be squirrels?”

“Brandon was at Derek’s house that night, or I would have asked him. When he was eleven years old,” I remembered, “he was taller than me.” I didn’t add that I had a habit of reaching inside my shirt and touching the line across the skin of my stomach, to remind myself that he was my son.

David asked if I ever worried about him getting hurt, playing football. I replied that his forearms were “this big around,” making a circle with the thumbs and middle fingers of both hands. A slight exaggeration. But he really did make me feel safe at home, filling up our house and with his presence pushing out anyone who threatened us.

Less than forty minutes into the drive, David wanted to stop and get some lunch. He pointed to a sign and turned onto the exit ramp, saying “The Reindoor Lodge is a nice place. It’s homey and out of the way.”

“How out of the way can it be if they advertise along the side of the highway?” When he parked the car, I sighed dramatically and didn’t move for thirty seconds. He pleaded with me to hurry up so that we could get back into an air-

conditioned environment. His shirt stuck to his stomach and the sweat on his back resembled that optical illusion in which you see either a vase or two people in profile.

Inside the Reindeer Lodge, we were seated by a waitress wearing a black dress that clung in all the wrong places. Her jaw worked the gum in her mouth like factory gears, and as she waited for us to order our drinks, her chin slowly sunk down until it was framed by a layer of neck flesh. David tried to make conversation with her. He was a social creature. The ski shop he owned in Vermont needed minimal oversight – he staffed it with locals and only went up once a month – so he spent his time working in local government, housesitting for wealthy friends, and going out on boats with couples too busy to have children.

He waved his arms about. “Imagine you’re not working but about to sit down to your own relaxing lunch here. You have your choice of any dish. What would you recommend?”

The waitress stared at him as if he were a smelly child with barbecue sauce smeared across his face. “I’m supporting two ungrateful teenagers on my own. I could never just order anything.”

He was hardly fazed. “How about this – what gets the most compliments from patrons?”

“Hard to say.” The waitress widened her stance, as if preparing for a fight by lowering her center of gravity.

“What’s your name?”

“Liz.”

“Oh, is that short for Elizabeth?”

“No. It’s short for Lizard.” She pulled out a pad back without a single piece of paper left on it, and produced a pen. She squinted her eyes at the cardboard, then turned the pad back over, found a clear spot, and looked up at us.

We ordered.

Two twentysomething men with neat short beards entered the restaurant. They looked happy but tired, as if they'd been driving for hours and hours. I tried to send them a mental message: *Don't be fooled. Leave now.*

I suddenly wanted to talk to Brandon. I did the calculations in my head – he would be leaving for practice in less than an hour, and wouldn't be back until long after we'd reached Vermont.

I muttered something about needing to pee, then got up and headed towards a dark hall with a sign that said "Restrooms/Telephone," dodging around Lizard, who had just reached the young men's table. It took me three tries to get the call to go through. Brandon answered on the fourth and last ring before the machine picks up. "Hello."

He didn't sound worried or curious as to why I was calling. I opened my mouth and couldn't think of anything to say.

"David's being typical," I produced finally. "He spent ten minutes trying to figure out which soda he wanted to order. I don't know if I'm going to be able to survive this trip."

"Careful, Mom, you're getting hyperbolic."

"I'm sure once we start eating, he'll smear some food on his face. A little dollop of cream or ketchup or something, staring at me across the table. I don't understand how he can be unaware that he's adorning himself with his meal. Sometimes it's like he might as well be wearing an entire fruit salad on his head and a chocolate éclair on each finger."

"Mom."

"What?"

"You're working yourself into a frenzy. If he annoys you so much, dump him."

“Well,” I said, “that’s an option. I’m considering all my options, as I have a right to do.”

“Try being appreciative of what you’ve got. No guy’s ever good enough. You’ve been on the road for what, an hour, and you’re already complaining. Either dump him or be happy you at least have someone.”

I asked him what that meant. Nothing, he said.

“Nothing?”

“...*I* don’t have anybody. Be thankful.”

I held the phone away from my face so that I could stare it. Was this person I was talking to my son? Then I put it back to my mouth and said I was sorry.

For the second time in two days, Brandon was upset. Was he lonely, was that it? “What about that girl, Jennifer Morrissey?” Jennifer was a girl Brandon sometimes talked to on the telephone, though I had only seen her once, when I was at the high school.

“It’s Malitzsky, and she’s fine.” His tone was noncommittal. I tried to remember the names of any of the other girls that had called Brandon up over the last few years. “Listen, I gotta go,” he said.

“All right. Love you.”

“Luvoo.” It was an automatic reflex grunt.

I hung up the phone, and when I got back to the table, Lizard was already there, throwing a basket of bread at David.

The steaks were dry, and covered in peppercorns that blackened the corners of David’s mouth. But I barely tasted mine anyway, thinking of Brandon.

Even back when he was in day-care, my large, hale son never got sick and almost never complained. He got big fast, seeming to need very little and providing for himself what he did need. By the time Brandon was old enough to

look after himself, I found the idea of bringing another man into the house redundant.

But the other day he had spent two hours locked in the downstairs bathroom, which was a tiny room with no windows and no source of outside light or ventilation. He'd left the water running most of the time, until I yelled at him to stop wasting it. When he came out, he seemed to look right through me without seeing me.

What was I supposed to do? He had always been so independent, measuring every word as he said it to me in his soft voice. Holding back. He loved me, but I never imagined him needing me. Our relationship was not symmetrical, and it made him seem inhumanly strong, like a great rock. Our house was built on that rock, and that asymmetricality – I knew it was not the house of an average mother and son. When had this new, dark mood descended on him?

I tried to think of the very first sign of the change in Brandon, and I remembered an evening in April, when he had returned home from a pickup game with a bunch of friends. That morning had been almost tropically wet, the rain running in sheets down the roads, and the boys had dodged and tackled each other into drowned grass and mud, painting their bodies brown. Brandon came home and flung himself down in the lawn chair on the porch, wrenching his cleats off his feet, peeling his socks, rolling his shirt up off his chest and wringing it out onto the floor. The mud on his legs swirled in a pattern between his hairs, like a thick mass of ivy growing up a tree trunk, the lines of shiny brown disintegrating above his knees into spatters, splotches of moist dirt that disappeared up the legs of his shorts. I grabbed a towel – a white one, but I didn't care – and began to wipe the mud from his calves, then the backs of his knees, then the powerful bulges of muscle that were his quadriceps. He looked at me, his mouth a line through his broad face, and then said in his typically quiet, even tone, "I'll just take a shower. I stink." I shook

my head and kept rubbing his legs. “You smell beautiful to me,” I said.

“Everything about you is beautiful.” And he looked down at his own body, and ran his eyes over it, in a way I had never seen him do before, as if he had just realized he had a body, and that it not only could do things, like knock opposing players to the ground, but it could *be* something, to someone. He looked over his own chest and stomach and his thighs, and then he interrupted me and my towel to get up and go into the bathroom.

* * *

The ride took five and a half more hours. We stopped for gas once, we stopped for a bathroom break once, David took a wrong turn, and he insisted on detouring to see a flea market that was closed. During the final leg of the trip, he succeeded at getting me to talk about what was wrong.

“You’ll feel better if you stop sulking,” he said. “I think. I’m no psychiatrist but try me.”

“Maybe he just doesn’t know how to talk to girls. He’s shy. He’s really very shy.”

“Maybe he’s a late bloomer.”

“Everything he does is so... disinterested.”

David nodded and waited. The narrow Vermont road was surrounded by large green trees. We drove through a tunnel of filtered light.

“There was one night, when he was fourteen years old, and I was feeling sad.” I’d just ended my relationship with Thad, a lawyer who’d proposed to me but who I’d turned down because I felt nothing for him in bed. “I was in Brandon’s room, and he was drifting off to sleep, with his hands crossed over his chest.” I gave him a good-night kiss, first on the cheek, then on the chin, and then the neck, then down and across the right shoulder – even then big and firm. “I wanted him to wake up, but he wouldn’t wake up.” I kissed him on the upper arm, in the crook of

his elbow, down the forearm, on the wrist, and right in the middle of the palm, then I kissed each one of his fingers. “And I just became convinced of something awful, I became convinced, even though I knew that he loved me, of course he loved me, I became convinced that he didn’t love me.”

David looked at me like he didn’t understand, maybe because he didn’t have a family, he didn’t have any children.

On that night, when Brandon didn’t wake up, I wanted more. I wanted him to love me from below. He was my son, I was his mother, why was I the lonely, pliant one, how dare he not demonstrate the way he felt for me, how dare he not get down on his knees in his need for me. I wanted him to be fragile, I wanted him to risk something in loving me.

“What does this have to do with Brandon and girls?” David asked gently, interrupting my thoughts.

“Because he’s lonely now,” I said. “Something is changing in him. It’s not just me and Brandon, Brandon and me, the two of us together.”

I felt like I was choking. David touched me on the shoulder, then on the head. His fingers were sweaty and slick. We were there – the bed and breakfast was in front of us. “He’s seventeen years old,” David hazarded to say after a bit, “and six foot three, so isn’t it a good thing that he’s growing up?”

I didn’t answer him.

The owners of the B and B weren’t home, so their son gave us our key and showed us to our room upstairs. There was a tiny bathroom and a not much bigger bedroom with a king-sized bed. I suddenly could not bear the thought of sleeping with David. I hadn’t yet, but he would want it, if not expect it, on this trip. I watched him walk over to the window and pull the curtains shut. “Hot as an oven in here, with the sun coming in all day.”

I put my bag in the center of the bed, as if I could claim the whole thing as

my own. David took a pillow and sat on it. He started discussing the bed and breakfast, the family who owned the place, the things they would serve us for breakfast, and the boy who'd shown us in. Even sitting on the pillow, David looked short, and I started to think of excuses in my head for asking him to stay on his side of the bed tonight.

"I've seen a couple of kids with those rings in their lips," he said. "I guess it's the new thing. How do you eat, or whistle, or kiss someone?"

"I don't think they really care about that. I'm sure the girls he's kissing think it's cool."

"I wonder if his lip swelled up when they pierced it. I wonder if he was able to talk for a week."

I didn't know why he was still going on about this. I tuned him out, unfolding and refolding my clothes for the next day. There was a knock on the door. When David opened it, an enormous fan was waiting in the hallway, with the aforementioned pierced teenager crouched behind, pushing it along the wood floor.

David reached out to help him. "Ah, you run the desk, you bring us fans, you do everything."

The boy straightened up, sweaty and blowing on his fingers. "My parents make me do the lifting and carrying and dragging of the heavy objects. We thought you would probably want this if the heat doesn't break."

"Thanks very much," David said, sliding the fan over the lip of the doorway and to the side. It was the size of a bureau and looked like it had been scavenged from an airport hangar. "Where are you bringing this from?"

"The basement. I have a big room down there, but it stays cool, so I don't need it." The boy was a little taller but about an eighth as wide as the fan and I wondered how strong he was and how old he was.

"You working for your parents for the summer? What year are you in

school?” David asked.

The boy said he was going to college in the fall, and David asked him where he was off to. I could see that there was going to be a long awkward conversation, the poor teenager roped into answering a million questions.

“Cornell.”

“You don’t say! I went there myself. How do you like that?” David turned and beamed at me, then beamed at the fan, and at the boy. “Excellent. You’re going to love it there.”

The boy said it had been his first choice. A thought flitted vaguely through my head: Brandon would be going to college someday soon. It was an astonishing idea – unreal.

“Going to Cornell. What’s your name? I’d like to shake your hand. It’s a lot harder to get in there now than when I went – heck, they took *me*.” David stuck out his hand. The boy smiled at it for a second, surprised, then shook it.

“Jamie.”

“Congratulations, Jamie.” The boy’s smile got even wider. The ring in his lip pressed against his bottom teeth. He also had rings in both his ears. “So, you doing anything else this summer before you head off for New York State?”

“Working mostly, but I’m going to London for a week in August.”

“Really? London? That’s excellent. The Tate Modern, the Tower. Ever been before?”

“No, I’ve never been out of the country before. Except Montreal.”

“Who are you going with? Your family?”

“No –“ he blushed and looked down but said it anyway – “I’m going with my boyfriend’s family.”

David said he was a lucky guy, and that he’d have a memorable week, and Jamie said that that was the plan. David shook his hand again. “Well, best of luck,

and enjoy Ithaca. These are the best years of your life. Remember that. Best years of your life. Thank you very much for the fan.” Jamie said thank you to David and to me for staying at his family’s bed and breakfast, and I noticed as he left that he was wearing a t-shirt with a group of lions standing in a circle around what looked like a dinosaur leg. The t-shirt was tight and fitted him closely around the waist, hitting just above his belt. Dragging in the fan, he had looked out of his element, but leaving he seemed small and lithe enough to slither beneath our bed as we slept.

David turned the fan on, and we were both surprised by how quiet it was considering its size. Then he laid back on the bed, moving his pillow underneath his head. He already looked like he might never get up. “This is really a pleasant place. I think I’ll take a nap.”

“What did you think of that? That kid saying he was going with his boyfriend?”

“What about it?”

David wasn’t looking at me, but I looked away from him. I realized I didn’t know what I was trying to say.

He spoke with his eyes closed. “Did you have a boyfriend when you went to college? I had a girlfriend when I went to college. It didn’t last. Not that long at all...” David was capable of talking himself to sleep.

I waited about ten minutes, until he was snoring gently, and then I went downstairs. Jamie was reading a book, his head down on the kitchen table. He heard me come in, and popped up like a target in a carnival game.

“Is there a telephone here that I could use?” I asked.

“Is there something wrong with your phone?”

“What?”

“The phone in your room – is there something wrong with it?”

“Oh. No. I was just wondering if there was another telephone I could

use.”

He said that for long distance, he couldn’t let me use the downstairs phone. He wasn’t allowed. I would either have to call from my room, or I could go next door to a place called Michel’s, and use the pay phone there.

“Right.” I left and walked to Michel’s, a deli that appeared to double as a bar. I realized I didn’t have any change, and asked for quarters at the register. It cost an exorbitant amount to call home.

Once again, Brandon didn’t answer until the fourth and final ring.

“So, did you make it to Vermont all right? Or are you lost?”

“We did get lost at one point. Of course. But no, we’re here, we made it. David is sleeping.”

There was a moment of silence. It was my job to fill it. “So, got anything planned tonight?”

Hesitation. “I might be going out with Derek. Maybe. I don’t think I will if Gutmacher comes though.” Brandon only referred to his peers by their last names if he didn’t like them.

I asked him what was the matter with Gutmacher.

“He’s the type that gives football players a bad name. You know. He’s... prejudiced.”

“How?”

“You know what I mean.”

I was staring at the number buttons on the phone. I asked him where he was, as if he had called me.

“What do you mean, Mom? I’m at home.”

“No, I mean, where? Are you in the kitchen?”

“No, I’m outside on the porch. I took the cordless. What does it matter?”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s just – I’m just wondering if something’s wrong

with you. If something is the matter. I feel like something is.”

There was a dead silence on the other end. Not an uncomfortable silence, but rather as if Brandon had put down the phone and walked away. Then there was breathing again. “No, Mom. I’m fine. What makes you think there’s something wrong?”

“You didn’t want to be captain. You seem lonely.”

“Mom. I’m all right. Where are you calling from? It sounds more like a honky-tonk than a bed and breakfast. You don’t need to check up on me.”

“I know I don’t need to but I want to.”

Silence.

“You said you were feeling... you don’t want to talk at all?”

Another moment of silence. This one was long enough for me to wonder if my money had run out. “Not on the phone,” he said finally. His words were suddenly more deliberate, like he was extricating himself from something, like a man leaving a woman. “I don’t want to. I will. I promise I will.”

“What is it?”

“Not now.” The words were spoken with absolute finality. I felt the hairs stand up on the back of my neck as if I were watching a horror movie.

“Brandon,” I whispered, “you’re scaring me.”

“Hold on.” There was a noise. “Derek is here. I have to go. Please. Just enjoy Vermont. It’s gotta be cooler than it is here. Bye.”

“Wait a minute, do you want me to come home tomorrow instead of the next day? I can get David to drive back –“

“I have to go. Sorry. Bye.”

He hung up this time.

* * *

I went back up to my room, where David was still asleep, still snoring. I

wanted to lie down, so I squeezed onto the bed next to him, kicking off my shoes. I felt confused and suddenly very tired, and I closed my eyes, only intending to rest them for a minute.

I fell asleep. I dreamed that I was alone in my house. I was sitting in the kitchen reading when I heard a soft, slow, rhythmic thumping from the basement. I got up, turned on the light, and started to walk down the stairs. The stairs in the basement were simply planks, and they were open to the floor below—someone could reach through, between two steps, and grab an ankle. Because of this, I kept looking through the stairs trying to make sure that there was no one waiting to seize my leg. I went down sideways, my eyes straining in the dark. And then I got to the bottom and there was a figure standing at the base of the stairs suddenly in front of me and it was a man—clearly a man—with the same face as Lizard from the restaurant and it pointed to the corner of the basement and in the corner was Brandon standing facing the wall and he was pissing against it.

I woke up, shook David, and yelled in his face “We have to go home, we have to go back, something’s wrong with Brandon, we have to go back now!” He sat up and wiped the drool from his chin and started telling me to calm down, to get ahold of myself, but I vaulted out of bed, saying something about a bad dream, a nightmare, knocking over both our suitcases with my legs. I didn’t make any sense, but David gave up, seized his keys, and started trying to placate me – he looked afraid of me, of what I was going to do. I snatched the keys from him, telling him I didn’t have time to stop ten places on the way. He tried to wrestle them back, but I ran out, slammed the door behind me, catching his fingers in the jamb. As I flew through the hall the other doors flipped by me like playing cards, and I jumped down the stairs, into the front room, before something caught me around the middle – the cord to the telephone that was in Jamie’s hand. I stopped short, and he stopped talking, and he looked at me and I looked at him.

I heard David running along the upstairs hall. I moved away, slowly now, sliding under the phone cord, and walked out the front door. The sun was going down behind a mountain in a giant ball of red. The heat had broken and a wind was blowing, towards the sunset, as if the sun was pulling all the heat towards it as it fell into the earth. As if somewhere past the horizon a place was being devoured by an inferno. I sat down on the steps and put my head in my hands. I could not go home.

Footsteps came up behind me. “I just thought that... Brandon was going to do something to himself,” I said to nobody. I completed the thought differently in my head. ...*Brandon was going to do something to me.*

David’s arms were around me. I looked back. David started to say something, but I didn’t pay any attention. I looked past him, at Jamie. I was crying, and I couldn’t see very clearly. I couldn’t see what his expression was, I couldn’t even see his face.

I was remembering a time in February when the furnace wasn’t working properly and I had gone down into the basement with a man from the heating oil company to see what might be wrong. He had quickly found that one of the settings was off and adjusted it, but then he had discovered a small stack of pictures ripped from magazines that were stuffed inside the furnace, underneath the grating. He handed them to me—they appeared to be pictures of the winning Olympic men’s swim team, wet, smiling and posing for the camera—and cautioned me that it was extremely dangerous to store papers there. I threw them away. And at the time all I thought was, *our whole house could have gone up in flames.*

MAKE SURE YOU'RE RIGHT

"Daddy!" The little girl blew her cheeks out and then sucked them back in. She was wearing a blue dress with a white bib collar. "The cat is mean."

"I'm going to make a remark about your lateness," the woman announced as she watered the azaleas.

The man stood on the walk with his briefcase flapping open like a busted wing. The clasp was broken, but it was okay: there was nothing inside it. "The cat loves you."

"I had to pick up your daughter and the Carraway twins in my cruiser," the woman said. "They rode in back where a crack whore had miscarried earlier today." The watering can she tilted over each bush was the size of a microwave.

"I'm sorry," he said to the woman. "I called. I phoned."

"The cat got stuck in my hair and screamed," said the little girl. She watched the cat lick droplets of water from the undersides of the leaves of a holly bush. "Cat! Daddy's going to punish you."

The cat noticed the man and meowed a question to which there was no answer.

"This is a problem," said the woman. "This arrangement we've fallen into is inequitable."

"In-eck-wit-able," the little girl sang.

"The city has a different culture," the man said. "My boss doesn't care that I have a family. She's not interested."

"You could do something about that."

"Don't eat the daffodils, little girl. What could I do?"

"Quit."

"You're getting me all wet." Water was running down off the

rhododendron into his loafers. “And what, we pay the mortgage on a policewoman’s salary?”

“Police *officer*’s. Believe it or not, I make the same amount as the men.”

The little girl closed her hand around the space where the cat’s tail had been a moment before. “When I grow up, I want to be a policeman.”

“Let’s go inside.” He lifted the little girl to her feet with the hand that wasn’t holding the open briefcase. “What happened to your scrunchie? Were you chewing on it?”

“I told you. The cat.”

“We’re not finished.” The woman put her empty watering can on the ground. “I’m not finished with you.”

“I’ll put the cat in the time-out chair.”

He gave the little girl some bananas out of the fruit bowl to play with. He began making dinner, pushing handfuls of meat into a rectangular pan. The woman came in, leaving the door open. “We already ate.”

“I’m sorry. I know this is a partnership, and I’m falling behind on the partnership ledger. You don’t want any meatloaf?”

“First I want you to make me a promise. That you will be home by six o’clock every Friday for the rest of the summer.”

“You know I can’t. Okay.”

“Second. Where is she? What’s this on the tile?” The woman lowered her voice. “She loves you and misses you, but what do you think is going to happen when she gets to be a teenager? You need to spend more time with her now, before she starts locking herself in her room and listening to punk rock. You need to invest in the relationship now. What if something happens to me at work? The crack whore today had a four inch blade between her breasts.”

“I don’t think the kids listen to punk rock anymore. Nothing’s going to

happen to you.”

“Things happen. I see things happen all the time. What do they listen to then?”

“I don’t know. Nothing’s going to happen to you. Can’t you get transferred to a different beat? Parking tickets or something?”

“I don’t want to do that. I didn’t become a cop to give out parking tickets. Something’s smashed into the floor.”

“You became a cop because of your dad.”

“Well, it’s not that simple. But a big part of it, yes.”

“It’s banana.”

“Why is there banana on the floor?” The woman bent over to inspect it further.

“Why did you say that about your job? You think I don’t worry enough about you already?”

“I don’t know. How much do you worry about me?”

“I worry about you.”

“It’s not that I doubt you.”

“But? Leave it. I’ll clean it up.” The smell of cooking hamburger meat and ketchup began to waft through the kitchen.

The woman threw the banana-smeared square of paper towel into the trash. “She’s all yours tomorrow. Do something fun with her. Take her to the beach. Or walk the cat on the leash. She likes that. I mean your daughter. Not the cat.”

* * *

“I want fried chicken,” the man said. It was Monday morning.
“Where can I get good fried chicken?”

“Um. I don’t eat fried chicken,” the other man said.

“You don’t have to eat it. Only I do,” the man said. He was sitting in his office with the door shut, talking on his cell phone. Through the glass he could see his high-heeled boss click down the hall like a rooster. His own feet were up on the desk, one ankle crossed over the other. For a second he wished he worked in Dallas so he could wear cowboy boots. “There’s a place with great fried chicken back home.”

“I didn’t think people ate fried chicken in Connecticut.”

“People eat everything in Connecticut.” The man lifted his feet up and re-crossed his ankles the other way.

“Why do you live there anyway? We can go to Cafeteria, I guess. Rumor has it chicken is served.”

“I have a daughter. A cafeteria?”

“It’s not a cafeteria. That’s just what it’s called.”

“Why?”

“Can’t you live in the city with a daughter? Other people do it.”

“I like to keep work and home separate. If you worked here, you’d probably feel the same.”

“It’s just the name of the place. They serve food. Cafeteria. Let’s meet there right at noon or we’ll have to wait for a table.”

“I’m leaving now. Boss is in the bathroom. I have to make a break for it.”

The man walked down the street whistling. He watched the people passing him. A woman with two pigtails pushed a two-child stroller. A man picked a newspaper up out of the gutter and folded it under his arm. When he got to the restaurant he saw the other man standing on the corner listening to music. The other man pulled the buds from his ears.

“What were you listening to?”

“You’re on time. I’m impressed.”

“How’s your leg? You’re walking normally.”

“It’s fine. I’m going back to work tomorrow. I actually biked here.”

He pointed to a gold Schwinn locked to a No Parking sign with a chain as thick as his upper arm.

“You didn’t tell me what music that was.”

“A band out of New Orleans.”

“Just because I’m old and square, you won’t tell me? I’m curious.”

“The guitarist and bassist used to be bike messengers too. But I don’t think I really like their sound.”

They walked in. “There are a lot of gay people here.” The man looked across the restaurant at the bar. A man with a shaved head and a band of stubble along his jawline stared at him.

“We’re in the cheesy part of Chelsea. Of course there are.” The waiter was standing in front of their table. The waiter’s t-shirt was so tight there was a small bump in the fabric over his belly button. An outie. “Hi, boys,” said the waiter, stretching his neck first to one side, then to the other, as if about to unroll a yoga mat and prostrate himself.

The waiter told the other man that the salad he wanted to order wasn’t on the menu anymore but not to worry: they had a different salad he should try. “Pears are really in right now. You should totally get that one. The only fried chicken we have comes with waffles. Chicken and waffles. They go together, I promise. Like love and marriage.”

“You want my waffles?” the man asked the other man. He wondered if anyone from work was going to come into the restaurant.

“No. Stop looking around. You’re creeping me out.”

“Sorry.” The man smiled at a woman sitting at the table next to him.

She had long blonde hair held back by a pair of sunglasses. She frowned at him as the red-haired woman sitting next to her leaned over and stabbed a strawberry off her plate with a fork.

“Remember when I said,” the other man mumbled after taking a long drink from his water glass, “that it was okay if you couldn’t touch me in public?”

“Yeah.”

“I changed my mind.”

“Oh.” The man reached under the table and squeezed the other man’s knee. “I can’t.”

“Yeah.” The other man scratched one of his bushy eyebrows. It was a way of trying to hide his wet eyes. “Men are supposed to be big and protective. You’re supposed to put an arm around me like I’m yours. Instead everyone here thinks we’re friends.”

“Do they think I’m gay?” The man sat up straight and looked around. The woman with the blonde hair was drinking out of the red-haired woman’s martini glass.

“Are you ever going to – change?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Never mind. This isn’t the place to talk about it.”

“I have feelings for you. They are big and protective, I promise. They aren’t like anything I’ve felt before.”

“I just didn’t think when I first delivered that envelope I would still be seeing you two months later.”

“I can still come over after work tonight...?”

The other man looked down at his plate, so that the top of his shorn head was visible, and delicate-looking, as if the bones in his skull had yet to knit.

“Yeah.”

* * *

The man stepped into the train to go back to Connecticut three seconds before the doors closed. A voice over the intercom snapped “Seven fifty-nine to New Haven. Stops at Stamford, Darien, South Norwalk, Westport, Fairfield, Bridgeport, Stratford, Milford, and New Haven only. Make sure you’re right.” The man slid into a seat and looked at the back of the head of a girl with patches of wispy blonde hair. He thought about his daughter. What if she got cancer? His chest hurt. Did he tell her he loved her often enough? Why didn’t he tell her every minute he was with her?

The other man called him. “They’re saying another hurricane might hit New Orleans. My mother told me she spent half the morning praying and the other half cursing.” There was a choking sound on the phone. “I don’t know how she can still live there. I couldn’t.”

“Does she have a place to go if something happens?”

“She isn’t going anywhere.”

The man thinks of a cookbook he saw next to the other man’s bed. It was a vegetarian feminist theory book. It had a section on the advertising of oppression and murder: cartoons of pigs in lipstick, dancing. The other man’s father died in the storm when the back part of their house collapsed. “It’s going to be okay. I shouldn’t be talking on the phone right now.”

“Tell your wife hello for me.”

“I’m on the train.”

“I believe you.”

“I am.”

“Bye.”

At home, the man was charged by the little girl, who wore socks on her hands. “Daddy, can I stay up for the news?” The woman stood at the sink with

her back to them, holding dishes under a stream of scalding water.

“The news is late! Are you a four-footed beast today?”

“No,” said the little girl primly. “I want to see the woman whose hair changes color.”

“So I guess you’ve heard about New Orleans,” the woman said without turning around. When the man didn’t reply, she turned off the water and wiped her hands on a dishtowel. Then she looked out the window into the dark. Or possibly she was looking at her reflection in the glass. She turned around. “I mean, it’s been all over the news.”

“The news.” The man walked into the other room and sat down in the new chair. He misjudged how low the chair was and half-fell, his feet kicking up into the air. “It’ll probably be okay,” he called into the other room after another minute. “It’ll change course and hit Mexico or something instead.”

The woman walked into the room. She had a band-aid on her neck. The man looked at the band-aid and remembered he’d worn one in the same place when the other man had given him a hickey. He’d told the woman that he cut himself shaving. The woman wasn’t looking at him. He waited for her to say something.

“Today,” she said, “I had to go with the Department of Children and Families to take away four kids. The mother was trying to hide them in her friend’s apartment. The two women mixed their children up and wouldn’t identify whose was whose. It took us three hours to sort them out.” She picked up a sock off the rug. “They kept yelling ‘Pig!’ at me. I mean the kids. The ones old enough to talk.”

“Why is there a bandage on your neck?”

“I was standing in the kitchen holding the cat, and that toaster you bought popped up. The cat freaked out.”

“I bought it out of breadwinnerly affection.”

“Why is it so dark in here?” She walked over to the lamp and stuck her hand inside the shade. When she removed it she was holding a black sock.

“She’s not even tall enough to reach this bulb. And we don’t need you to win bread, or buy toasters to toast it in. That’s not what really matters.”

“If I could be home every minute with her, I would.”

“Yeah, but the city.” The woman’s mouth looked like a red fist in the lower half of her face. “You can’t get away from it, can you? You work more and more, and your daughter gets older and older – you don’t even see it. I can’t be a single mother to her.”

“I get away from it every night. I come home.”

“To sleep. It’s like Connecticut knocks you unconscious.”

“You are not a single mother. I’m her father.”

“What does she call the cat?”

“What?”

“What does she call the cat? Do you even know?”

“She calls it Cat.”

The woman looked very tired, and suddenly not young, and the man felt how he loved her, but not as much as she deserved. The woman turned away.

“You don’t even know.”

* * *

“A bicycle!”

“Tricycle.”

“I *know* that.” The little girl was perfectly dismissive; she didn’t even look up at the man as she lowered herself into the seat on the trike, losing her balance at the last second and plopping down hard enough to roll backward a foot. She grabbed the pink and green streamers instead of the handlebars, yanking them

like reins.

“Put your feet on the pedals. That’s how you make it go.”

“What if I crash?” They were in the driveway, bees were running errands amongst the flowers, a Federal Express truck was rolling twenty-five miles an hour along the gently curving suburban development road.

“You won’t crash. There’s nothing to crash into. This isn’t Eighth Avenue.” The man gestured at the expanse of creamy blacktop stretching before the tricycle’s front wheel. A cloud shaped like a minivan nicked the edge of the sun, then drifted hurriedly away, embarrassed at the suggestion that it might disturb such a nice day.

“Crashes can be deadly.” She began to push on the pedals with her toes. The wheels began to move. “Purrrrrr,” she motored. “Daddy!”

“That’s excellent. That’s really excellent.” The man walked alongside of her, then had to quicken his pace to keep up, his bare feet slapping against the asphalt. “Look at you go! Faster and faster!”

They maintained a straight course until they reached the bend in the driveway where a cluster of flowering dogwoods required skirting. The little girl turned the handlebars to the left, then the right, then to the left again, and settled into the change of trajectory with almost no lapse in speed, curving around the dogwoods beautifully. She ultimately overcompensated and rolled off the driveway into a bed of boxleaf, but for a few seconds the man was intensely proud of her. He saw that she was a natural. She moved with the grace of an athlete five times her age.

“That was great! You’re a biker chick. You’re Tour de France material.”

“Help me with the bicycle, Daddy.”

“We’re going to have you on training wheels in no time, and then

biking around on just two wheels. You'll set records." He believed that there had never been a little girl like his in the history of little girls. "What do you call the cat?"

She was already off and rolling again. She careened this time onto the lawn, bouncing over hillocks of crabgrass. "Aaaaaah."

"Pedal slower, and you'll be able to turn before you go off-road. What do you call the cat, sweetie?"

She pedaled backward, spinning her feet while remaining stationary. "Look!"

"Nothing's happening. It doesn't have reverse. Focus for a minute: what do --"

"Can a bike go on the highway?"

"Not this one. What do you call the cat?"

"How does a bike go to the city?"

"This bike doesn't go to the city. It stays in Connecticut. What do you call the cat?"

The little girl pedaled forward, and shot straight toward the garage. She glided over the lip of the cement and rolled between a green lawnmower sixteen times her size and a set of mountain bikes that hadn't been touched in four years. The tricycle came to a stop on the mat that said WIPE YOUR PAWS. "I was so fast!"

"You're a fast girl. What do you call the cat."

"I'm not telling."

He turned her tricycle around for her, but didn't follow her as she pedaled out of the garage. Her hair bounced against the back of her head and the sleeves of her dress billowed in the wind she was producing by her own footpower. He waited until she'd zoomed all the way to the mailbox, coasting to a stop a few

feet before the driveway met the road, before stepping out to collect her. His cell phone rang.

“I just got out of the hospital.” It was the other man. His voice wobbled like a tuning fork, yet it came through the phone so clearly the man looked around as if everyone in Connecticut might be able to hear it.

“What - ”

“I got hit again yesterday. End of my shift. Trying to deliver the last package and my left leg gave out and I tipped into the path of a fucking hybrid.”

“ – happened?”

“Broke my leg, but that’s not the bad part, that’ll heal. Fucked my neck somehow. It’s unclear. That’s what they say, unclear. Have to go back for more tests. Listen.”

“I’m listening.”

“Can you come into the city? I’m hurting. I really hurt.” The last word sounded like *hu-urt*. There was the noise of a nose being unclogged, but unsuccessfully. Then a whimper.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean now. I mean can you get on a train and come to my apartment.”

“You’re okay though, you’ve been released from the hospital?”

“I’ve been hit by cars twice in a month. I think there’s something wrong inside me. I’m not okay. I’m alive but I’m not okay. I think I’m being pretty clear. I need you to come.”

“I’m with my daughter. It’s Saturday. It’s – I can’t.”

“I’m still wearing my ID bracelet. I still have a big red hole in the vein in my arm from the IV. You...”

“Monday – Monday I can – ”

“I was lying in the road with a piece of pavement in my mouth – ”

“I’m just so glad that you’re – ”

“Are you coming?”

“Monday. I can’t right – ”

“Don’t ever call me again.”

“Daddy! Is that the city you are talking to on the cell phone?”

* * *

The other man’s apartment didn’t have a working buzzer so he stood outside the building and called him over and over. Discolored water dripped from vintage window-unit air conditioners. He stared with wet eyes at the bricks and the people who came out the door.

Finally he turned around and went to work, looking over his shoulder hopelessly. His tie was looped against his neck and dragged through the first and second buttons of his suit. He had three spots of dried lather sticking to the underside of his jaw. In the elevator he forgot himself and leaned heavily against the wall, lighting up every single one of the buttons. He stopped at each floor, watching the doors open, pause, wait breathlessly, then shrug closed, meeting in the middle with a disappointment in the world so infinite it hurt his heart.

He picked files up and put them down, sometimes pressing them to his forehead. He went to the bathroom and sat on the toilet for an hour without pulling down his pants.

He kept calling all through lunch. He called through the afternoon, and into dinnertime. The office emptied around him, sucking all sound down the elevators. Suddenly his desk phone rang. Home. “I’m glad you answered this,” the woman said. “I was just about ready to call your boss. I’d looked her up on your company’s website, ready to make her explain why she was working you as much as you say you work. Then I realized that what I was really doing was –” her

voice dipped down so soft and low it almost seemed to dry up “- trying to catch you in a lie. The police officer was coming out in me.”

He felt muscles contract along the surface of his skull, muscles he hadn't known he had.

“I'm sorry, sometimes the job just makes you expect the worst in people. And it is stressful being home alone with your daughter so much. But I shouldn't have been so suspicious.” The woman was interrupted by a noise. She muffled the receiver on her end before speaking, and the man felt a desperate need to know what she was saying to the little girl. He felt as though something enormous had just stepped between him and his daughter. He broke into a sweat, jumped up behind his desk, pulled his tie off with one hand.

“I'm coming home right now,” he shouted.

On the train he stared out the window without seeing the hexagonal projects of Spanish Harlem and the building-block towers of Co-Op City. His eyes weren't wet anymore, they just felt dead, like globs of meat inside skull-sockets. When he was thirteen and all his friends were making jokes about sex and masturbating and he only felt empty inside, his father said, “I get this feeling more and more lately like something's wrong, and I'm your father, and I'm going to make it stop being wrong, see, because that's my job.” But that was twenty-four years ago; he couldn't tell his father anything. The other man's father was dead, the victim of a natural disaster. His daughter's father was a liar.

He imagined coming home to see all his things thrown out across the lawn, debris in the grass, the bushes, a few things up in the branches of trees, like a hurricane had come and a huge wave had washed through his house, a gale-force wind had blown all the pieces of his life out into the open.

A piercing cry pulled him away from the window. A screaming child was lifted into a short woman's lap by a tall woman. “Fine, you want Abba?

Mommy'll give you Abba." The short woman's newspaper was crushed into her lap by the weight of the little boy, whose legs bent under him at an unnatural angle as he buried his face in her chest.

"Warn me about these things," said the short woman, trying to collect the destroyed pieces of the *Wall Street Journal* while the boy settled into an Indian-style perch on her thighs. They were sitting across the aisle from the man. The women both had short hair that flipped up over their foreheads like the beak on a rubber duckie.

The man reached into his wallet and found his picture of the little girl, and he held it up with a shaking hand until his daughter was sitting next to the little boy. Her mouth was open and pink inside, like the color of her dress, only happier. The little boy and the little girl looked like they would push each other down and pull each other's hair and play house with a doll and a baby carriage fashioned from a blanket and a plastic wheelbarrow. He wanted to throw coffee in those women's faces. He wanted to kill them for being there on that train with him that evening, rolling into Westport on that summer afternoon. He wanted to put his hands together like a beggar and ask them what to do.

* * *

"I have a camera, I have a camera," the little girl chanted to herself, sitting very straight on the park bench and taking no notice of the dogs and children and rollerbladers streaming past her.

"You're going to give that to your mother," the man reminded her for the tenth time, making sure the cord on the camera case was still wrapped around her wrist. "Let's straighten out that dress and get that hair out of your mouth. We want to look nice for – there he is."

The other man crutched down the path, his hemp shirt hanging off his lean torso and swinging between his tense, wiry arms. His mouth was crooked,

bitterness pulling the left side down, but it smoothed into an oval of surprise when he saw the little girl. He stopped and lifted one forearm to his brow to wipe the sweat, as women with severely straight blonde hair pulled back from their foreheads jogged half-circles around him.

The man raised one hand in greeting, and the other man hesitated for a few seconds before limping to the bench and sitting down, pushing his hatbrim to the left and laying the crutches against one cargo short-clad leg. “Hi,” he said to the little girl, then looked away at the tattoo of a fleur de lis above his elbow.

The little girl turned and looked up at her father for guidance, and he introduced the two. “That mailman is swimming,” the little girl whispered, shy, pulling her hair back into her eyes.

“What mailman is this?” the other man asked, directing his question at the little girl.

“She does this when she meets new people, she seems to pull something out of her head because she’s too nervous to say hello.”

“No! The mailman.”

“Actually, she usually asks us if there’s been an earthquake. She saw something on the television and now she thinks every loud noise she hears is one.”

The little girl pointed with the hand from which the camera case dangled. Somebody was splashing around in the pond, and a small group of people had gathered to watch him, shrieking whenever he directed a handful of water at them but not moving away. He was wearing what looked like a subway conductor’s uniform, open halfway down his chest.

“Oh. Somebody will get him out, don’t worry. Somebody will come and get him.”

“Maybe he had a really hard day at work,” the other man said to the little girl. “Maybe the track signals were all messed up and people kept not standing

clear of the closing doors. Maybe he just needs to cool off.”

“He’s going to drown,” the little girl protested. “He needs a lifeguard.”

“He’s not too deep.” But as the other man said this, the splashing stopped and the uniformed man’s head dropped below the surface. The crowd leaned over the water in unison as if being tilted by a breeze.

“You showed up,” the man said over the little girl’s head. “I really do have something to tell you.”

“You think he’s having a seizure? Do seizures ever look like that?”

The little girl screamed, a fussy little scream that stopped short, as if she were merely testing her throat. The other man started a little and his crutches fell over onto the path, forcing him to lift up his cast-encased leg to retrieve them.

“Was that a person?” one Lycra-clad man shouted to another as they walked their bikes past the bench and peered over towards the water.

The other man looked directly at the man, then started hoisting himself to his one good foot. The man barked, “Sit down,” and then modulated his voice to address the little girl. “Stay here for a second,” he said. He walked, then half-ran, toward the pond, feeling where the bench had pressed his sweaty shirt to the small of his back. The surface of the pond was flat and still, covered with seeds and debris like impurities suspended in viscous amber. How could someone even enter this water? How could he do this, with his pockets full of cell phone, wallet, keychain, quarters, his daughter’s train ticket – he reached the edge of the pond, planted his feet on the rock that extended into the black liquid.

He had married the woman at City Hall, their hair and shoulders wet from the rain, giggling and whispering at first but then sobering up as they stood around waiting for the ancient, nearsighted clerk to get the paperwork together. He had said he would love her till death. He had never felt closer to her, had never felt such a sense of responsibility.

There was no way of telling where the uniformed man had gone. Police arrived on the scene, behind him, ordering the crowd to back away, pulling strange-looking hoses along the paths and across the grass. He found himself being corralled up towards the street, pushed back by men and women holding portable barriers. He stepped on a woman's foot and almost fell over. He ended up on the other side of the pond from the little girl, and he looked across at her and the man, the heat waves rising from the asphalt path fuzzing them like a soft-focus shot from a black and white movie.

By the time he managed to get back to them, an even larger crowd had formed, and t-shirted tourists were five deep in front of the bench. "He wants to meet you," the little girl was saying. She was holding the other man's hat in her hands, where it looked as if it were the size of a punch bowl.

"We should get out of here," the man said. Then, when neither of them responded to him, "How are you feeling? Do you want to talk about what happened?"

"It would be my pleasure," the other man confirmed to the little girl.

"Sweetie?" The man lifted the little girl's chin up with his fingers. "You okay?"

"I have a camera."

"Yes, and you're going to give it to Mommy to take pictures of you so that she can give them to me." The man started to cry, his eyes filling up and going hot all at once, like a wave of nausea. Four days ago he had seen the two women on the train. Two and a half months ago he had taken the messengered envelope out of the other man's hands.

He understood that he was going to be alone, that he was waving good-bye to his wife and his daughter and getting on a bus with no final destination advertised above the windshield.

“Did you talk to her about what happened?” he managed to get out.

“She told me a story instead,” said the other man, addressing him for the first time.

“He wants to meet you,” she repeated. She pushed the hat into the other man’s side so that it buckled inward.

The other man began to pick up his crutches, to fit them into his armpits and to yank himself from the bench. “Well, I’m intimidated,” he said. “That is some cat you have there. I’ve never heard of such adventures, such bravery. All the world should learn of this valiant creature.”

Everyone in the park was covered with a thick layer of light, a coating, evenly spread across faces and limbs and t-shirts. The man felt as if he could not see anything but the light, could not see anything but the buttery glow shifting over the forms of the bicyclists, the joggers, the tourists, the teenagers, the police, the other man, the little girl. He was outside of the world. “Daddy,” the little girl said, and it was like he could see the word written down on a piece of paper, stuffed inside a narrow-mouthed bottle of dark green glass. In college he had learned about Nietzsche, about science and the Enlightenment killing God, about the illusion of progress, about the darkness and isolation of life when what has been learned cannot be unlearned. He’d sat in that lecture hall and dreamed about all the places he’d travel to in his own life. He would go to South America, to Argentina and Brazil and Chile; to Germany: Bavaria and Thuringia, to Spain and Portugal, to Greece, to Australia and New Zealand, to the parts of Northern Africa described in *The Sheltering Sky*, which his roommate had given him to read their first week at school. Now he was older, richer and supposedly wiser, and he could go anywhere but where he wanted: home. Because he was burning it down. “Daddy, we have to buy a present for Pop.”

“Pop?”

“We got one for Mommy. We didn’t get one for Pop. We get a mouse for Pop.”

“Maybe Pop would like a nice can of tuna,” the other man offered.

“Ew, tuna.”

The man pushed the words out of the jail of his chest. “I’m telling my wife tonight.”

“A mouse with a piece of cheese – inside. We get one.”

Killing Percy was probably not the best first step for preserving mankind, but I reassured Noah that there had been no alternative. “He was drugged up out of his mind,” I said. “I don’t care how many times I played West End Girls, he shouldn’t have smashed the audio.”

Noah kept finding stray globules of blood floating around the rocket, and I kept picturing Percy’s head: his face frozen in a paroxysm of energy, the eyes bulging, the tongue hanging out like a carp, white foam flecked at the corners of the mouth.

“I had to do it,” Noah mumbled, looking out the windows of the rocket. He was not looking toward anything, since there wasn’t anything to look towards. “I guess there’s no one to alert.”

I wondered about Percy’s body, floating in two pieces through space. I wondered how long it would be until the gravitational pull of some celestial body coaxed Percy in, then burned him up or shattered him into a million fragments. “No, guess not.”

We were the last two men left in the universe.

* * *

“That’s Louisiana,” said Noah. “Home.”

“That’s West-by-God Virginny,” I said. “I think – it’s hard to tell. It’s too small.” Earth was rapidly shrinking as we left it behind.

Just ten minutes ago the three of us had blasted off. The name of the rocket was Hell’s Kitchen. We were going to outer space, past Pluto, where no man had ever gone before.

“Wyoming is somewhere in there,” said Percy. “Not that I’d call it home anymore. Who cares?” He tapped the window hard with his knuckles. All of

North America was now little more than a patch of brown ridges on the tiny sphere of the planet, like a set of tooth marks.

“That lift-off really put my balls up my ass,” I exclaimed for the second time.

“This martini blows,” said Noah, sucking from a straw. The straw protruded from a bright yellow box that said SHAKE WELL. He handed me one and I chewed my straw in what I hoped was a thoughtful manner.

“How do you feel, leaving it all behind?” I asked.

“Excellent. I’m ready to explore faraway galaxies.” Noah pulled up his shirt and scratched his stomach, revealing abdominal muscles packed like tuna cans beneath his skin, a product of astronaut training, ten months in the simulator, the Gravity Variator, the Foreign Surface Adaptive Instrument. I hadn’t filled out like that, but Noah was genetically blessed, no doubt about it. He let go of his martini box. It floated like a bubble for a meter or two until Percy stuck out a hand, caught it, and began sucking on it.

“All right, boys!” came a voice over the telecommunicator. “Status report!”

“Shipshape, sir,” said Noah.

“We’re okay,” I said. “It was a little rough.”

Percy hiccupped and rolled his eyes, and attempted to tap his foot in a manner expressive of impatience, except neither of his feet was touching the floor of the cabin, as he was suspended in the center of the rocket.

“Excellent,” came the voice. “Remember your assignments and stay on course. Next status update at four billion castrometers. Lines of communication with Earth will remain open. Time delay will increase with distance from home base.”

“Understood,” said Percy, switching off the telecommunicator. “Hell, I

gotta piss.” He swam toward the urinary apparatus.

“Tell us how it goes,” said Noah, without sarcasm. We’d practiced with it before, but never in zero gravity. Percy snorted and slammed the door.

“I feel like I lost one hundred and sixty pounds,” I murmured, floating up into the nose of the rocket. “I’m weightless.”

“You see him bolt that martini? He drank a lot back in space camp, too,” Noah observed. Though we’d all lost contact with one another in the intervening years, the three of us were alumni of the summer-long camp, where Noah and I had been on the Seahorse team together, and Percy was a Gerbil. Noah’d barely looked at me back then, though Percy certainly had.

“I remember,” I said.

“You knew him too?”

“Kind of,” I admitted, blushing.

Noah looked around the cabin. “These will be tight quarters, won’t they.”

* * *

Percy was smoking a cigarette. Most of the cigarette was fitted inside a hose which ran into a white bag growing by degrees grayer. “Noah, your arms look good in the uniform shirts,” he observed between puffs. “They’re fitted but not so tight you resemble an ape.”

“I pray every night that we find some new life forms, I literally pray that we’re the ones to discover them,” I interjected. I was playing a game of croquet with Noah. The wickets jutted out of the walls of the spacecraft. It was a very difficult game.

“I hope we’ll be able to interact with them, if we do find them,” said Noah, dodging his own ball as it ricocheted off a window, propelled by a powerful swing of the mallet. “Who knows what kind of environments we’ll find, what kind of adaptations we’ll need to make.”

“Sounds like a lot of pressure on you,” Percy said to me. I was in charge of the Biological Adaptive Apparatus.

“We’re a team,” corrected Noah. “We share the pressure.” We were supposed to be the very best in our respective Emphases, except for Percy, who had been subbed in when the previous Infrastructure man dropped under the minimum weight requirement because of an addiction to crystal meth.

“Remember space camp? That was great for team-building,” I exclaimed nostalgically, trying to change the subject. The ball had not yet stopped moving, though it was slowing down. It passed through the half-circle made by Percy’s arm, his hand on his hip, and his torso.

“And for dalliances with the other team after lights out,” said Percy. I hadn’t meant to bring that part of the experience up, but Percy meant it for Noah, who let go of his mallet. The mallet floated toward one of the wickets and lodged there. “That was a long time ago,” Noah said. “I didn’t think you even remembered.”

“Of course I do,” said Percy, finishing his cigarette. “I remember you both.” He pressed a button and the now grey bag was sucked down a waste duct. Noah and I looked at each other, then looked away. “Who’s on top?”

“What?” Noah said.

The corners of Percy’s mouth turned up at his own sophomoric humor. “Top bunk.” The bunks were stacked along one wall, the sheets and pillows velcroed to the mattresses.

“I don’t have a preference,” said Noah.

“Oh, that’s nice. You want the bottom?” Percy said to me.

“I beg your pardon?”

“The bunk, I mean.” Percy pretended to be very busy inspecting the sheets. “It’s closest to your books, is it not?” I’d brought on board a number of

volumes and secured them in a glass cabinet beneath the lowest bed. Percy did a somersault in the air and coasted over to the alcohol dispenser. He took a sip out of a box of Long Island iced tea, then coughed. Little drops of yellow-green liquid floated away from his lips. He stuck his tongue out and collected them, like catching snowflakes. “Delicious,” he said.

Sure, he was a bitch, but an hour ago he’d showed me a small piece of foil he kept in his underpants. When he unwrapped it a few pills floated out, and he stabbed at two of them with his mouth like a goldfish, dry-swallowing them. “These are our little secret,” he confided in me. “It’s a long trip. Help yourself.”

* * *

At six billion castrometers we’d used the Domestic Generator to create artificial pets. First came a reddish-brown dog that jogged through the air wagging her tail and never needed to eat or relieve herself. Then a small black mutt as a companion. We added two cats, a silvery minx and a fat orange tom. The pair of dogs and pair of cats romped around the rocket on a tireless loop, and Noah and I created personalities for them which we programmed into the computer. Their names were Abigail, Breslin, Cameron, and Diaz. I liked to have Abby or Bres lay down next to me during sleep hours, even though they always felt a little too clean and uniform, like upholstery; Percy claimed the cats smelled like piss.

Now the dogs and cats were winding their way around the cabin as our game of bridge (the computer making the fourth) devolved into alcoholic chaos. “I think this is the three hundredth time,” Percy grumbled. He was referring to the Pet Shop Boys, on repeat over the audio. He was also knocking back a box of cosmopolitans out of an extra-wide straw. There were three empty boxes already floating around the cabin, and they kept striking Noah and me in the backs of our heads like large dazed fish.

“Sorry,” I said, “I’ll turn it off.” I’d been sticking to white wine, which

came in boxes the size of Bibles, and which I associated with my mother and growing up in West Virginia. I was smashed.

“So I noticed you haven’t used the Autosexual Relief Chamber,” Percy remarked to me. “What is it, Lent?”

“Too sterile. Don’t want to whack off into an air filter.” I was slowly drifting near the table. I realized that in relation to Percy and Noah I was upside down.

“You’re going to make yourself nauseous,” Noah warned.

“You like to hit yourself in the face,” said Percy. “I remember that from camp. I thought you were showing off.”

Breslin gave Cameron a love-nip, and Cameron swatted Breslin across the face with her paw. The computer asked if we were going to keep playing or not.

I floated to my bed and buried my face in the sheets. “Let’s not talk about it anymore.”

Percy joined me and put a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t be embarrassed,” he said, running his hand down my arm and squeezing the meat of it just above the elbow. Then he looked over his shoulder at Noah. “It’s only a revelation to *him*. He doesn’t know you at all, does he?” Percy’s fingers felt good on my skin, like anchors, sick as I was of drifting.

* * *

We threw a dance party when we reached one hundred billion castrometers from earth. We were in uncharted waters now, though all was blackness, except for stars we weren’t about to reach anytime soon.

The theme was “Heaven... in Hell.” For strobes, we activated the rocket’s alarm lights, and we turned up the bass on the audio as close as we could get to the penetrating feeling of the blast-off. The three of us writhed back and forth and up and down through the cabin, a powerwash of synthesizers scrubbing our bodies.

Percy was rubbing the crotch of his Levis against my thigh. Noah tried to cut in on us, but Percy threw an empty box of martini at him.

Percy opened his mouth just enough to show me the two pills he was holding between his teeth. One was pink, the other blue. “I smuggled all kinds of stuff on board,” he cooed into my ear as he humped my leg. Spaceships weren’t designed for discretion but he knew Noah couldn’t hear him over the music. “We should give it a try. See what happens.” He took the straw from his box of cherry margarita and tied it into a knot with his tongue. “Maybe test if two men can squeeze into one of the capsules at the same time. That hulk over there would never fit, but, trust me, you’re not missing much anyway. He’s not that size where it counts if you know what I mean.”

Before I could respond, Noah had returned, grabbing me from behind. Our six legs gnashed and sliced the air like gears.

The three of us ran our hands up and down each other’s chests, inside each other’s tank tops, over each other’s sharp, clean-shaven jawlines. Then the music changed from Sylvester to Donna Summer, and I broke away from the other two. “I need a break,” I said, “my head’s all water.”

Percy glared at Noah as I floated toward the alcohol dispenser. I took a drink, then crossed my arms over my chest, suddenly aware of my nipples. “You all right?” Noah called, turning down the audio.

“Yeah,” I said, Donna Summer suddenly a whimper. “The drag party, final week of space camp – they played this. You remember?”

“I remember,” said Percy, “you were massively pregnant, and your eyes were all black and red, and your wig was falling off. You couldn’t walk in those heels at all.”

“You were the Virgin Mary, right?” said Noah. “You were crying.”

“I got a call from my mother right before leaving for the party. She’d

found my journal and read parts of it.”

“You looked like a broken woman,” Percy said. He considered for a moment. “Destroyed,” he amended.

“You didn’t say anything to anyone that night,” Noah recalled. “Did she come around?” He put one arm around my neck, then the other, holding up my head with his biceps.

“She did. She said it was the thought of me never having children that upset her most. She’d always thought I would make a good father someday.”

Across the rocket, Percy floated with his arms crossed, revolving around himself.

Noah put his hand on my face. “I agree,” he said. Suddenly I realized I had him. Noah leaned forward and I drunkenly kissed his mouth. When I opened my eyes again I could see Percy across the rocket, jabbing at the volume control with his thumb until “How Deep Is Your Love?” sounded apocalyptic. Noah folded his arms around my waist and we drifted up into the nose of the rocket. We wedged there, not noticing where we were or what surrounded us until something hit the sole of my bare foot. It felt like fur, and I looked beneath me. It was the rear half of Abigail’s body.

The four animals had been sliced in two, and their pieces floated through the rocket like discarded overcoats and mittens, their dog and cat faces empty of computer-generated expression. Percy glowered at the other end of the rocket, a sharp piece of Kevlar in his hand. I looked for blood, but the insides of the animals’ bodies were grey pixellated hollows.

“That’ll teach you to ignore me,” Percy hissed. “I’m an essential member of this crew.”

“That’s it,” said Noah to Percy. “I’m reporting you to command.” He switched off the alarm lights and killed the music. He pressed a button on the

telecommunicator. “Earth, it’s Hell’s Kitchen. I request a no-confidence in a crewmate.”

Silence.

“Earth, please respond. Urgent news,” I yelled. “Urgent... Extreme urgency.”

Nothing.

“The time delay...?” said Noah.

“Maybe the tele is broken.” I smacked it with my open hand. “Earth, where are you?”

“Bring up Earth on the imaging screen,” Noah told the computer.

The computer tried. The screen was black.

“Go to alternative satellite feed.”

No satellite feed could be found.

“Computer, when did we lose contact?”

The computer beeped thoughtfully. “About thirty minutes ago. I didn’t want to disturb your party. Apologies.”

“Where did the signal go?” Noah demanded. Even Percy had approached the computer now, though his eyes were still glassy and he still held the Kevlar in his hand.

“It appears,” the computer analyzed, “that Earth transmitted for about twenty-two minutes from locations out of its normal orbit, before all connection was lost. No abnormal messages were received at this time. No messages were received at all. Based on the locations outside of orbit, this may indicate that the planet was forced by unknown circumstances, perhaps a huge physical impetus, to depart from its usual path and begin to spiral into the sun.”

“Check again,” said Noah.

“Oh my God,” I said.

“No,” said Percy.

We pulled up an electromagnetic imaging graph from the computer at the unmanned Alpha Delta Alpha station on Mars. It revealed that Earth’s orbit had indeed started to collapse roughly an hour ago, without warning, and that the planet had left the Habitable Zone already. It hadn’t yet collided with the surface of the sun, but it was hot enough to boil people’s blood in their veins.

“Any other rocket signals out there?” Noah asked the computer, rapidly typing.

“All other missions were in orbit around Earth at the time of signal loss,” the computer responded.

The three of us looked at each other.

“I’m so glad I’m on drugs right now,” said Percy.

* * *

Within the next twenty-four hours we reached a planet in a previously unknown solar system, a small, adequately warmed, high-density-core planet with three moons and a partial atmosphere. Noah and I were slumped against the air of the rocket’s interior, hypnotized with numbness, while the audio played the same synthesized eighties single on a loop. Percy had locked himself in the urinary apparatus capsule and wouldn’t come out, so we’d been using the Autosexual Relief Chamber to piss in. We had no one to whom we could report the new planet’s discovery, but I straightened myself up and floated toward the control panel, then began coordinating the instruments, programming the sensors, reading off the infrared data. “We’ll release the probe,” I said, “and obtain a soil sample. I’ll break out the Biological Adaptive Modifier, prepare myself for a trip down to the surface.”

“There’s no point now,” Noah said.

“There’s more point now than ever.” It scared me seeing him like this, and

all of a sudden I felt like I had to take control of him.

“I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“It might be the only way.” The probe pointed down toward the planet, like an accusatory finger, and detached.

It came back with a layer of foreign material embedded along its hinges, as if it had dirt under its nail. I analyzed the sample while Noah waited. My mouth grew tighter and tighter until it was sealed like the rocket’s bay doors. “It’s no good,” I pronounced, “it’s sterile.”

Just then Percy burst from the urinary apparatus capsule. He was still clutching the jagged piece of Kevlar in his hand. His hair was matted against his head like he’d slept funny on a pillow in a place with gravity. “There’s nothing down there,” he snarled. “Of course not. There’s nothing anywhere now. We’re sent searching for new life, but we really learn the meaning of life. It’s useless. When we die out here, no one will be left. It’ll be the end of everything. All the music – no ears to hear it. These pills – no one left to take them. No one left to read these books.” He used his fist to smash the glass cabinet doors behind which my books were stored. They popped out and began to fly through the cabin. One struck Noah in the head; another disgorged a bookmark as its covers opened and its pages fanned into a hedgehog shape.

“There will be more planets,” I stammered. “More opportunities. More chances.”

“The next likely candidate for having a solar system and planetary body capable of supporting life is two point six trillion castrometers away.” Percy’s voice was soft and dangerous now. “And if we have to leave the galaxy, we’ll never make it in our lifetimes.”

“We’re still alive,” said Noah in his deep voice, watching Percy and getting between him and me.

“We have each other, and stuff to read,” mocked Percy. “What’s this?” He grabbed at a set of volumes that were colliding with his legs like a slow-motion meteor shower. “Proust? Really?”

“Well, when else was I going to have this kind of time again?”

Percy pointed to himself, then to Noah, then to me with the sharp piece of Kevlar. “We’re the end of the line. We’re all that’s left of life. Don’t you see – it all comes to a stop! And that music!”

He began swinging the piece of Kevlar, pumping his whole arm, slicing through the audio and dislodging wires which crackled in the cabin air. He moved toward the navigation computer. Noah thrust himself through the rocket and grabbed for Percy’s arm, and Percy brought the Kevlar down into the palm of Noah’s hand. Blood began leaking out towards Noah’s wrist. Noah had nothing to shove off from, no leverage, and he tried to swing Percy’s arm back behind him, but Percy used the wall of the cabin to twist himself out of Noah’s grasp. He aimed the Kevlar at Noah’s chest, screaming and hissing like a snake, and then Noah brought his leg up and in between Percy’s legs, kicking him backwards in a somersault. The Kevlar slipped from Percy’s grasp, and he grabbed for it in the air but Noah got there first and swiped it so fast it sliced straight through Percy’s neck.

The rocket exploded in blood like a geyser, filling up with nightmarish spheres of liquid that coated all the nearby surfaces. Percy’s neck acted like a bubble wand from Hell, and his head floated amongst the blood, his eyes twitching and his pupils contracting for a few seconds until they were blotted out with red. Some of the smaller blood bubbles began to clot in the air and then to bounce off the cabin walls. It was everywhere, inescapable.

“Quick! Follow me,” I yelled, squirting towards the Detox capsule. Noah jammed himself into the remaining space, his legs bunched up against his chest so that his knees were under his chin, his arms packed in around me. I slammed the

door shut as the blood floated towards it. “Down to two,” I said after a moment, then I had an impulse as powerful as an orgasm and I pressed my face hard into Noah’s chest, opening my mouth so that I tasted his shirt. I was shaking all over and I wanted to crawl inside his skin.

When we came out again, Atmospheric had cycled through the air in the cabin, filtering out the gore and replacing it with a smell reminiscent of a newly cleaned public pool. Percy’s body was spinning near the rocket’s center. His head was gently gliding along a window, the dead eyes gazing out.

* * *

We Velcroed ourselves to one of the walls to have sex. Changing positions was difficult. The strips of Velcro had to be secured on our naked bodies in the right places – on forearms and knees for doggy-style, the shoulder blades for getting plowed, on Noah’s ass for when I sat on him. Every so often one of us became unstuck and squirted off in the direction of the kitchen area. The lube beaded from between our legs and floated into our eyes and mouths, but Noah’s body tasted wonderful, the only thing organic in the rocket, in the world.

Afterwards we held each other and drifted through the cabin, sometimes dozing off until we bumped into one of the hard metal surfaces. All was silent except for the hum of the computers and climate quality apparatus. There was nothing to go back to, nowhere to return; we had only outer space and its unexplored territory, its possibilities.

“Will you marry me?” I asked Noah as we spun around and around, three months, earth-time, since the rest of the human race had abruptly perished.

Noah said yes, and I began to cry. The surface tension kept the tears stuck to my cheeks. “Salty,” I said.

* * *

One year of earth-time, three more planets, all of them without signs of life

or even water. We'd used the Domestic Generator to develop a new set of animals: Enrique, Farrah, Gloria, Hayden.

We were a little embarrassed about having sex in front of the cheery, tangible-holographic pets, so we shut off the generator when we got naked. We were also embarrassed because we were trying to do something which had never before been done by two men.

I explained it to Noah one artificial sleep period as we floated, wrapped in a sleeping container. "I could try using the Biological Adaptive Apparatus to induce cellular changes and to create new interior structures. See if I can get the body to generate cell types and organs not typically found in males. I could try," I went on, "to make us an egg, and make us pregnant."

Noah was quiet for a moment. "No. Too dangerous."

"We have to take a shot." I looked him in the eyes. "And it would have to be me. It's safest for me to experiment on my own body."

Noah told me to forget it, but I was stubborn, and eternity was all around me, insistent. I spent months determining the right kinds and proportions of hormones and synthetic agents to introduce into myself, analyzing my body's reactions to them. Finally I made Noah promise to try. We switched off the generator, so the cats and dogs couldn't watch, and we undressed.

It was like our first time. We found ourselves Velcroing our bodies to the wall in the most conservative, almost missionary position, slightly adapted for rear entry. We watched each other's eyes for clues to our feelings as Noah pressed himself on top of me and wrung my shoulders in his hands.

Three days later, a trickle of blood ran down my leg. We tried again, changing positions, altering the hormones. The only results were the painless, perfunctory trickles of blood, each three twenty-four-hour periods of earth-time later.

“It’s no use,” said Noah.

“I can genetically modify myself further,” I suggested. “I haven’t exhausted the capabilities of the apparatus.”

“No,” said Noah, gripping my wrist.

“I have a theory that if I – “

“No. That’s an order.”

“We’re the last two men left alive in the universe,” I said softly. “You can’t command me – “

“I am commanding you,” Noah whispered. “If the human race dies with us, it dies. But I have to have you.”

“We’re antimatter,” I said, the tears flying out of my ducts and this time jumping right into the air of the cabin, hitting Noah’s chin and neck like rain. “We disprove the first law of thermodynamics.”

The dogs and cats rubbed up against us, uncomprehending. Noah looked at me. Then he looked out the window of the rocket. I wondered if he was waiting to see an asteroid, a comet, something, some sign, movement, energy, matter. The stars did not move in the window.

* * *

The navigation system picked up a strange set of readings that seemed to break the laws of space-time. Something was going on outside the rocket. We stopped the propulsion and released a Diagnostic Operations Vehicular Entity. It shot out into space and zoomed around at near-light speed before returning. No nearby planets or stars, or other foreign bodies, were detected. We turned the propulsion back on and went a little further. “We’re headed towards the center of the galaxy,” I explained. “There may be a higher density of celestial phenomena there.”

The navigation suddenly stopped functioning. We killed the forward thrust

again. All was darkness in the windows except for faraway stars. We re-released the DOVE. This time it did not come back.

“We’re losing the other systems!” I shouted to Noah. “Environmental’s dying! Get in your suit!”

We scurried into our spacesuits, and sealed ourselves inside our helmets, equipped with a tiny two-way communicator independent of the rocket’s tele system. “There’s only one thing it could be,” I told Noah over the two-way. “A black hole. We’re already being pulled in. If we reach the event horizon, even light cannot escape.” He knew this already but it comforted me to keep talking.

“Are we going to die?” I could see his eyes searching for mine through the glass of his helmet, and felt his heavily gloved hand on my arm.

“We might. We might leave time altogether, and live forever. We might pass through the fabric of the universe and enter an alternate reality.”

The rocket had completely shut down. It broke apart around us, stringing out like spaghetti and disappearing into a deep black without any stars. We floated suspended in nothingness, without any frame of reference besides one another, in our bright white suits.

“Hey,” said Noah, “will I be with you, after this?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

When you died, and the person you loved died, what happened to the love?

We could not move. There was nothing to push off of, nothing to reach for, nothing to float towards, nothing to swim away from.

9:47 PM

“Look at that,” Rock said, pointing a finger out the window of the cruiser.
“That car just went into the swamp.”

“No way,” said Tab. “We better go check on it. I mean, ya think?”

They were sitting in the cruiser waiting to catch speeding teenagers or cars with a taillight out, but everyone passing them drove scrupulously. They had their windows rolled down and were listening to the crickets. Rock was wearing Tab’s hat and Tab was bouncing Rock’s hat against his knee in time to a song he had stuck in his head. Tab seemed especially fidgety and Rock could see that he had something in his shirt pocket, below his badge, which he kept touching with his fingertips.

They hadn’t given out any tickets yet. That was bad because the Chief was suspicious of them, repeatedly hinting at a desire to reassign them to different squads. He’d told them that if they didn’t start hitting their ticket quotas he’d take the lost revenue out of their salaries, and he was mean enough to do it, too. But Rock didn’t really mind, that much, just sitting in the car with Tab, and every once in a while getting the slightest whiff of Tab’s deodorant, mixed with his fresh sweat. He had something to tell Tab and he didn’t know how to do it, or when to say it, or even if he should say anything at all, that night. He wanted it to be that night for sentimental reasons, but it was hard to work up the nerve, and their shift didn’t end until two.

They hopped out of the cruiser and crossed the street, pushing their bodies against the humidity. “I hear sucking sounds,” said Rock.

“I hope the dude is okay,” said Tab. “Or the girl. Woman.”

“If we save him, maybe we won’t get yelled at for having another dead

night.” Rock was shining his flashlight into the ferns and underbrush. “What a jungle. I wonder if this is what Vietnam was like.” He thought about being in a platoon with Tab in Vietnam. He saw lots of rain, lots of water turned green by the light coming through the dense vegetation, the green ripped by bullets the way the surface of a body of water is ripped by raindrops. Tab running through the waist-high water, his big machine gun thumping against his chest. Tab charging at him, wrapping his arms around him, holding his head above the water. Rock realized all this, his entire idea of Vietnam, came from the movies. His uncle had been in Vietnam, but Rock didn’t know anything about him because he died there.

“Chief’ll yell at us, you just wait,” Tab was predicting. “He knows what’s up and he doesn’t like it one bit. He knows everything. He’s like my mother.”

“Tire tracks.” The moss was squashed down like corduroy. Rock wondered if Tab’s mother was ever going to warm to him. She thought Tab could do better, and he probably could, too, but soon Rock wouldn’t be living in an apartment above Lafitte’s. Maybe that would make a difference.

It was a Datsun Bluebird, twenty years old, a deep demin color that they don’t make cars anymore. Its back end reared up in the beams of their flashlights while the front sank slowly into the ooze. The lights on the dashboard were visible, casting a green glow across the muck.

“Time to act.” Rock put the end of the flashlight in his mouth and pushed the branches away. He thought about telling Tab to stay there, or radio for help, but he knew he wouldn’t listen.

“Boy,” remarked Tab, “you said it.” He stuck one foot into the mud. “Cold. You should call for backup in case an alligator eats me.”

“I’m coming with you.” Rock jumped into the swamp, sinking up to his knees with a rude noise. “Kind of feels like oatmeal that’s developed a mind of its own.”

Tab had reached the driver's side door. "He's unconscious. I can't get the door open, the swamp's too heavy." He reached down into the mud, thick liquid swirling around his elbow and then closing on his bicep. "Aw, you won't believe this. My arm's stuck."

"I'm coming." Rock was trying to climb on top of the car. When he pulled his legs out of the mud, his shoes came off. "I bet I'll have to pay for those out of pocket." The car's front lurched forward another few inches into the ooze, and he slid down the roof and onto the windshield. He stood in his socks on the wipers and peered into the car. "I think he's breathing."

"Rock, I'm gettin' scared," said Tab, still bent over trying to free his arm. "I think I need you to save me first."

Rock wrapped his arm around Tab's torso and pulled, but he had nothing to brace himself against – his socked feet slid around on the car. "Grab that tree branch," he told Tab, watching Tab's arched back, stopped for a moment by its strength and vulnerability: the power in its size, and the way it offered such a large, easy target. Tab swung his free arm up, caught the branch, and hoisted himself onto the Datsun, the swamp making sounds like it was trying to clear phlegm from its throat as it relinquished his limbs.

"We'll get him out the back," said Rock. He scrambled over the car like a coyote and pulled at one of the rear doors.

Tab joined him and the door cracked open, parting the muck and allowing some water and leaves to seep onto the floor of the car, which they could now see was covered in bottles and firecrackers.

"Ooooh," came a voice from the driver's seat.

"Gee, maybe we shouldn't be moving him," said Tab. "Possible neck injury, ya know?"

"He'll drown. He'll be devoured by alligators or pelicans." Rock reached

in and grabbed the kid's neck. "You all right? We gotta yank you outta here."

"Yowch," said the voice.

"Let's go, man," said Tab. "We're savin' your life."

They pulled the kid between the two front seats and out the back door, his limbs banging into the cushions. He was small and popped out into the muck like a doll. The kid's head lolled on his shoulders and he blinked at the two officers as if he was stoned. "Thank you so much," he said. "I think I broke everything."

"We're going to carry you to the cruiser," said Rock.

"Wowee," said Tab. "This is why I became a cop."

"See, Chief? We get the job done," shouted Rock to the cricket-filled bayou as they hauled the kid across the road.

"He'll probably say we were just mud wrestling," said Tab.

"Can you guys not tell my dad about this?" asked the kid.

Rock felt lightheaded and he became aware of his uniform, pasted by sweat to the sides of his chest under his arms. The thing he wanted to ask Tab he had never asked anyone in his whole life. "I lost your hat in the swamp," he told Tab. "You're never gonna forgive me."

10:50 PM

"Oh, here we go. What's her name again?" said Tab, squinting at the woman, then peering furtively into his shirt pocket. He had just asked Rock if he wanted to take a quick break and a walk when Rock pointed to the activity ahead of them. "We met her last week, and she yelled something like she was from Bossier City. Seemed nice."

"She did not seem nice," said Rock, tapping his hand on the steering wheel and squinting toward the underpass. It was starting to seem like it might be a busy night after all. "She was chewing a wad of gum the size of your head."

“She probably had a hard life.”

“Had or has?” They were parked at the edge of an abandoned lot with the car and lights off, watching the state road where it went underneath the highway. They’d just gotten there from the hospital. A woman bobbed around on stilettos, her yellow hair turned pink by the neon lights from the Irish/Mexican bar and the porn store. Rock needed to talk to Tab before their shift was over or he was afraid it would have to wait until the next day. After work he had to go back to his apartment and do paperwork and ideally get some sleep. The closing on the house was at eight in the morning.

“What do you mean the size of my head?” Tab pulled the passenger-side visor down from the roof of the car in order to use the mirror and an avalanche of stop and frisk reports fell into his lap.

“I mean the wad of gum was big but not that big. I have a fat head.”

“Aw, come off it.”

Rock looked at Tab’s lap. “You were supposed to file those. The Chief is going to take a sharpened spoon to our balls.” The frustration in his voice wasn’t frustration with Tab, though, it was frustration at himself. Was he just scared? Too scared to take Tab’s hand and say ‘I’ve got something to ask you?’

Tab was trying to look at himself in profile in the visor mirror. “My head is huge too. I don’t even think this hat is regular sized, I think it’s special.”

“You’re still wearing mine!”

“Check it out. Truck’s slowing down. Hoo boy, she’s double-timing it over there.” The woman’s legs wobbled quickly along the road.

Rock reached a hand across the front seat and pressed it into Tab’s arm. He was afraid of the job picking up speed and taking over again, this time for the rest of night, and he wanted to say what he had to say first, he wanted to put it out there, he wanted to turn over what was in his chest.

Tab looked over at Rock for a few seconds, his eyes moving slowly over Rock's face and then down, before he looked back at the road. "Hey, we're working. We can't be getting all sexy now. Remember you made me promise? But listen, at the end of our shift I want to go down to the dock. Not for *that*, for something else."

Rock looked down at his own lap and saw that he had an erection. The docks were where he'd first put a hand on the back of Tab's neck and not taken it away, until Tab turned to face him, burst out laughing, and then kissed him. That was exactly a year ago. "So you remember."

"Holy smokes, she's leaning in the window," Tab said. "C'mon, yeah, I remember. Do I remember! Whoa." He touched his shirt pocket again, and Rock almost asked him what was inside it, but then Tab pointed toward the underpass. "She's this close to gettin' in."

"Let's go." Rock switched on the cruiser and sailed through the abandoned lot, waiting until they were on the road to hit the lights.

The woman turned to look at them, scrunching up her face as the cruiser blinded her. Rock pulled up behind the truck and she took a few steps back into the grass next to the sidewalk, lurching as her ankle collapsed in an unseen hole. Tab threw the door open but didn't get out immediately, instead tilting his head in the direction of the truck. "You want to take him, I'll take her?"

"Let's do them one at a time. She's not going anywhere. She can't walk in those heels to save her life." The woman was fishing around in her bag for something; tiny pieces of paper and wrappers spilled over the top and onto the ground.

Tab shrugged his shoulders and started looking in the glove compartment for the flashlight. "Shucks. Did we leave it in the swamp?"

"You're gonna hafta bail me out. Yeah, no shit!" The woman had found a

cell phone in her bag and was shouting into it.

“It’s probably with my shoes right now in an alligator’s stomach.” Rock opened his door and swung his feet over onto the pavement. He had on a pair of Tab’s sneakers and their whiteness against his navy uniform and the black of the ground made him feel for a second that it would be unacceptable to be seen by the public wearing them.

He went around to the trunk of the cruiser and found the backup flashlight, but of course it was dead. “Have to do this without.” He strode to the window of the truck while Tab stood in the driver’s blind spot, a hand on his gun. The man inside was dwarfed by his own seat, and he had a white beard that fuzzed out where his face ended and his neck began. “Sir, please step out of the vehicle.”

“Can’t,” said the man in a small voice. “Least not quickly.”

“I don’t want you to do it quickly, sir, I want you to do it slowly.”

“Is five minutes alright? I got to lift this over me and put it on the ground and open it and then I got to get myself in it. Takes a while. Truck has a high chassis.” The man was pointing to a wheelchair folded up in the passenger side of the cab. He didn’t have any legs. He lowered his head and tucked his beard in toward his chest. One of his arms reached out and he palmed the handbrake like a kitten kneading its mother’s stomach.

Tab came over to the window of the truck, and leaned in slightly to check out the man’s lack of legs. His head did not cross the invisible barrier between the inside and outside of the truck. Rock was watching for that. He worried when Tab wasn’t careful, when he didn’t go by the book.

“Well, you can stay there for now,” he said, stepping between Tab and the truck. “You’re being charged with soliciting a known prostitute.”

“Known? I didn’t know she was one,” the man mumbled.

“You’ve got your wallet out,” Rock chided.

The man looked down at it. The driver's license, faintly visible in the neon glow from the porn store, seemed to depict a black woman. "S not mine."

"Robbery?" Tab was indignant. "And what're you paying for sex for anyway?" He lowered his voice. "You didn't hear it from me, but there are women who go online looking for cripples, they have a thing. Though don't ask me any more about it."

The man only deflated further. "Maybe but those girls don't want accompanying Vietnam flashbacks."

"Hey! Stay put!" Rock yelled at the woman, who was stumbling down the sidewalk. She turned and came back, imitating him under her breath, "Hey, stay put, hey, stay put."

"You gotta wife?" Tab asked, pointing to the wedding ring, almost shaking his fist. He looked ready to deliver a harangue, and Rock checked his watch, knowing he'd probably missed his chance. Tab could go and go for hours, lecturing, berating, demanding a change of behavior and a change of heart.

1:43 AM

"Ma'am," said Rock, "You have to let us in. Either you open the door or we open it for you. One will result in less structural damage."

"We're on your side," Tab added. "Not of the door. I mean, ya know. Morally."

"It was a mistake," said the woman. "I'm telling you. Wrong number."

"Who'd you think you were calling to say your boyfriend is whangin' on you?" Tab was trying to peer in the window. This neighborhood was on a bunch of government lists because an old factory sitting in the middle of it, now abandoned, had leaked carcinogens into the water table. They'd had to rush over as soon as they finished the top copies of the arrest paperwork for the john and the prostitute,

the Chief promising that they'd each get credit for one collar. Their shift was up in fifteen minutes but the guys on night didn't want to go.

"Get away from there," Rock whispered to Tab. "You want to get shot?" Music was playing inside the house, something upbeat and a little jittery. Tab stepped back and put a hand on his gun.

"I could just kick the thing down," Tab said. "Door looks like it's made a cardboard. The gutters are PVC."

The door opened. The woman trying to hide behind it had a handkerchief draped over her face. A radio was playing "Car Wash" and a television showed a woman in a sequined dress clapping and singing "Got To Be Real."

"Good evening, ma'am. You called about a domestic disturbance, and we're here to help." Rock stepped in, his eyes sweeping the room. "Would you mind removing that garment from your head?"

"Oh – no. Can't. Religious reasons." The woman tilted her face toward the ground, which was covered in utensils and soapy water.

"Now. You can't expect us-all to believe that, can ya?" Tab asked.

"Where's your boyfriend?" Rock tried to switch off the radio but the music only changed to "I'm So Excited."

"He's at the gas station." The woman walked backward into the kitchenette, taking tiny steps. One of her feet got stuck in a pot.

"There's a hole in the wall the size of a sunflower," Rock said. "Looks fresh."

"Let's see your face," said Tab. "I'm sure it's a pretty one. That came out wrong."

"How do I turn this thing off?" Rock was pressing all the buttons on the radio. A toilet flushed somewhere in the house, barely audible above the music but accompanied by a gentle vibration in the floor.

“I have to go,” said the woman, trying to free herself from the pot. “Have to pick up my kids.”

“Driving with your face obscured. I’d pull you right over,” said Tab.

“That him in the bathroom?” The radio was now playing music and beeping at the same time, while the television broke for a commercial and a bunch of smiling children bounced around to “MacArthur Park.” Rock stepped over and knocked on a knobless door. The children on the TV made sad faces to accompany the lyric about Donna Summer’s cake being left out in the rain.

The woman yanked her foot out of the pot and her handkerchief fell off her head. Her left eye was swollen shut. She looked like a piece of fruit was trying to grow out of her face.

“Okay,” said Tab. “That’s over the line.”

Rock kicked the bathroom door and it flew open, bounced against the wall, and slammed back shut, giving them a half-second’s glimpse of a man leaning over the sink to stick his mouth beneath the running faucet.

“Get out here,” said Rock. The door opened again and the man tottered into the room. He pushed a few strands of hair behind his ears, revealing tattoos that curled around in his earfolds.

“You’re coming with us,” Rock commanded. “Turn around and put your hands in the air. We’ve seen what you did to your girlfriend.”

“She’s my mother,” said the man. The woman touched the radio. The music stopped and they heard an engine in the driveway sputter, then die.

“Who’s that?” Tab ran to the window, where he saw a man trying to get a motorcycle to start.

Tab ran out the front door with his gun in his hand, and even if Rock had been able to make his voice work and the orders to stay put come out of his mouth, Tab wouldn’t have heard. He stepped high, like a football player doing tire drills.

Then something exploded near the driveway, and he went down, face first, next to a lawn mower. Rock charged out and saw the man jump off the motorcycle, disappearing into the woods.

“Ten-Thirteen!” Rock screamed into his radio. He dropped to his knees, not feeling the bottlecaps scattered across the dirt, vaguely aware that his whole head was numb. “Send everyone in the parish – it’s Tab – “

“I’m bleeding,” Tab mumbled. “Lousy night this is turning out to be for my uniform.”

Rock stripped off his shirt and pressed it to Tab’s neck, covering the blood. “Don’t move – don’t talk – where is it?”

“Where’s what?” Tab rolled over, then sat up and shook his head like a dog. “Shucks,” he said, gazing glassily at Rock’s chest. He made a funny face. “Not sure now’s the time to get naked.”

“You’re not hit?”

“I tripped on this,” Tab said, kicking at a cinderblock. “There are broken lightbulbs all over the yard. I think I got some glass in my shoulder, is all.”

Suddenly Rock felt time slow back down, felt the thick, soupy air again. He pulled away the shirt and examined Tab’s chest, where the fabric of his uniform shirt had been torn and bloody particles of dirt and glass were matted into the cloth. “I don’t – I can’t – “ Tears filled the corners of his eyes as the muscles in his head, face and neck relaxed.

“Boy, am I a mess. Imagine what Momma will say when I try to sneak this stuff into the wash.” Tab got shakily to his feet, and looked around the yard, at the empty shopping carts and painted truck tires. He holstered his gun and tried to brush himself off, then winced and pressed his fingertips into his chest. “She’ll take one look at this gore and say she knew it all along, she sees me dead every time I leave for work.”

“You’re not dead,” Rock said, to himself as well as to Tab. “You’re alive.”

“You better cancel that ten-four. We’ll look like jackasses.”

Something was glinting in the light coming out of the open door of the house, something tiny and tangled in Tab’s ripped shirt. Part of the front pocket had been ripped open, exposing its contents. Rock touched the object with his fingertip and it came with him, held to him by dirt and blood. It was a ring made of steel, perfectly round and silver.

“I’m supposed to be on one knee,” Tab managed to say.

“I was going to ask you,” Rock said, his throat tight, “to move in with me. The new house. Make it ours.”

He lifted the shirt in his hand back up to Tab’s neck, wiped at the few drops of blood still sitting at his throat. Married or cohabiting couples could not remain partners on the force. Where was all the blood coming from, how could there be so much of it from a little glass? He unbuttoned Tab’s shirt to below his nipples, pulled the shoulders away and pushed down Tab’s undershirt. A couple of inch-long gashes striped Tab’s skin above and below his collarbone, two parallel slices that still oozed in the corners.

In the academy one supervising officer had urged the cadets not to be heroes, saying “The experience that tells you what really counts in life is when a punk pulls a gun and threatens to shoot you.” He wondered if the supervising officer had ever felt about another cop the way he felt about Tab. He knew that sometimes in wartime, men had felt that way for one another, and he knew from being on the force, and seeing people almost always at their worst, that life was war.

Tab pulled away from Rock, knelt on the ground. He smiled with one corner of his mouth: “I’m old-fashioned. My favorite part of the vows is the honor and obey stuff.”

They could not live together and work together. He would have to watch from bed as Tab got up, got dressed, and left for the station alone. Maybe that was something worth suffering; maybe even those feelings were a part of yourself, a part you could somehow turn over to the other person. “Yes,” he said, not waiting, not waiting any more, “yes.”