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A Country Of Giants

Benjamin Mace Greenlee

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A COUNTRY OF GIANTS

by

Benjamin Mace Greenlee

Bachelor of Arts, University of Louisville, 2010

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts


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This thesis, submitted by Benjamin Mace Greenlee in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.



Elizabeth Harris Behling, Chairperson



Mike Flynn,




Chris Nelson,


,

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This thesis is being submitted by the appointed advisory committee as having met all of the requirements of the Graduate School at the University of North Dakota and is hereby approved.



Dr. Wayne Swisher,
Dean of the Graduate School



Date

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Title A Country of Giants
Department English
Degree Master of Arts

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vi
ABSTRACT.....	vii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. AND WHO COULD NAME THE SHAPES OF CLOUDS.....	14
III. HABITAT.....	36
IV. A SOLITARY DROWNED MAN.....	53
V. SNAKE MASTER.....	72
WORKS CITED.....	89

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ABSTRACT

This thesis, A Country of Giants, consists of four short stories which explore the borderland between youthful innocence and adult understanding. This borderland is often considered in “coming of age” tales, a literary genre that investigates the growth of youthful characters. Through my four stories I examine themes including a loss of innocence, claiming one’s identity, independence, and sexual understanding. In addition to those themes I present situations where adults lose their experiential understanding, digressing into a more innocent and uninformed state. I tend to write realistic stories, and it is my hope this use of realism develops well-rounded characters that a reader can sympathize with, involving those readers with my stories. I also write with a stylized language. Due to my character’s’ inability to name the situations and experiences they are encountering, my heavy use of metaphor and simile—as well as disjointed sentence structure—renders this lack of understanding as accurately and as vividly as possible. Lastly, in addition to my stories I include an introduction to my thesis discussing the influence of other writers, including their particular themes and writing styles, which places my own work within an established literary tradition.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I was afraid of life. That's why I read comic books and stories about people who threw punches to solve their problems. They were about quests and testing one's self—two things I didn't understand—and heroes who dealt with solitude—something I knew too much about. Mainly these stories were violent, and that was okay, because I read them from the safety of my bedroom. Of course what I read wasn't well-written but it was entertaining. A story needed to elevate me, transport me to a strange new world I hadn't encountered before. I needed to be engaged. These aren't the terms I used when I was young. Mainly I wanted explosions, which seems troubling to me now. Perhaps I was reaching for something my life hadn't provided, and in the reaching I discovered character and language, two essential elements of fiction. However, my youthful ideas of strangeness lingered; a story still needed to entertain. So these elements of character, language, and entertainment combined to drastically change what I thought a story was about.

I began to see stories as an imaginative act governed by sympathy. I don't mean sympathy for other people, but rather an appreciation and understanding of the experiences encountered regularly, a love for my own life. Despite the adventures I read about as a child I began to see that reality was full of the same interesting scenarios, full of rich characters that spoke a magic sort of language and lived through entertaining

situations. So like many other contemporary writers I became a student of realism. For me, this literary tradition captures the relationships we create and cultivate on a daily basis. Not the fantasy-shaped characters of my childhood but the ordinary people we all know and are. However, a story at its core goes against the ordinary. A situation in a story is new, different, and strange. This is not to suggest that the pattern of a story is new or strange—all people experience moments of crippling heartbreak, or moments of intense joy, or experience the same emotion that millions of others experience—but the very happening of a story challenges commonplace. How many times has someone uttered the phrase, “You won’t believe what happened to me today,” then described a situation that stood apart from all other situations that made up their day? That someone is telling a story, perhaps one heard and repeated over and over, but with a difference, a slight variance that could be named unique, *because it happened to them*. A story, then, becomes a personal moment of contact between the teller and the listener, describing a common situation that challenges, yet invites, all the variants of that same situation. A story offers the opportunity to examine change, and this is how stories entertain the reader, by showing us our own peculiarity and the changes in our lives. For the stories in this thesis I’ve created strange and weird situations for my characters to see how they change, and for my characters, growing into an adult is when most of that change occurs.

The stories in [A Country of Giants](#) deal with that strange transitional period between childhood and adulthood. To highlight this growing period the stories are dictated by age: a boy learning to be a man; teenagers acting like adults; a twenty-something son trying to be friends with his mother; a father searching for his role in a family. Essentially my characters are trying to recognize something about their lives,

what direction their lives are moving in. I believe these stories are called “coming-of-age tales,” in which a child creates a new understanding of something based on an experience he has had, innocence to experience, though, I believe, all stories are coming-of-age stories. Characters change, regardless of age, and because of this change they are different people. They learn. In these thesis stories my characters find themselves in peculiar situations that force them to adjust to what they believe is the “norm,” to encounter strange, and my characters, through a first-person perspective, try to understand what they are experiencing. Perhaps my narrators find understanding, perhaps they don’t, but they continue to live regardless, even if they can’t comprehend their new condition.

The first story in my thesis, “And Who Could Name the Shapes of Clouds”, is, I believe, an example of a child changing into an adult, or at the very least, encountering a bridge that would allow him to cross over into adulthood. My protagonist Roy is not only torn between male and female—his parents vie for his affections, and the person he has always been associated with is a girl—but between childhood and adulthood. This gender tension arrives through watching his divorced parents compete in varying contests at the county fair. The two are literally and metaphorically fighting to become dominant over the other and to win. Roy loves them both in different ways and can’t quite understand what force has come between them. Why can’t they be on the same side? Roy doesn’t have the knowledge of experience to answer this question, which is important because I use narrative distance to tell the story. The adult narrator is discussing this past situation in an unknown present. Even after years of contemplation, of living with what he witnessed, Roy still doesn’t have the complete knowledge one

might have. In essence, Roy hasn't come of age, locked in a childhood which traditionally suggests a lack of understanding. After a discussion with his father, the adult Roy narrator says, "There were no real words from him, no advice or wisdom or fact meant to show how much he knew about everything...He couldn't say it any clearer than I already had" (32-33). I meant to demonstrate how maturity doesn't equate to understanding. Both father and son have the same limited comprehension of the situation. Both adults don't "know" how to interpret their experience. And for both characters, adulthood has not provided an answer.

This notion is also exemplified through the main character's first sexual encounter with a girl, Jamie, who happens to be his best friend. She has changed by entering a world governed by sexual expectation; she is filling her social-sexual gender role. Roy is developmentally behind her. He hasn't transitioned into that world yet. Then, as a climax to the story, Jamie thrusts that world upon him when he isn't ready. The scene reads, "She stood, her hair wild and her eyes, her eyes so wide. She was calm and still, watching me. I was being ripped apart, falling away at the seams" (31). I emphasize the physical at this point, and throughout the story, to demonstrate how our bodies govern who we are: Jamie is quietly assured of her place; Roy is so confused his body can barely handle the reaction. He says, "I pushed her off and moved to the stump, panting and shivering and not knowing what that meant" (30). This experience is new to him, strange. The two can no longer remain friends like they once were because this period of growth has demanded they change their relationship to fit the new world they inhabit. It is change Roy does not want but must embrace. He is a character lost in transition.

Though the above story is only one of four in my thesis it possesses many of what might be considered my strengths, with language being perhaps my greatest strength. I believe the style a writer uses is the main stimulus for a reader, drawing that reader in, enchanting the reader and engaging him or her more than any other element of a story. A mix of sparse and elaborative language can work on a reader in multiple ways, creating a rising and falling sense of sound which draws a reader closer to the story, the source of that sound. It is a sensory sensation. Basically, a mix of language strikes different notes. When I want to strike the reader depends on where he or she happens to be within the page, paragraph, or sentence. I attempt this technique in my story "Habitat," in which a first-person, male narrator tries to understand the concept of home, encountering this concept through different scenes and experiences. Midway through the story I include this mix of language when this narrator describes a blue-clad prostitute that drives through construction sites in an old ice cream truck trolling for costumers. To take just a few lines from the long description, my narrator says, "Her cheeks were speckled with glitter and tiny azure stars. Her eyes were a desolate grey. There was some sort of spell here, reminding me of home, of comfort, and this hippy child, this mother of the ocean, knew exactly what she was doing" (38). The ending six words aren't as exotic as the adjectives "azure" or "desolate," but they come at the end of a long paragraph full of short, colorful clauses strung together with semicolons. The six words act as a sort of unadorned punctuation, giving the reader a moment to relax after all the adornment he or she's just taken in, especially given the strange context of my character's describing a prostitute.

I've learned this use of language from writers such as Jorge Luis Borges, Denis Johnson, and Cormac McCarthy. I found these writers at different stages in my fiction career with Borges being the first. After reading one of Borges' stories the line between reality and fantasy is blurred, the same quality that enchanted and entertained me as a child. I am completely immersed in the reality of ideas he creates and I believe he creates this reality by using style, by warping what is perceived with language. Take this line from "The Circular Ruins"—with the translation by Anthony Bonner—: the passage reads, "He dreamt [the statue] was alive, tremulous: it was not an atrocious bastard of a tiger and a colt, but at the same time these two fiery creatures and also a bull, a rose, and a storm" (Borges, 126). How could one thing be so many things? The collection of varying information within this passage has allowed me to perceive the shifting nature of this statue. I can imagine, in my own terms, the single-syllable bull or storm—as they are completely unadorned with adjectives or descriptors. However, their association with "atrocious" and "tremulous" limits and highlights the possibilities for my imagination, mixing longer words with shorter words to actively confuse the reader's imagination so he or she can imagine many things in one. Though a product of the translation, which must be acknowledged, the style here is effective and engaging; the multisyllabic words expand while the single-syllable words retract. Borges' fiction is breathing. The words have been chosen very carefully, for their sound. Though I am not close to having that type of artistic power, I emulate this writing by trying to manipulate the reader in similar ways. The first page of "Habitat," for example, ends by saying, "Kid Louie shrieked with laughter and in the early morning, out in the yard, we sang football fightsongs then slept where we sat, cans in hand, dreaming of bacon breakfasts and hot showers and home"

(34-35). The use of occasional alliteration, phrases strung together with conjunctions and commas, and ending with the long “o” followed by the buzzing, resonant “m” of “home” is, hopefully, creating a sound that engages the reader. “Home” finishes the sentence while simultaneously establishing the theme of the story. The words, and their ordering, act as a stimulus, pulling the reader in and showcasing the entertaining world I’m attempting to create.

Another element of style I’m interested in is the use of arresting metaphors and similes. I make use of this figurative language within my story “Snake Master” to show the chaotic and strange world this “father” character has created—he breaks into an animal clinic to steal medicine with his friend Taco only to realize something important about his life: he doesn’t belong anywhere. My drug-fueled narrator makes a tender comment as he describes a physical characteristic of Taco, saying that “he had flowers for eyes and when he looked at you it was a special occasion” (69). Given the context of the story and the character—a scene prior to this passage has him bringing a rattlesnake to a birthday party—this description is incredibly human. He is showing he cares. Other similes and metaphors throughout help establish the reality this character lives in, mainly that it is influenced by his drug use. He tells us that “Streetlamps blurred by, firing like synapses” (71), and, “I saw shapes forming themselves out of the dark. Taco’s face came to me like a memory recovered” (73). Or an especially disturbing simile after my narrator crashes his animal-filled car: “[Taco] was holding a two-inch fang up to his eye like a pearl. It looked slick with blood” (79). These techniques of comparing one thing to another are not only important for characters that are trying to understand a particular situation, but they also help shock the reader. My reader doesn’t expect to see flowers

compared to eyes or streetlights compared to the body's nervous system, but when I connect two dissimilar objects or feelings the reader needs to momentarily rethink his or her understanding. Obviously I wouldn't want to overly confuse the reader, but a few well-placed phrases can create character and setting while simultaneously engaging and shocking the reader. And though I've scaled back on the use of metaphors and similes as I've progressed as a writer, I still find joy in crafting these lines as they are often the most memorable of any in the piece.

My shocking yet tender metaphors in "Snake Master" are perhaps influenced most by Denis Johnson's story collection Jesus' Son. In Johnson's story "Work," his narrator dreamily describes a female bartender as "she poured doubles like an angel, right up to the lip of a cocktail glass, no measuring... You had to go down on them like a hummingbird over a blossom" (Johnson, 53-54); in the final lines of the story the narrator comments, "I'll never forget you. Your husband will beat you with an extension cord and the bus will pull away leaving you standing there in tears, but you were my mother" (Johnson, 54). The ending is incredibly disturbing yet tender as well. It starts with nearly back-to-back similes, then ends with this idea of nurturing and love. However, Johnson's characters aren't just junkies or washed-up dregs. They are people, and Johnson's language shows them as human beings, almost moving into religious/spiritual understanding of their condition. By crafting lines that would normally get tossed out—"like an angel" is fairly cliché—and pushing the meaning of language and words a bit further than expected, Johnson is able to develop his characters while stylistically engaging the reader. His drug-fueled narrator perceives this barmaid *as* an angel, a

divinity who eases the stress of his life. Because of Johnson's use of language, and the nature of his characters, his stories have become a measure for some of my newer stories.

Of course one cannot have strength without the balance of weakness.

Plotting, I hate plotting. This incredibly important element in nearly every story is the main difficulty I encounter while I write. I believe I am too concerned with ideas, which is another way of saying I'm trying too hard to enforce meaning. However, I've come to realize that plot helps ensure meaning. When I use the term "plot," I am referring to the direction and obstacles characters take and encounter that lead to meaning, for the characters or the reader. Though multiple facets of a story combine to create meaning, plot is the core of that significance, showing a character's movement and choices which has shifted—or returned—from where the story initially started. By following plot, however linear or twisted, a moment of recognition is reached. Exactly what is recognized will vary from reader to reader, and from character to character, but in every case a new appreciation or understanding is obtained, or at least appears in sight. People are malleable, and plot is the force that causes them to turn and create a new shape, essentially, to embrace change, or reject it.

A story I haven't discussed from my thesis yet is "A Solitary Drowned Man," which is by far my weakest story, mainly due to plot. As with "And Who Could Name the Shapes of Clouds," where two plots happen simultaneously, with my narrator's parents fighting for control over their lives and also the narrator's friend pushing gender expectations onto him, I'm trying to incorporate two separate plots in "A Solitary Drowned Man" that comment on each other, working with and against each other. However, in this particular story, the two plots never converge. The opening of "A

"Solitary Drowned Man" reads, "I was sitting on the comfiest sofa ever made thinking about what Mother really meant by you don't love me anymore when Tate asked if I would be his porn buddy" (49). Though perhaps an interesting opening, it suggests the problems of the piece: a son's relationship with a mother and friend's relationship with another friend. How will the two relationships meet? They don't. Basically I bit off more than I could chew and the execution of this story falls short of what I originally intended. I believe the parts are present, and there are still a few lines I'm proud of, but the two plots don't add-up enough; they perhaps never effectively come together. "A Solitary Drowned Man" is also the earliest written story in this thesis, so I can proudly say my idea of plotting has grown dramatically, given how the other stories have now been shaped—I believe they work much better. However, the revision process was a huge marker for developing the plots I've created, as well as trying to scale-back the influences of other writers. By continually working on character through revisions—determining what change they needed to undergo—I've come to appreciate plot more. The obstacles I place in front of my character push them in strange new circumstances and worlds, places they don't fully understand. In fiction, "obstacles" function as another word for plot. I continue to develop my obstacles.

In addition to my weakness with plots, I also have a tendency to overwrite. This overwriting is a byproduct of my love for language. I string too many clauses together. I force emotion onto the page with philosophical musings. I try too hard to create an event rather than just relate it. Though this event creation could be considered admirable, it is often infuriating for the reader. McCarthy does a little of this when he's really "on," attempting to illuminate the inferiority of hope in mankind's dismal existence. A passage

from The Road reads, “The ashes of the late world carried on the bleak and temporal winds to and fro in the void. Carried forth and scattered and carried forth again. Everything uncoupled from its shoring” (McCarthy, 11). Though beautiful language, this passage is taken from a novel, where, perhaps, dreamy messages have a place. Stories, and specifically realist stories, don’t have as much space, and their use of dreamy, flowing language might need to be more sporadic and purposeful. The information needs to be slightly more controlled. Early drafts of every single story in this thesis had over-the-top passages that hammered the reader over the head with meaning. From an earlier draft of “A Solitary Drowned Man” my narrator describes his mother in an overwrought way. He says,

She moved close and considered me with a mixed look that I can only term as pity and confusion, the same starving gaze I’d seen on all types of people. A longing meant to call back whatever minor part of ourselves that is missing or vanished or has abandoned us. I wanted to understand what she saw, and if it could be named. I wanted it to keep hurting because that’s all it did.

Even now I’m not entirely sure what this passage intended to mean, but I know it isn’t working. Compare these lines to my final thesis version and it is easier to see how I’ve scaled back the use of cramming prose down my reader’s throat: “She looked so small to me then, especially with all the experiences she invented to fill up her life, making that life desperately important, frantically real” (58). With many guiding influences, I held back that impulse to let my pen fly. Certainly there are still traces of those early draft passages within this thesis but they do have a small space on the page—I do need a few

precious moments of outpouring—, but I’ve learned that I need to stop forcing certain moments. Just let things be. Sometimes simple is better. But hey, I’m still learning.

And in regards to this learning process I’d like to end this introduction to A Country of Giants with a story from my childhood, which seems fitting given the context of my thesis stories.

I was writing a story about a warrior frog, some anthropomorphic sword swinger—the sort of character that enchanted me as a child. I remember working hard on it, as hard as any eleven-year-old does. The color of my warrior frog’s skin had to be just right while the arc of his swing needed perfection. The blood of his enemies was dark red. There were no interior thoughts and of course the sun was shining. That was how I pictured the world of stories, more engaging than reality. When I finished this creative process I felt accomplished, that I had arrived. I can’t be positive but I’m sure the entire thing was no longer than five pages.

At the urging of my mom I showed it to my grandmother. Apparently she was a writer, had published some poems somewhere at some time. I have those poems with me now. She read my story once, twice, maybe three times. I remember walking around her apartment as she read. I’d been there a hundred times but the ceiling always looked enormous and her library of books was daunting. The room smelled like history. I was so small, and I thought, What would this woman say? She was old, so whatever came out of her mouth was a command.

She called to me and asked a very important question.

“It’s good, Bennie. Entertaining.” Then she paused for a moment, knitting her brow and perhaps rereading a particular line or passage. “But, who is he fighting for?”

I didn't understand the question. They were his enemies, so they were bad.

That's all.

"Think about it," she said.

I did, but not for a long time, and I gradually remember it as a question of "what does your character want?" This meant attempting to create another human being on the page. It meant growing into an environment where other people matter just as much as I did. It meant an understanding of some kind. Being an adult, I think. And though I am still trying to appreciate this phenomenon of togetherness—of tying one life to another—I continue to write with character in mind, and I continue to use a language that engages, entertains, and enchants. Basically, I continue to make worlds.

CHAPTER II

AND WHO COULD NAME THE SHAPES OF CLOUDS

My father had a girlfriend and Momma didn't like that at all. This was decades ago, when I was twelve, young but not young enough. We lived in Bledsoe County then, the colon of Tennessee. I say that with contempt but I learnt a lot there, even if the meaning of certain things wasn't taught to me proper. Mornings after a rain. A fallen nest full of baby hawks, all broken and forgotten and mummified. Biscuits and well-water for breakfast every day for a month. The nearness of my best friend Jamie. Her touch. I also remember a heat so strong it burned the breath right out of my lungs. It always felt like summer in Bledsoe, and that never helped anything.

My father was a bit of a stray. For family he only had me and Momma, and Rita, his girlfriend. There was a kindness in him sometimes but it seemed to become muted and snuffed whenever he chose. He couldn't hold a job but he knew everything. People gave him a certain respect because of this. He learnt from books. Back then in a small town like Bledsoe that was enough to create power. Occasionally he would tell a story or fact and the listeners would lean close, catching every detail and nodding whenever it matched something they already believed or suspected. Blueticks have the largest paw of any breed. When considering the Columbian Exchange, potatoes changed the history of the world. White blood cells defend our bodies from invaders. "Leucocytes" he called them. Employers will cut you quicker than a fart if it saves them a nickel. My father was

a funny man, and all the wrong people called him friend, but he had a way of looking at you as if you weren't there. That's why Momma couldn't stay with him, I think. She needed the attention. She needed to feel real.

After the separation he kept the house and the land seeing as it was a gift from his dead granddaddy anyway. Momma started a double-shift at the Pic/Pace and found an apartment in town above the dry-cleaners. There wasn't a door for the bathroom so we hung a sheet from the ceiling. Momma wanted to apologize for that, for everything. She looked defeated. Every night she soaked her hands in saltwater and she sighed great big sighs as if she were deflating. Staying at the apartment half the months of the year gradually taught me that her life had taken a turn away from vitality. She was no longer young. I realized she didn't want me to abandon her, and that realization made me sorry.

When my father was home I slept on the couch, down the hall from his and Rita's bedroom, otherwise I had the place to myself. You're a man now. Live like one. I didn't know what a man was. Perhaps it was shaped with solitude. I learned to love bologna and ketchup sandwiches in that house.

I was staying with my father that summer, the summer I want to explain. We lived like strangers, me and my father. I did whatever I wanted while he usually did the same. He forced me to go to the county fair though, with Rita, the clown of my childhood. She always wore cherry red lipstick and bright clothing. "Outfits," she called them. I chewed tiny pieces of skin from the inside of my mouth and spat them on these supposed outfits whenever we passed each other in the hall. I thought it was appropriate somehow.

After Rita moved in there was a great push to welcome her into my life, based on her wants. My father didn't much care how the two of us viewed each other, though after her complaints he caved and created family time. He would've never used those words otherwise.

Even though Rita was around I still had Jamie to look forward to. She was finally coming back to Bledsoe after a summer in Georgia with her cousins. We hadn't seen or talked to each other in months, save for a postcard of a peach tree orchard which told me when she'd be back. Her return was momentous to my twelve year old life. She was my friend, and that's important. While everyone else at school called me 'bones' she called me 'Roy'. No one could beat her at a footrace and she could outwrestle anyone in our grade. Her feet were dirtier than mine. She ate live crickets. When we swam in the creek we spat water into each other's mouths and it didn't matter. These traits meant something. I felt strong around her, and when she looked at me I knew I wasn't alone. That didn't stop her from kicking my ass from time to time though. That's what friends do I think, keep each other in check. Momma said me and Jamie were sweethearts, had been since we were babies, playing in the water trough, naked and not knowing what that meant. She went on and on about it, never letting her notions go no matter how angry I got. As we grew up I showed her the black-eyes Jamie occasionally gifted me and asked if they were kisses. Momma said yes. Before the separation, she believed there were different ways to love.

*

“Get your ass to the fair,” I said to Jamie on the phone. I’d been trying her all morning. Rita waited by the door with an ice tea and a frown from the cuss words I only used around her. It was my house, so I gave her my back.

“I’ll try,” Jamie said. “I’ll need to find a way to get there.” That voice, how do I describe that voice? I know it had a way of filling me whenever I heard it. I didn’t feel skinny anymore. I felt weightless.

“Try, nothin.”

“Be friendly,” she said. “Be sweet to me.”

My father honked the horn once. There wouldn’t be a second time. I told Jamie okay and hung-up. Her tone was different somehow. She sounded faraway, further than the telephone lines could reach.

Rita finished her tea then grinned. Her face was heavy with paint and that chemical perfume she always wore burned my nose. She thought it smelled like lavender but she used so much it reminded me of the cleaning aisle at the Pic/Pac. It soaked our clothes and carpet. Rita could’ve been a real knockout if she didn’t try so hard. My father kept her anyway.

“Daddy’s getting impatient,” Rita said.

“That’s why he settled on you,” I told her, moving toward the door.

She reached down and twisted my ear, pinching the lobe with her fake nails. This tiny retribution didn’t hurt anymore but I let her think it did so she’d keep doing it.

“Teach you some manners.”

“Yes ma’am,” I said. “I’m always learning.”

As soon as I stepped into the afternoon sun I felt my shirt go damp. Rita was behind me and I knew she'd melt like a lily. My father was sitting in the truck, an old 1958 Fleetside that came with the house. It was slightly rusted but my father would drive down Main Street slower than the other vehicles, showy and proud.

“Get your ass in the truck,” he said. I opened the door but Rita stopped me.

“Daddy, your boy isn't respectful. Saying all kinds of nasty things. I don't feel much appreciated around here.”

He looked at me hard, then jerked his thumb to the bed of the Fleetside.

I hopped in the back gladly. They thought it was a punishment but I could watch the sky pass over me in sheets of blue, the clouds fat and lazy or stretched into thin ropes, dust whirling up from the corners of the bed. The best part came whenever we hit the potholes. A quick jolt with my body pressing into the metal beneath me, then, for a brief moment, I could fly, weightless.

The Bledsoe county fair was a major week for the people of Bledsoe and the people of the surrounding counties. There were truck pulls and mud runs and a demolition derby that crippled a man after I moved away. Amusement Alley was the main attraction though, full of goldfish easily won and easily flushed, softball throws, contests of various sorts for cash prizes, a funhouse maze, a shooting gallery where the high school boys would line up with heir quarters and win overstuffed tigers and giant hearts for whatever girl came with them that day. There were mechanical rides with names like Hellspin and Madcap and Dominator Drop. The purpose of these rides was to

rip you apart. The safety harnesses were always loose. Once there was a gorilla in a cage. The sign said it had travelled from the wilds of Africa and had eaten one of the men who had tried to capture it. We threw peanuts against its back so it would move. I never saw the color of its eyes. Cotton candy came in one flavor: pink.

“Here’s a quarter,” my father said. “If you can turn it into two then it’s a good day.” He was wearing his good jeans and a baseball cap to shade his eyes. Even through his pearl snap button-up I could see the muscles that turned me scarce when he was angry. He looked immense. I knew why women like Rita wanted to hang on his arm. He made them feel special. Somehow Momma fell for it too.

They left me to my own devices so I stayed close to the rides hoping to run into Jamie. She and Momma found me first.

“Look at *this* sweet lady Roy.” I’d been hanging around Amusement Alley, wondering how far my money could stretch and laughing at stunned riders who came off the Whirly-Gig. I finally decided on a bag of caramel corn when Momma and Jamie walked straight through the crowd, as if they knew exactly how to surprise me.

They were both wearing dresses, soft and dainty and freely moving in the breeze their bodies made as they walked. Momma occasionally wore dresses, but they always came to her ankles. Jamie wouldn’t go near one. They matched somehow, blue and yellow, and the summer sun cast them in a graceful light. Their hair was bouncy and curly, Momma’s blonde and Jamie’s the color of chestnuts. It had been at least a week since I’d last seen Momma, Jamie even longer. I couldn’t name how they held themselves, not then. Their toenails were painted the same color.

“Aren’t we pretty, Roy?” Momma asked. “Don’t you think?”

I was staring at Jamie. She had her hands behind her back and had barely looked me in the eye.

“You’re taller,” she said.

I considered myself and I considered her.

“You’re not.”

“Shush it, Roy,” Momma said. “The man at the gate said we were sisters. I just laughed and laughed and told him thank you.” I took a step back and looked at both of them. Momma held a big purse and kept smoothing the sides of her dress with a free hand while Jamie tucked a piece of hair behind her ear. I wondered what it felt like, that piece of hair.

“Say we’re pretty, Roy.”

“You’re pretty, Momma.”

“Jamie, too.”

“Okay,” I said. Jamie smiled, but then it vanished just as quickly.

“Oh stop staring, Roy. You’re being rude.”

“Yes ma’am,” I said.

“Where’s your father?” Momma asked. She kept turning from side-to-side and held her chin up. “And that jezebel.”

“Around,” I said.

“Don’t start,” she said. “Here. Take this five dollars and treat Jamie. Treat her like a lady.” I usually had to beg for this much, doing quick chores around the apartment.

“Can we get corndogs?”

Momma stopped searching through the fairgrounds and turned to me strangely, then pointed to Jamie with her open hand as if I hadn't seen her. "You don't get it, Roy. You don't understand."

An announcement came over the speakers then. The tug-of-war was about to commence. Men versus the women. Any interested parties should make their way to the south-side of the petting zoo.

"Found him," Momma said. My father always participated in the contests, different ones every year. He said they were easy money. That the other chickenshits couldn't touch him. He won most of the time.

Momma walked towards the contest arena, leaving me and Jamie behind. I stepped closer. We were finally equal heights.

"Are you a lady now?" I asked.

She frowned at me. I noticed the hair spilling over her shoulders which stuck to the curve of her neck in clumps, dark like burnt vines. Tiny dots of sweat pearled her upper lip. Her breath reached my face despite the oppressive sun. It felt cool.

"Well?"

"You're still ignorant," she said.

"Same as you." I thought we were being playful but she didn't look like she was having fun.

"Not anymore," she said. Her words came out soft and lonely, as if she were unsure. "Come on."

We made our way to the tug-of-war. Jamie said Momma had a direction for how the day would go, detailing it to her on the car ride over. I wasn't paying much attention. Jamie had touched my hand. Hers was slick with sweat, slick, yet soft.

Me and Jamie pushed through the crowd to the front, all the bodies squeezing the two of us together. I saw Rita at the very edge, leaning her face and all that makeup into a small compact she always carried. My father was already on the field, hammering the dirt with his boot heel then bending to pull tufts of grass, watching them fall straight in the windless day. Ed Tom Grady stood behind him, not doing much of anything. There were two stock-boys from the hardware store next to him, smoking cigarettes and smiling to themselves. My father pointed them to the rope then held it like he was pulling, pretending to brace his legs. They flicked their spent butts and stopped smiling.

Momma strode onto the field, pulling a pair of gardening gloves from her purse. A few whistles came from the crowd and that usually didn't happen around Momma. "She's ready," someone shouted. Her yellow dress blazed in the exposing sun and her skin had shaded cinnamon almost instantly. For some reason I noticed the back of her legs. I'd never seen them before. Her calves were as solid as bowling pins. She was magnificent.

"Still telling people what to do, eh David?"

"Katherine," my father said, dropping the rope and folding his arms across his chest. "You look nice. I haven't seen you that pretty in a long time."

Momma threw her purse to an empty sideline then meshed her gloved hands together.

"You aren't saying anything I don't already know."

"What do think you're doing?" he asked.

“As usual David, I’m earning the money.”

My father laughed and my mother didn’t. Rita bounced onto the field and kissed her man, right on the lips, right in front of my Momma, then walked away again. She wore a lot of bracelets and she jingled when she walked. I did hate her.

The announcer came over the speaker again though he was standing on a podium next to us. He kept patting his face with a handkerchief and detailed the specifics of the event, looking very pleased with himself. He was all voice.

“I see we have some bulls on the field already,” he said, “and one very lovely lady, but we need to bulk-up the beauty team. Come now women, show us your strength!”

Jamie poked me in the side with her elbow. “You could take’em.” She was watching the stock-boys at the end of the rope. Both of them high school kids. They were years away from me.

“No way. I’d have to be on the girls’ side.”

“You already are,” she said. “You always have been.” I noticed she kept pulling on the hem of her dress. She wasn’t teasing me, but I didn’t understand what she meant, so I flicked her cheek. All she did was grab my wrist and place it at her side.

“What did you do in Georgia?” I asked.

“Shush,” she said. “Watch your Momma.”

There were more women on the field now, eight in total. Momma was standing at the back of the line, wrapping the rope around her forearm. Something untouchable about her. She didn’t bristle when the rope scorched her skin like the other women. I think I saw her spit.

“Don’t hold the rope like that Katherine,” my father shouted. “Hold it like this.” Some of the men in the crowd laughed. He was smiling, having a good time. He only smiled when he wanted to impress strangers.

Momma gave a quick tug then the pop-gun sounded and they really went at it.

The women pulled hard and the stock-boys went down immediately. They had overestimated their own strength and been dragged down because of it. They sulked off the field, dusting their knees and staring at their feet. Jamie squeezed my wrist.

My father and Ed Tom barely budged though. They were seasoned. That’s how my father would’ve described it. Used to the ways of the world.

“Come *ooooooooon* Daddy,” Rita shouted. “Come *ooooooooon* Daddy!” She was jumping on the sidelines, her hair and body bouncing haphazard. Several of the men next to me stared at her, jealous and wishful.

Ed Tom grunted and pulled and nearly all the women went down, falling off in twos or threes or letting go and rubbing their rope-burned hands. They all lost except the Mason Twins and Momma, who held on and struggled.

The thing to know about the Mason Twins was their job. They cut trees for a living. Their daddy had done it and his daddy before him and his daddy before him. It was a generational occupation that came down to two baby girls. They didn’t pass up the axe and their bodies became hard from work. Some of the younger kids threw pebbles at them and ran. I heard they chose their own dance partners at the Friday socials and on the church steps their laughter was thunderous. All the men in town were secretly in love with them. Secretly afraid.

But it didn’t help Momma.

She strained and pulled and slid and I could see the veins enlarge on her neck like baby snakes and sweat dripped from her elbows in great strings and her arms were as solid as stone and Ed Tom nearly touched the center line and Dorothy Mason nearly touched the center line and the crowd cheered then hushed then cheered again when they realized it was an actual match and they pushed against us and Rita yelled “Come *ooooooooon* Daddy!” and Jamie yelled “Come *ooooooooon* Kathy!” though I’d never heard her use Momma’s name and Jamie squeezed my hand and she was right next to me and time didn’t exist and there was life sweet life in Momma and by God she almost had it until my father smiled with gritted teeth and squatted and pushed back and yanked hard and ended the whole damn show in one long tug.

Momma was lying in the dust next to the sisters.

“Almost,” my father said, removing his cap to wipe his forehead with the inside of his elbow. He walked off the field toward Rita who jumped into his arms and kissed his cheeks and neck.

The Voice congratulated the teams on a victory well-earned and called the men to the podium but Ed Tom stayed to help the ladies. Everyone clapped then laughed as Jean Mason lifted him from the ground and kissed him a great big kiss on the lips. He waved his arms triumphantly. Me and Jamie ran past them to Momma as she walked off the field to her purse, trying to dust herself which had now turned into splotches of mud from her soaked dress. I could nearly see through to her under-slip.

“You almost had it,” I said.

She turned to me and her face was burnt with exhaustion. “I heard what he said, Roy. I tried my hardest.”

“I know it,” I said.

“Then don’t tell me almost.”

“Yes ma’am.”

One of her knees was skinned and she kept trying to remove the dirt from her dress, only smearing it deeper into the fabric. I reached to help but she grabbed my hand and held it, squeezing it once then letting go.

“I thought I had it this time,” she said. “I thought I won.”

Jamie ripped off her own sleeve in one clean pull and rubbed at the splotches in Momma’s hem, scrubbing hard and spitting occasionally into the fabric. Momma looked young then, relaxing and letting someone else take care of her. Standing there, close to each other, they were sisters. These are the only terms I can apply to them.

“Oh,” Momma said, “oh sweet girl.”

“We’ll beat him,” Jamie said. “We got this.”

The Voice came over the speaker again, congratulating the winners once more and asking everyone to gear up for the next few contests. More Money! More Fun! More chances for greatness!

“Yes,” Momma said, straightening herself. “Yes.”

She lost the softball throw, and the 100 meter dash, and the log splitting countdown. New people tried this time, lining up against the other and seeing how far they could go. My father won most of the contests and took these events as opportunities to teach the entire crowd, especially Momma. It’s about the curve, Katherine. Hold the ball like this and spin it. The biblical wars were fought with stones. Giants toppled.— Olympic runners don’t have nothing on the Tailteann Games. Ireland, circa 1829. I’m

talking BC Ed Tom. Before Christ.—Who the hell could beat a pair of female lumberjacks? Amazonians aren't natural. Cut off a breast? My God.

In situations like this, my father never stopped talking. Jamie cringed whenever he spoke and I put pieces of grass in her hair when she wasn't looking.

Last was the pie-eating contest. The contestants were seated at a table on the Voice's stage, wrapped in bibs and staring at the stack of pies donated by the Mothers of Southern Heritage Society, a collection of old women whose granddaddy's had fought in the Civil War. Momma sat at the end, next to my father. There were no other seats. Her hair was wild and there were streaks of dust on her cheeks and forehead. My father was saying something to her but I couldn't hear what it was. He laughed then dipped his finger into one of the pies, extending the dripping blueberries close to her face. The MSHS only made blueberry.

“Why are your parents so cruel to each other?” Jamie suddenly asked. I thought about it often but had never phrased the question that way. I just knew there was a distance from where they started and where they ended-up. I imagined the sycamore down by Tremble Creek behind my house. The trunk was solid and fat but after a foot off the ground it split in two different directions, each side going its own way. I used to climb that tree, bracing my arms and legs against the trunks, only making it so high, the space between them becoming too great.

“They're not friends anymore,” I said, and that sounded right.

Then the Voice spoke. Get ready. Get set. Go!

Everyone started off strong. They dugged at the pies with their hands and ate clumps of whatever came up, the crust and filling smashed together unrecognizably. All

their faces were a mess of berries and crumbs, masking their features. I could hear them eating. The air was heavy with sugar. Ed Tom took a different approach, cutting thin slices then placing each in his mouth all the way in. He ate half a pie in one minute, wiped his mouth with the bib, then sat back and watched the others good-naturedly. Some booed at his antics while everyone else laughed. I liked Ed Tom Grady. He accepted the world with equal parts mirth and dullness. I'm not saying he was stupid. I'm saying he was okay with being ignorant to what was expected of him.

My father was almost unstoppable. He brought great handfuls to his mouth and licked his fingers when he was done. Others dropped away, scooting their chairs back and walking to the edge of the stage, vomiting just out of sight. It had only been three minutes, but my father had eaten five pies. It was all power. He always carried a silver toothpick and between those pies he picked his teeth to show how much of a winner he was.

Momma labored. Even before the contest she looked sick but at the halfway point she was downright ill, placing her palms flat on the table to steady herself, dazedly watching my father eat next to her. She kept hiccupping. The Voice brought her a bucket because she refused to leave and fanned her face with his soggy handkerchief out of the gentleness of his heart. She placed that bucket in her lap and took little scoops from her fourth pie. People cheered her name and it was exhilarating to hear it in the open air, the sun touching that name with its light. But she was so very tired.

Jamie clutched her hands to her chest and kept whispering, "oh Kathy, oh Kathy, oh Kathy". There were almost tears in her eyes. It was sweet but useless. There was

Momma, but then there was my father. I honestly didn't know who I wanted to win. They both held equal power over me in different ways.

“Your Daddy's a winner.”

It was Rita, standing directly behind me, staring down that thing she called a nose.

“Did you know that?” she asked. “Did you know your Daddy's a winner?”

Rita placed her hands on my shoulders as she talked, her voice softer than I remembered. Her fingers were covered with rings and the skin beneath them was smooth and shiny. I noticed the color of her fingernail polish. Lite violet. The color of the tulips we used to have in our garden, back when Momma filled the kitchen with the smell from her special dinners and she and my father would hold each other close and dance to the music only they two heard. That was a lovely color, those garden tulips.

I kissed Rita's fingernail, her right pointer, then looked toward the stage to watch my parents. Momma was watching me, her eyes, her eyes so wide.

The Voice called out thirty seconds. Momma threw back her chair and held a fresh pie to her face with both hands like some sort of offering. She ate the entirety of one then picked up another. Filling streamed down the front of her dress, the bib had been torn away. My father stopped and watched his former wife, watching as she downed the contents of the tin. Rita dug her nails into my shoulder. Jamie didn't breath. We were all watching, witnessing some small happening that we didn't fully understand. Then I saw it. A tiny kernel of something that had evaded me up to that point. This contest wasn't a matter of how much one could eat, it was a matter of how much one could take. My father was already too full of himself, and Momma had been taking it her entire life.

“Time,” the Voice shouted. It was silent, save for the screams coming from the rides and the goats bleating in their cages. There were still things alive outside this small situation, and that’s what Momma had missed.

They helped her from the table over to the scale, weighing her again to determine the change. My father came next. He didn’t look too sure. Ed Tom declined the invitation politely and gave Momma his clean chair.

“Ten pounds, two ounces. We have a winner folks!” The Voice lifted Momma’s arms, flinging bits of pie into the crowd. A piece struck my forehead, wet and cool. I wiped it away with the inside of my elbow. The Voice told her congratulations and handed her a wad of money and the people cheered and clapped and described what happened to each other as if none of them had seen and their voices trailed off recounting the day’s events and they asked their sweethearts or daughters or sons: what’s next?

Me and Jamie took Momma behind the stage. She could barely walk and when she sat down she started to vomit. Jamie held Momma’s hair and rubbed her back in swirling motions. I turned the other way and watched for people. There were none.

When she finished she took great gasps of air. I noticed her dress. It was ripped in places and blood gathered at her hem from her skinned knees and there were scuff marks and clumps of dirt here or there and it looked saggy with sweat and the front was black or blue, depending on how much the berries had stained it. Momma was panting on the ground, ruined with victory.

“I did it,” she said. “IdiditIdiditIdiditIdiditIdidit.”

“You did Momma.”

“That’s right,” Jamie said. “It’s over now. All over.”

Momma looked to us then, looked up into our faces, and smiled sweetly. I wanted to hold her close, and sooth her with all the comforts I didn't know. Telling her how sweet she was, how much I loved her, how there was no other woman save my Momma. She was left shaking victorious in front of ten pounds of Civil War blueberries. My father left with Rita that night and Momma went home alone. How could he be so cruel? And where is that sweet woman now? She is long gone. I have abandoned her. I have abandoned that woman for other women, like my father before me, and his before his.

Then this happened.

Me and Jamie stayed at the fair. The sun had started to set, no longer burning our skin or our breath. Everything getting dark. Momma drove herself home. She told us to stay, to have a good time, that she'd pick us up at the end of the night. "You look so nice together," she said. "Roy and Jamie." We watched her leave. My father found us next, stepping close to me. He didn't look pleased but he didn't look defeated either. Somehow fresh. He told me we were leaving. I asked if I could stay. He looked toward Jamie then grabbed my shoulder, hard. "Do you know what you're doing?" I wasn't sure what he was asking and before I could say anything he turned to leave. I thought about that question the rest of the night. Do you know what you're doing?

"Nice night," Jamie said. We were sitting on a pine stump at the edge of the fairgrounds, a small space between us. The air was cool and we could hear the treefrogs crooning around us.

“Somehow,” I said.

“How’d your parents meet?” she asked.

“Not sure. High school maybe?”

She thought about that for a moment. I followed her gaze but it only led to a twisted bush of nettles.

“We start junior high in two weeks,” she said. “That’s not far off.”

“I know it.”

I pulled on one of the strings hanging from her torn sleeve. It came out quick in a zigzag movement, collecting in my lap as I kept pulling, unraveling the shoulder of her dress. Jamie grabbed my hand and placed it in the space between us, not saying anything.

“Tell me about Georgia,” I said.

She kissed me then. Out of nowhere. Out of the night. It was wet and her tongue slid over my teeth in rough movements and Jamie leaned against me and we fell off the stump into a bed of pine needles. They stuck my back. There was a rock against my shoulder blade. Jamie didn’t care, she was scrambling on top of me.

“Stop,” I said, but it came out small, as if I hadn’t said it, as if Jamie couldn’t hear.

She moved from my mouth to my neck, blowing and sucking on the skin like her breath was leaving her and she needed more. I felt a sharp pain on my shoulder and knew she bit it.

“No,” I said. My body was trembling. I was shaking loose.

“They like it,” she said. “Boys like it this way. They told me so.”

I pushed her off and moved to the stump, panting and shivering and not knowing what that meant.

She stood, her hair wild and her eyes, her eyes so wide. She was calm and still, watching me. I was being ripped apart, falling away at the seams.

She pulled her shoulders from her dress, one at a time, then let it fall to her ankles, stepping out of the ring of fabric that contained her.

She was naked. It was nearly dark but I knew she was naked. Her skin was always pale and right then she glowed a pale blue glow, like fox-fire in the distance. Like a moon through water. Translucent skin that glimpsed me her core. She was made of air. And me? I didn't know how to be soft.

“Shhh, Roy. Come on.” It was Jamie's voice, a sound of expectation, of anticipation. “Come over here.”

She reached out her hand.

I saw it, strange and familiar, unreal, and I ran. I ran so fast that the wind peeled back my skin, my legs pumping-pumping-pumping.

Jamie had beaten me, had gotten there first. But now she was behind me somewhere, left naked in a field one day that summer.

It took me all night to get to my father's house. Twelve miles. We never kept the doors bolted when we slept but I went through the window anyway, left open to air out the Rita.

There was no moon, nor stars, and everything was like walking through pitch, but I could see my way through that house and around the furniture from memory, thankful

for something familiar I could rely on, my feet throbbing in one dull pain. Jamie sat in my mind like some sort of flame, shapeless and untouchable. There would be no sleep that night. I went to the bathroom and turned on the light, oblivious to everything except the image that stared back from the mirror. I pulled my shirt over my head and let it drop to the floor.

I stood for a long time and watched the bones of my shoulders and ribs pushing against my skin when I breathed as if they were unconnected to anything. Little bumps rose on my skin from the night air and I ran my hands over them, moving across my arms and chest, wondering how my body could react without my knowing it. My heart beat against my palm. There was the bruise where my father grabbed me and Jamie's teeth marks. Side-by-side. I was in that body somewhere, I always would be, but I didn't know if I would recognize myself in this skin, or if anyone else would ever see the person I thought I knew.

“What the hell are you doing son?”

It was my father standing in the doorway, squinting against the light with one hand resting on the frame, fresh from sleep. He was barefoot, shirtless. Somehow he still filled the entire room, drawing it his way and leaving me outside of it. There were muscles on him where the mirror only showed me bones. A thin, faded scar pulled across his abdomen and curved upward, disappearing. I don't think I'd ever seen it before and he'd never told its story. There was a history with it, tying him to some past where he was still my father but maybe not just yet. He had a cruel body. I didn't like it. I now wonder who he was before we knew each other.

“I don't think we're friends anymore,” I said.

He knitted his eyebrows, surprised. “Who?” he said.

I wanted to wait, to make him wonder the rest of his life.

“Me and Jamie,” I said. “Not like we used to be.”

It was silent for moment. “That happens,” he said. “Sometimes.” That was it.

There were no real words from him, no advice or wisdom or fact meant to show how much he knew about everything. He just pushed a breath from his lungs in one long exhale and looked to the floor. He couldn’t say it any clearer than I already had. It made him smaller, but less hard, the room reshaping itself to include both of us. He knew exactly what I was talking about, or he didn’t know anything at all.

Above us, a moth flicked itself against the light from the ceiling, the glass making a *tinking* sound with each charge. We both looked to it at the same time. Bits of the moths’ wings were dusted against the bulb and I wondered why it wanted to hurt itself so much, what center it was trying to reach.

“Know why they do that?” my father asked.

I turned to him and saw that he was smiling, eager to have an answer for something, anything.

“I’ll figure it out,” I said, and I switched off the light.

CHAPTER III

HABITAT

We were tearing it all down when Kid Louie walked in and declared he was getting married. I was the only one present to hear, folding my work shirts in the living room and placing them in the duffel next to my graduation clothes, a pair of black slacks, my only button-up, the tie my mother bought me. Except for my tools, I was wearing everything else I owned. Chickenwing was making tomorrow's lunch in the kitchen, using whatever remained from the twenty dollar refrigerator we bought at auction. I heard the *whack* and pause, *whack* and pause of Nathan still in the back somewhere, throwing his claw-hammer like a tomahawk into the drywall the three of us hung last summer. I was going to paint that wall, but we didn't care. Nathan's uncle was retaking the house anyway, bulldozing his land for the new Hunter's Court suburb. We were losing it all regardless.

"Celebrate me," Kid Louie said. "Celebrate my good fortune."

I called to the others and told them the news. Nathan was still angry about the house but said congratulations and yes, we should have a party, a real rager, so we pooled our money and bought a handle of KG and more beer than we could stomach.

Our dining room table was the first to burn in the pit, followed by the chairs we collected from dumpsters, then whatever else we could find, shelves, cabinets, couch, beds.

Nathan ran from the porch shirtless and screaming, the bathroom door balanced over his shoulder. He threw the door onto the fire and danced across its panels until Chickenwing grabbed him with his good arm and sat him next to the cooler. Kid Louie shrieked with laughter and in the early morning, out in the yard, we sang football fightsongs then slept where we sat, cans in hand, dreaming of bacon breakfasts and hot showers and home.

“I have a mission,” Kid Louie said. This was four hours later at work, another contract two-story on Whitten Street in the nice part of town where, for nine dollars an hour, we placed barges, set trim, and let alcohol squeeze from our pores in the day’s heat. I was still hazy from earlier and asked him to explain.

“Rebecca wants me to find her somewhat missing aunt. To tell her the good news and make sure she’s safe.” He unrolled an extension cord and threw the end to me. “Her aunt has a condition,” he said.

KL was talking about people that didn’t exist, people not from my world. What did “somewhat missing” mean? It sounded like parts of her were here, parts of her were there. Unwhole.

I plugged in the air-compressor and its industrial hum hammered my brain.

“Who’s Rebecca?” I shouted.

He looked at me funny then wiped his face with the bottom of his shirt.

“My wife.”

Something new was always happening to Kid Louie because Kid Louie was always in love. There was a different girl every week, the next more beautiful and chaste than the last. His words. These girls kept blowing his paychecks though and he never

talked about the sex. A gentleman never tells. We were sure he was a virgin. A romantic's heart beat in his chest and the guys good-naturedly called him queer. I just laughed. He was eighteen, two years younger than us and not used to the ways of the world. We met him just after his mom split. Maybe he was a different person before then.

“Anyway I need your car,” he said. My baby was a black 81' Toyota Cressida with alloy rims. There was a sweet sun roof and Chickenwing rewired the inside so we could blast our Tupac through a CD player. After commencement she took us all the way down to Panama City to see Styx in the Marina Civic Center. Eighteen hours of worth it.

“She doesn't leave my sight,” I said.

“I know,” he said. “That's why you're coming with me to find Rebecca's aunt.”

He was always pulling shit like that, imposing his life on ours.

“The others too,” I said.

“Even Nathan?”

Ever since that one night—when Nathan stomped around the living room, wasted, asking each of us to let him have it, right here, right on the jaw—the two of them weren't the same. We knew Kid Louie was too soft to throw a punch. He left without saying anything, some other friend's taillights weaving neon strings in the night, and Nathan howled his superiority until Chickenwing laid him out with a right cross.

“Even Nathan,” I said.

* * *

“Me and the guys have a surprise for you, Kiddo.” We were breaking for lunch in the unfinished basement with the rest of the crew, eating cheese and pickle and potato

chip sandwiches, drinking huge pulls from gallon water jugs to flush our polluted systems.

Nathan was smiling, winking at me and Chickenwing. The two of us shrugged when Kid Louie looked to us for help. We didn't know what was happening either.

"I told the boys about your nuptials," Nathan said. "We're all real happy for you, but..." He paused, looking around the circle. "...but we're worried about your performance."

"Oh jeez," I said.

Kid Louie looked nervous, chewing his food slowly, not meeting anyone's gaze though we were all staring at him.

"What performance?"

"In the sack," Nathan said. "The boudoir."

The rest of the crew started snickering and shaking their heads. They were all good men, but underneath there was a fraternal cruelty that would never let go.

"I've had sex," Kid Louie said.

"I believe you," Nathan said, wiping his mouth with the inside of his wrist, "I really do. But your *wife* needs a professional, someone who knows what he's doing."

"Give it a rest," Chickenwing said. Those two had known each other the longest out of all of us. There was a special violence between them, marked with history and childhood animosity.

Kid Louie stopped eating and stared at Nathan, hard, trying to appear big. We could see straight through it.

"I can handle myself," he said.

Nathan narrowed his eyes and smiled thinly.

“Riiiiight,” he said. “But just to be sure, we got you a ride with the Snowflake Queen.”

The Snowflake Queen was a prostitute who drove a refitted ice-cream truck around construction sites. She’d pull in front of crews on break playing Pink Floyd or Bob Marley from her sound system, unfolding the side door to display the goods. Inside were bags of chips and soda bottles and beer cans, boxes of airline-size peanuts, porno mags or DVDs depending on your preference, actual ice cream, and a pharmacy’s worth of drugs with names I couldn’t pronounce. She must’ve had some sort of official protection to peddle so many illegals. In our world, she was legend.

“You’re done,” Chickenwing said, standing from his caulking bucket and grabbing at Nathan. “It’s over.”

“She’s here,” Nathan said. Squirming from Chickenwing’s grasp and running up the stairs, laughing. “Dark Side” was softly playing through the partial walls. The crew swept up Kid Louie with their numbers and pushed him out of sight. I stood and watched. There was nothing I could do. They already owned him.

The ice-cream truck was parked at the end of the unfinished driveway, everyone crowded and circled at the back. Chickenwing waved me over when he noticed I was standing apart. He was the most imposing man there, even with his twisted arm.

“This is happening,” he said, but he couldn’t take his eyes from the open doors. No one could.

The Snowflake Queen sat cross-legged at the edge of a mattress on the floor, looking from face to face with a serene smile. Her blonde hair was a shimmering wave

and flowed down her front, collecting in her lap. I noticed she was surrounded in various blues: sapphire beads parted and hanging in great strings from the open door; cobalt sheets; a cerulean dress that bunched at the knees, suggesting its length and airiness; an Egyptian tube top stuffed with glory; ultramarine eye shadow; Persian colored lips that wouldn't quit. Her cheeks were speckled with glitter and tiny azure stars. Her eyes were a desolate grey. There was some sort of spell here, reminding me of home, of comfort, and this hippy child, this mother of the ocean, knew exactly what she was doing.

“Which of you is first?” she asked, still smiling, her voice floating to us from her den.

“Just the kid here,” Nathan said, slapping KL on the back.

She reached out her hand and asked for the money up front, her fingers unfolding like a time-lapsed video of an orchid in bloom. Nathan handed her the collected wad, clasping her wrist for a moment. She gently pulled away and wagged *tsk-tsk* with her pointer, asking Kid Louie to step up, to come into the back with her. She smiled playfully, and she was so very cool.

“I'm not so sure,” he said, turning to us, almost pleading, somewhat fragile, his hands held tight to his sides as if handcuffed. I think he was trembling.

“You don't have to do this,” I called. The Snowflake Queen scowled at me from her dais—turning her ugly—then her face returned to calm.

“It's okay sweetness,” she said, reaching down to the scared Kid, placing her fingers on his cheek. Her hair tumbled from her naked shoulders. I could feel the men groan in their hearts. “I'll take care of you. I'll treat you right.”

Kid Louie looked to us one final time, found nothing he was looking for, then climbed into the back of the truck and sat on the bed. I wanted to say something else, something about Rebecca, but the door shut. Nathan started a chant, soft and slow then building in tempo and violence. *Lou-ie boom-bi-yah! Lou-ie boom-bi-yah!* This kept up until the truck pulled away and turned down an alley out of sight. All we had now was our tired imagination.

The crew watched where it had been for a moment, then headed back inside to finish the lunches their girlfriends or wives made them, personalized with little notes taped to saran-wrapped sandwiches that they read then pocketed when they thought no one was paying attention.

Chickenwing grabbed the collar of Nathan's shirt and dragged him towards the dumpster somewhere, saying something about pain, lots of pain.

I kept wondering where the adults were, the people in charge that could've saved this entire situation from its circus shame. Then I realized I was an adult, had been for some time—at least since I removed my cap and gown—and that realization was a devastating fact, one burdened with age and experience and accountability. I had been handed an obligation, and I didn't have the hands to hold it.

* * *

The next day we scoured the city for Rebecca's aunt, the four of us piled into my Cressida, me and Nathan and Chickenwing sipping leftover beers, the groom-to-be not saying much of anything. But this was after another night of raging.

When Kid Louie came back from his ride with the Snowflake Queen he was pale and silent, working on whatever job he had left with a singleness of purpose. The rest of

the crew kept their distance from him, some weird awe or an even weirder shunning. I asked if he was okay and he just nodded and said yeah.

I could tell Nathan was excited to see him back, to ferret out all the details—how her breast’s smelled pressed against his face, what that cool skin felt like, what noises she made close to his ear, all his usual sensory questions—but he kept quiet. The bruises on his arm glowed from Chickenwing’s handling. We all wanted to know though, and for some reason we didn’t ask, somewhat chastised for our part in his awkward life.

“One more sleepover in the castle,” Nathan said after shift ended. I think he wanted to be cordial, asking KL if he wanted to come and drink with us. So we stayed another night in that empty shell, stretched across towels and using our arms for pillows. We didn’t know how many more nights we had in that house, and we were all secretly scared, secretly ashamed of our failure for not building a home for ourselves, but there was nowhere else to go.

“Try the methadone clinic,” Kid Louie said, pointing to a building.

We’d been driving all day, stopping at homeless shelters and thrift stores and Christian missions, asking overworked volunteers if they remembered a woman none of us had ever seen ourselves, Kid Louie dropping a name and basing his descriptions off details his fiancé provided. They blinked at us wearily then gestured to all the people they were trying to help. We told them thank you and KL shrank a little each time.

“I don’t understand,” Nathan said, throwing an empty into the floorboard.

“We’ve been over it,” I said, looking into the rearview.

He pulled another can from the case, nodding as he bent.

“I just want to be sure,” he said, “I just want to know. This is my Saturday after all.”

We parked in the clinic’s lot and I turned to Kid Louie and asked him to explain one more time. He started talking but didn’t look away from the windshield.

“Her name is Cecilia, Rebecca’s mom’s sister. She’s five ten. Skinny. No one in Rebecca’s family has heard from her in months. She just didn’t call one day.”

“I know that,” Nathan said. “But why do they care? She’s an adult right? She can live her own life.”

“It’s not that simple,” Kid Louie said. “She has a condition. These sorts of attacks just pop up and she’s left dazed and scrambled. She can barely function. Even on meds.” He was silent for a moment, thinking. “Rebecca wants me to do this, so I’m doing it. For her.”

Nathan chugged his beer then crushed it in his hand, suds snaking over his fingers. He was about to wipe them on the upholstery but I said I’d kick his ass if he tried.

“You’re a real knight, Kiddo,” Nathan said, cleaning his wet hand on his jeans. “I mean it. Galloping in to save the day.”

Chickenwing clanked his empty off Nathan’s forehead and we all laughed, even Kid Louie. I could tell he was proud of this activity, this commitment to do something for a person you know and love. It was noble. Essential. I’m not sure we all understood.

That clinic had nothing to offer about Cecilia, neither did Lutheran services, or the Salvation Army, or the scraps of people that loitered at the bus stop. We were nearly spent, our knees sore and asses numb, all of us tired of each other’s stories. The sun

sinking its way toward evening and the beer river long since dry. We almost called it quits until we snatched a lead from the plasma donation center, our holy grail.

The college-boy seemed nervous as we bunched around his shatterproof glass. He was probably our age but he looked older, had nicer clothes. There were books piled all around him and he wore glasses. Smart-people glasses.

Kid Louie spoke with intent like an adult, explaining the situation. The college-boy relaxed and told us yeah, she sounded familiar. Came in two days ago with a short creepy guy that always gave his blood. The creepy guy was much older than her. That happened a lot here, the college-boy said. Younger women trapped somehow by older guys. There's a kind of manipulation. We nodded our heads, not knowing what he meant. Kid Louie asked for more details. We learned that she sat in the corner of the waiting room the entire time, feet flat on the floor, gripping the arm rests of the chair, staring at the fluorescent ceiling.

"I thought her damn tendons were going snap, man." He was inserting unnecessary cuss words as he spoke, trying too hard for us to accept him.

He gave us a possible address though he wasn't supposed to and we called him brother and dude and said thanks all the way out the door.

Several blocks later we found ourselves in front of an abandoned hotel on the East Side, appreciating the brick work and trying to read the painted letters nearly faded invisible with time. It looked like a warehouse or an apartment building and we inadvertently tensed whenever we heard a car passing. We'd only known about this part of town from the news.

"Cozy," Nathan said.

“I’d shut that mouth around here,” Chickenwing said. He was flexing his right fist and holding his crooked arm across his expansive chest, like a shield or a warning.

I was about to ask what we should do, but Kid Louie was at the front door, determined and reckless, stepping into a once-boarded hole and escaping into darkness.

The three of us considered the situation for a moment then followed. I couldn’t abandon him again, not again.

The interior wasn’t as horrific as I imagined. Of course trash littered the ground and mildew freckled the walls and paint had broken away in great flakes but everything else was fairly sound and solid. We marveled at the hickory balustrade that had somehow kept its shine and pointed out how tight the seams were in the floorboards. Nathan stared at a loose turquoise tile for a long time then pocketed it without saying a word. I knew his parent’s bathroom was decorated with a similar design. The keyholes of the remaining doors had fleur-di-les’ stamped around their openings, and at the end of one hall was an iron steam-heater decorated in magnificent scrollwork. Etched into its surface were frames of mesmerizing geometric patterns enclosing vines and lilies and archers hunting stags and bears peeking from dens and children poking beehives with hair-width sticks and the groove of branches with heart-shaped leaves making a forest of trees and tiny villagers waving at neighbors from open windows set in sturdy walls, warm hearths burning inside and each member of the home full of goodwill and family and love. I couldn’t imagine creating something so delicate yet lasting.

We were so taken with how sophisticated and comforting the entire building appeared we nearly lost sight of Kid Louie, who stepped into an open door just as we rounded the corner.

He had been knocking on closed doors and holding up a Polaroid of Rebecca's family to the peephole even if no one responded. Once or twice we heard the shushing of gruff voices through the walls so we hurried him away despite his protests. We wanted to help him find Cecilia, but we weren't prepared to get fucked-up over her. Maybe he was.

The three of us rushed to where he entered and saw him standing to the side of a cluttered room, watching a woman who paced back-and-forth, holding the Polaroid close to her face, mumbling softly through a tightly closed mouth. She was barefoot and she padded on the hardwood floor like a cat. When she turned her long straight hair swayed smoothly at the center of her back. It was wheat colored, that hair. She could've been twenty or fifty, I couldn't tell from the faint light coming through the closed curtains. There was a childlike feel to the place, all soft pinks and yellows, with lace draped over chairs and nailed to the walls. I was afraid to touch anything in case it broke. It was a doll's room.

"I think it's okay guys," Kid Louie said. "Come in."

We entered like we were entering our grandmother's house, invited yet anxious. She looked at us once then returned to the photograph, placing the tip of her finger on the surface in different places. I thought I heard a whimpering sound. She looked so breakable.

"Is she retarded?" Nathan whispered.

I stared at him until he looked away, at the floor and the stacked boxes and the hundreds of stuffed animals piled in the corner. I kept staring at him in the hopes that he would burn.

“No,” Kid Louie said. “I think she’s happy.”

“She is,” a voice said.

We all jumped when we heard it, Chickenwing extending his fist instinctively. Standing in a doorway at the opposite side of the room was a short old man, the one the college-boy told us about. His hair was incredibly white and thick, styled in a way I’d only seen in Gary Cooper movies. Adult and sophisticated. He was wearing faded Nikes and a pinstripe suit—the whole shebang—slacks, jacket, vest, red tie. I noticed a watch chain slacked at his hip. It looked tarnished. He had the air of some sort of keeper, a man in charge.

In our lack of understanding the three of us could’ve smashed him right there right then, pummeled him into the ground and saved Rebecca’s aunt from some sort of wrongdoing, some wickedness we believed we witnessed. But we couldn’t. This man was unapproachable.

“I know my baby’s happiness,” he said, walking into the room towards Kid Louie.

The two struck up a conversation immediately, KL detailing his situation, the old man nodding sympathetically, holding Cecilia close while she placed her chin on the top of his head and hummed. We learned his name was Theo Clemens. That he grew up on a farm in North Carolina with his grandparents and took the varsity team to state with his pitching arm and how he flew helicopters in Vietnam and, after that, nothing else. Then the old man spoke about Cecilia, how they met, what she meant to him, what they’d built together. He kept repeating the phrase “she found me, she found me.” Kid Louie smiled generously, openly, accepting everything he already knew about love, receiving confirmation for all those grand gestures and dated ideals. The three of us weren’t sure

what they were talking about. I couldn't hear their language. It was beyond me, beyond all of us. Then I saw Nathan wiping his eyes with his thumb. I don't know anything.

"See these scars?" Theo asked, finally speaking to us, letting go of Cecilia's hand and raising his arms so the cuffs of his jacket left his wrists. The skin on each was a netting of purplish mutilations and gray scabs. We'd only joked about such things around the fire, though I knew I could never hurt myself like that. My mother would be devastated and Dad, Dad would be disappointed and lost. I had family keeping me sane at all the right moments.

We nodded solemnly at Theo's question.

"I don't," he said. "Not anymore. Not since Cecilia." He turned and smiled at her. She didn't meet his gaze but merely played with his hair, smoothing it with the flat of her hand. "I want to live now."

I couldn't see what he saw, and I'm not sure I can name it now, but it had something to do with corners, horizons, the things one can barely glimpse. It was something about loss and gain. Foundation, maybe.

"Thank you," Louie said, growing bigger in my eyes. "I know what to tell Rebecca."

Theo smiled and tried to take the Polaroid from Cecilia. She protested for a moment then let go, watching the photograph as her man gave it away.

"Care for a trade?" Louie asked, pulling a digital camera from his pocket.

Cecilia's eyes went wide and she covered her mouth with both hands, looking from Theo to the camera and back again.

“She’s self-conscious about her teeth,” Theo said. “Though I tell her she shouldn’t be.”

Louie turned to us for the first time since we’d been there and shrugged. It seemed somehow fatherly. He was in control now, we deferred to everything he said and did.

Theo gently pulled Cecilia over to a chair and stood on its surface, whispering into her ear. She never took her eyes from us.

Gradually she relaxed and nodded profusely.

Louie took a step back and bent his knees a little. “Cheeeeeeeese,” he said.

Theo and Cecilia stood close, heads pressed together, with him balancing on the chair, his arm around her shoulder. Then she opened her mouth in a smile, revealing two lines of perfectly squared white teeth, so incredibly white. I’ve never seen teeth so flawless. They looked like a child’s teeth, fresh and strong yet set in the jaws of a homeless schizophrenic who not only thrived in an abandoned hotel but loved there as well. I couldn’t tell if they were genuine or fake, and at that point I wasn’t sure if I was thinking about the teeth or the couple.

Then I realized it didn’t matter, because this happened: during the entire way out of the city Nathan stared at the photograph. Louie hesitated at first but Nathan said please and that somehow washed away any hostility between them. None of us said much, lost in thought and watching homes blur past in the night, wondering what the families were doing inside. A game night maybe, or Mexican food. They were probably just gathered around the television, watching a movie they all decided on, together.

We pulled onto a street I'd never travelled before and parked in front of a home I'd never seen. Louie asked me to take him to his wife, his Rebecca. So I did.

He asked for the camera back and sat in the car for moment. The porch light to the house came on and the door opened. Warmth came through that open door, warmth and light. A woman stood in the doorway, one hand holding the frame, her body leaning slightly towards us. I couldn't see her face but I knew she was a woman. There was a shapeliness to her, not physical, but a constant breath of control, of self-possession. I think that's how I knew. Feeling. This car of boys was beneath her consideration, almost.

"I didn't sleep with her," Louie said, turning to me. "The Snowflake Queen. We just talked."

"I know," I said.

"She's from Reno. Saving to become a marine biologist."

Nathan spoke up then, breaking his reverie, leaning toward the front seats, trying to get closer.

"I understand," he said. "I didn't before but I do now."

I wasn't sure what Nathan meant but it seemed important for him to say. His words felt like a bridge being built.

Louie smiled at him then said thank you as if it were a compliment and looked toward the woman again, and waved. She waved back then drew her fingers forward, inviting him in, beckoning us all inside. But only he got out of the car, walking slowly and steady up a green lawn, to a woman who was his wife, his sister, his mother, his

friend. To a woman that would hold him like a baby forever and ever and trusted him enough to do the same for her. A woman. A house. A place to call his own.

We watched him until the door closed, still staring after the lights turned out, a long time after the lights turned out, leaving us in the night, leaving us in all that darkness, leaving us without a home.

Then we left to find one.

CHAPTER IV
A SOLITARY DROWNED MAN

I was sitting on the comfiest sofa ever made thinking about what Mother really meant by “you don’t love me anymore” when Tate asked if I would be his porn buddy. We were already friends, and I wasn’t sure porn needed to be involved, but Tate always talked this way, jumping straight into conversations about an article he read in *Popular Science* or expanding on topics I thought we’d finished discussing months earlier. My favorite was him spouting facts meant to astound those who heard them: a rhino’s horn is made out of compacted hair; a hurricane releases more energy in ten minutes than the world’s entire nuclear stockpile combined; twelve newborns will be given to the wrong parents daily and that most people laugh between thirteen and fifteen times that same day; butterflies see in ultraviolet light. I didn’t question the validity of his claims nor did I mind listening to him because he didn’t tell personal stories meant to elicit a response or ask that I act as his confidant. He just talked and I could listen and accept at my leisure. This was exactly what I wanted from Mother, a certain space to accept her on my own terms. I wanted to breathe.

“What’s a porn buddy?” I asked.

He jerked his attention to his dog Moe as if he had asked the question, a little black mutt he found tied to a dumpster and who had chewed off the hair of his tail. That

dog just stared unblinking at me whenever I came over. I would've sworn he was stuffed if I hadn't seen him dragging socks under the sofa.

"A porn buddy," Tate said, the skin of his forehead folded in concentration while his fingers worked at some sort of device, "is a person who retrieves and destroys another person's incriminating or unsavory effects before said loved ones find it. Most notably pornography."

"People need this?"

He leaned toward the coffee table between us—an interesting piece of furniture he had made out of an old door—and grabbed a miniature screwdriver and what looked like a watch battery. He was making something I couldn't see.

"They're obviously in a position where they couldn't do it themselves, sick or dead or dying."

I remember him looking up at me, briefly, and if he was trying to communicate anything other than what he had just said with that look I completely missed it, as I missed a lot of things.

"They don't want their family to stumble onto the little devils they hide," he continued. "The sorts of devils all people have. It's an important task if you think about it. It's about secrets."

I thought of Mother then. How I was twenty-two when I finally moved out of her place and found a small studio above Royal Palace Pawn on 38th next to the KFC. How it was a long time coming. I never went to college and she more than made up for that experience, telling me all about the stories and adventures she'd been having since she kicked Dad out after he'd diminished their savings for the third time to go on a

“walkabout” in Atlantic City or Vegas, apparently with a woman from accounting. Each new thing she did accumulated around me until her life was filling my lungs like she said Dad had filled hers. I was glad she was happy, she never let me forget that part, almost literally lifting into the air with vitality, but I couldn’t help feeling overwhelmed with skydiving lessons and gourmet recipes and surprise Krav Maga demonstrations in the hallway on my way to the bathroom. I could use a few more secrets.

“I will clean up your life,” I said, looking around the room, wondering what kind of dirt was apparent.

There was an entire wall of shelves that held books, magazines, stacks of newspapers, and a few movies I never had the opportunity to check the titles of. Tools littered the floor alongside disassembled calculators and wrappers of expensive protein bars. There was only one computer that I knew about and it was tucked in the corner on a stack of cinderblocks with a couple 2x4s laid across them. It looked as if it didn’t get much attention—there was a didgeridoo leaning against the monitor—but I figured it cost more than four months’ worth of rent at my place above the pawnshop downtown. A few black-and-white photos hung on the wall and it was then that I remembered something Tate had told me soon after we first met: both his parents had died in a car accident when he was fourteen. It explained why he lived in a house at such a young age and why he never really talked about them. I didn’t want to press the issue when he first told me or just then, so I didn’t, but I wondered who exactly he was hiding his secrets from.

“I trust you, Donnie,” he said.

Mother used tell me that exact same thing when I was a teenager after she kicked Dad out, when she was frying bacon in the mornings and telling me all about her plans as

a liberated woman, trying to spill her new unknown life into a son that didn't want to hear anything about it.

“Check it out.” He held his hands out like an offering, smiling, the small device mismatched and angular in his open palms.

I put it up to my eye like he did and covered the slanting six o'clock sunlight with my fingers. There was a small lens like you'd find on a disposable camera and on the other side was a picture of what appeared to be a spiral of illuminated pinpricks slowly rotating by what had to be that watch battery. A star system in motion. Nothing else happened, just the same picture moving around itself, all those suns and all that space in the palm of your hands. I wondered why anyone would take the time to make something like this, but when I took the lens from my eye to ask, I didn't. He had already started leafing through a comic book.

“I'm keeping whatever weed I find,” I said, cupping the universe once more.

* * *

Samba music came muted into the apartment hallway and I stood leaning against the wall watching bars of shadow stepping to the beat at the foot of the door. Mother was awake. This was just past six in the morning after my late-night at the Waffle-Steak, me checking on her as requested by an urgent phone call.

I didn't even have time to relock the latch when she grabbed both my hands, raised them above our heads, and began to twirl, the edges of her kimono fanning out just enough for me to close my eyes. She was humming too. There was probably a man somewhere in her apartment, sprawled in bed or using her lilac conditioner to freshen up for work.

“Enough,” I said, as she spun around me for the third time.

She made a clicking sound with her tongue and pushed off my chest, moving to the stove where a pot was simmering.

I emptied the tips I made that week into the barn-shaped cookie jar next to the microwave and rang a tiny bell hanging from a string. This was my ritual. The bell was some sort of plea to a Buddhist heaven she read about in an article. I just went along with it.

“How did the night air taste?” she asked.

I leaned against the refrigerator and peeled off my work socks.

“Same as yesterday.”

This was another ritual, our friendship.

“Where’s the entertainment?” I asked, eyeing the living room couch for a potential stranger sipping chamomile tea with a pillow held to his groin.

She slapped me with a dish towel and went back to her pot, stirring in slow arcs with a wooden spoon.

“*Terrance* didn’t stay the night. We went to our pottery class then dancing at the Lion’s Mane. That man can move.”

“That *man* is named Terrance? He can move right in front of a bus for all I care.”

She took a taste from her spoon then said quietly, “He makes me happy.”

“Yeah. They all do at first.”

The samba played to a numb room and Mom stood at the stove stirring absently, head bent over the pot. She looked snow soft in the kitchen light. I could smell the grease of my shirt. I felt dirty.

“New recipe?”

She brought the spoon over and held it to my face, a hand underneath catching anything that dripped.

“Always something new,” she said.

“Always something new,” I parroted. “I think I’ll leave now.”

After Dad left I soon realized that somehow I’d switched to being Mother’s confidant as opposed to being her son and that our relationship had taken an irrevocable turn. All she wanted was “new”, taking in whatever that meant. I was getting worn out.

“Why don’t you come to judo with me in the evening? It’s fun. Or dinner maybe?”

“I’m an adult now,” I said, stepping past her toward the door. “I have to work.”

“You always work. There’s a whole world worth being a part of, and you’re twenty-three, young. You won’t find it behind that counter.”

I stood at the entrance of the hallway. She had her arms folded across her chest and the music around us sounded silly but she chose it and it was a part of her somehow, a thing she invited into her life.

“Will you come with me?”

“That’s not the reason I stopped by tonight,” I said, and walked out the door.

* * *

I remember when I first met Tate, an eighteen year old kid who smelled like patchouli and had forgotten more about 1980’s era space travel than I could ever care to learn.

I was scraping the grill-top with a broken spatula and it was dead except for two club girls cooling off in their sequined skirts at the back booth. I couldn’t take my eyes

off them, but when I brought an extra plate of toast and two free orange juices they didn't say thank you and giggled when I walked away. I figured they were lesbians and hated myself for wearing an apron that was covered in grease and ketchup and sweat.

"Just be glad you don't have to explode your testicles," some kid at the counter told me as I walked back towards the kitchen. This kid was Tate.

He didn't look up and I realized I hadn't noticed him walk in as I creeped on the girls in the booth.

"A virgin honeybee queen will have sex with up to ten male drones," he said, "but each drone explodes his genitalia into the queen to block off other suitors." He took a few more packets of sweetener from the condiment tray and finished what appeared to be a house with three stories. "Obviously they die but it makes perfect evolutionary sense."

I would've liked to think that this sort of information would be surprising but Mother's escapades sort of made me numb.

"I guess I'm lucky I only have to deal with passive-aggressive flirtation and crushing humiliation," I said. "Can I get you something?"

He tipped over the house and started again though I couldn't see anything wrong with the first one. "Coffee."

A few more customers trickled in and Tate sat at the counter and listed off facts and statistics while I nodded and refilled his cup. Every year 98% of a person's atoms are reproduced and replaced. Apple seeds contain the poison cyanide. It only takes a red blood cell twenty seconds to circle the entire human body. At the age of four Mozart composed his first concerto for the clavier. Tate never told me what a clavier was though. But he did tell me that ancient Egyptians slept on pillows of stone and the

Vanuatu rite of passage consists of tying a vine to a boy's feet then asking him to throw himself from a bamboo platform in an attempt to lightly brush the ground with the top of his head. I imagined the absolute terror so pure it condensed to calm as these boys hurried to manhood, a hard wall of earth coming at them like a future they knew nothing about.

The only time he got an emotional response from me was when he mentioned there were no clocks in Las Vegas casinos. I pictured Dad still sitting at a craps table years later while some woman I'd never met hung on his arm and blew on his dice. Then I pictured Mother dancing with those club girls from earlier or taking pottery classes at the Y. I could feel the impact people have on each other and my skin felt bruised.

"I wish time didn't exist," I said. "I just want to *be*. To not worry, you know?"

He laughed a sharp little laugh as if maybe time didn't exist and I'd gotten it all wrong. He pushed a napkin towards me with his number and stood from his stool.

"Did *you* know," he said, turning to me just before he stepped out the door, "the very first bomb dropped by the Allies on Berlin in World War II killed the only elephant in the Berlin zoo?"

I was bold and agitated and tired so I didn't care too much about the tone of the question I was about to ask him.

"What exactly do you do with this information?"

He paused for a moment and just stared at the floor, actually thinking about it, then looked up at me.

"Live like the world matters."

* * *

In an attempt to embrace the world, I caved when Mother invited me to a wine tasting event downtown.

The people there were of a different sort than what I encountered at the Waffle-Steak. They wore dressier clothes and their faces weren't tired. They smiled a lot, and pressed close together at their small tables while waiters came and went with empty glasses and fresh bottles and silver spittoons full of a purplish swill. The air was saturated with conversation instead of smoky grease. Girlish laughter occasionally rose above it all though I could never locate the source. There was a pulse in the room, and Mother hummed with its energy. She was talking with the Master of Ceremonies, as everyone named him, and I imagined a man who stayed up late in his youth studying for his ceremony classes, apprenticing in a ceremony shop, creating such an exquisite ceremony he eventually earned the title "Master". The ceremony had to do with gladiatorial combat, I believe. My spittoon was empty, and the wine was working its cultured magic.

As she walked back to our table I noticed that Mother and the Master coordinated, her dress and his bowtie, a deep color blue I couldn't remember the name of. Cerulean maybe. They looked like high school sweethearts and I suddenly felt very old and less drunk.

"Fun uh?" she said, sitting down.

"Is that the infamous Terrance?" I asked. She smoothed out her dress then sniffed at her glass in a circular motion, bending to fill out her scorecard.

"No," she said, blushing. "He's just a friend."

"Well, you two seem very friendly."

She took a sip from her four year old Sangiovese, swished it once, then spat with flourish into the silver bowl beside her.

“Earthy,” she said. “With a leather aftertaste.”

A glass shattered somewhere and people began to laugh, the waiter rushing over with folded cloth napkins and a wooden dustpan, all smiles and easy greetings. I threw my arms on the table in submission and asked her what I was doing there.

“I want you here,” she said, placing her hands on top of mine.

“You don’t need me,” I said, pulling my hands away and opening my arms wide in an exaggerated gesture meant to embrace the entire room, the entire world. “You have all this.”

She moved close and considered me with a mixed look that I can only term as pity and confusion.

“You don’t know anything about me, do you?” she asked, somehow receding further away.

She looked so small to me then, especially with all the experiences she invented to fill up her life, making that life desperately important, frantically real.

“I know enough.”

* * *

Two months after asking me to be his porn buddy Tate died.

I discovered this one morning when my shift was nearly finished. A tired-looking kid from a delivery company came and asked for me by name, leaving an envelope when I told him who I was. Maybe he wasn’t a kid. Maybe he was my age.

The envelope had Tate’s address and when I opened the flap a pair of keys fell out, one large and one small.

The card read: ‘Donnie, There are two fish in a tank. One turns to the other and asks, “Do you know how to drive this thing?” Remember that humor is the best way to deal with painful news. If you’re reading this then it means I’m dead or dying. Remember our deal. I have no one else.’”

Outside, streetlights shut off systematically one after the other. The pavement was getting clearer. It was six o’clock. I poured a bowl of cornflakes and stared past the window.

Having snapped out of it at some point I found myself in Tate’s driveway then inside his living room which looked completely different without someone else to help fill the space. I saw Moe on the couch with his little black-pearl eyes looking right through me or seeing the real me or noticing some sort of shadow I carried but couldn’t quite shake. I felt hollow. Then I remembered I had a job and if I did it I could leave.

“I’ll start in the kitchen,” I told Moe, who had jumped from the couch and now sat at my feet. “Start easy.”

Having no idea what to look for I opened cabinets and drawers, thinking about the sorts of things Tate wouldn’t want anyone to see or judge him for. I found a bottle-opener shaped like a pair of breasts. It was funny to me so I closed the drawer, then pulled it out again, placing the opener on the counter so I would remember it later.

There were a few bottles of wine in the pantry I didn’t think an underage kid should have and several cans of ravioli with cartoon dinosaurs on the front, a child’s meal no one over the age of six should eat. The refrigerator had a couple of beers which I drank later and some acid tabs in the freezer next to a half empty handle of vodka.

Behind some frozen peas I found a plastic container with a label that read ‘Moe’s Testicles: For Preservation’.

“I bet you didn’t have sex with a virgin before you lost these,” I said to the poor bastard as he drank from the water dish I refilled.

I took them out not knowing where they landed on the scale but feeling more and more comfortable with my decisions as I went. It was actually almost fun, knowing what someone should or shouldn’t have.

The hardest part was disassembling Tate’s grow operation in the basement. I unplugged the timers and unhooked the lights, folding up the reflective sheets that lined the walls and parts of the floor. There were twenty or so pots in neat little rows around fans that rotated and cooled the room but the only plants I saw were sprouts or the beginning of sprouts. I remembered he’d had his harvest a few weeks back and it dawned on me that I had no idea how to take care of these meticulously developed strains nor did I really want to. His ‘Vanilla High’ would die with him and I didn’t know what to think of that as I dumped the dirt and plants into a garbage bag while Moe watched, hating myself for it the whole time, wishing I’d known anyone else to give them to. I wondered if Mother had ever smoked before.

Tate’s living room had the most objects I considered ‘unsavory’ and they had all been in plain sight the entire time I knew him. They were mainly books like *The Historical Hermaphrodite*, a few different French versions of the *Kama Sutra*, *The Anarchist’s Cookbook*, a series dedicated to psychoactive drugs, biographies of Disney princesses, a bound collection of Vargas prints, a copy of the *Necronomicon*, and a mismatch of articles on topics ranging from girl sharking to full color spreads of

Amazonian tribeswomen. To my surprise the only things I took from the video shelf was *Titanic* and *House of 1,000 Corpses*, plus a trio of VHS that were undoubtedly tame yet pornographic in nature, videos weirdly based off literary classics: *1984-Way*, *Romeo and Juliet and Juliet*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's DD Chest*. Though I forgot to check the computer, I was a little disappointed.

Although I'd gotten used to picking and choosing what I thought Tate would want taken away, I realized my selection was starting to look like a twelve year old's fantasy. There were fireworks, lighters, a pair of nunchucks and some throwing stars, a shirt with designs that looked tacky. For some reason I even picked up fake vomit and for some reason he actually had it. I wondered who exactly I was doing this for then I remembered the black-and-white photographs on the wall. Tate told me they were his parents, though younger, each one artfully done and candid, no fake poses or forced smiles. The man or the woman in each piece seemed to be contemplating everything around them which was gray and large. It was as if the frames couldn't hold either of them. They were incredibly beautiful and I knew why Tate had kept them around. Parents and son were the same.

"Alright Moe," I said, bending down to scratch his hairless tail. "Let's finish this."

I'd taken everything I'd found worth destroying into Tate's bedroom. That was the last place I hadn't checked and I wanted to sort through the items I'd tossed on the bed to make sure they took up as few boxes as possible. There wasn't much in that room either. A few requisite *Playboys* under the mattress with a somewhat startling 9mm tucked close to where his hands would be while lying down. This was a little out of my

league. I took the magazines and left the gun thinking that if any aunt or uncle were to come they could deal with that one. Nothing in the closet save a collection of pipes, but the dresser next to his bed had a baggie of what looked like a couple ounces and a roll of bills from the sale of his last harvest. I pocketed the weed and left the money, honest.

It was after I started leafing through his diary that I had my first realization of the day.

I was reading entries at random, skipping pages and days and looking for any that had my name in them, occasionally laughing at some insight or description, all the while Moe watching as I lay in a bed of wine bottles, suggestive literature, bongos, and eleven boxes of tampons. After snickering at an incredibly long plan to end deforestation written on April 13th I realized this: I was laughing at a dead man. However, not only was I laughing at a dead man but the entire premise of my going through his stuff to toss out the “bad” was absurd. Tate hadn’t asked me to do this because he could trust me, there must have been a dozen people he could’ve asked that knew him better than I could ever imagine. He asked because I was the only person despicable enough that didn’t have the spine to just steal everything. A person wouldn’t need a trusted friend to take out their trash. He would need someone who actually enjoyed it, someone that didn’t mind picking out the dirt in another life because there was none in theirs, someone that chose to accept what he wanted and discarded the rest. Someone like me. And even if I were to find anything embarrassing there would be no one around for me to tell, I’d effectively amputated nearly everyone else out of my life. Everyone but Mother, and even she was fading fast.

The knowledge that I was particularly good at only taking what I wanted as opposed to what was offered sent me into the kitchen for a beer and into a man and woman coming in from the front door, stopping me cold next to an oblivious Moe who hadn't had the decency to bark their arrival.

"I'm Richard," the man said, deliberate, as if each syllable had to be accounted for. He pointed to himself then the woman beside him. "And this is Jean. We're Tatum's parents."

These were not the same people in the photographs I'd admired only moments before. While the black-and-white Zen masters on the wall matched the world in complexity and infiniteness with their faraway gazes and upturned palms, these two seemed drawn into themselves, shrunken without protest, objects amongst other objects without the desire to stand out. Their clothes were two-toned and arranged precisely, everything neat and proper. They smelled like drugstore perfume and aftershave, but only faintly. Their conversations were probably about the water heater dripping, and just how dry the meatloaf tasted, or whether or not the five o'clock news anchor had gotten a haircut. The wife didn't wear earrings and the creases in Richard's slacks were unbroken. I imagined they used the word 'blessed' in regular conversation. They were as interesting as spoons.

I told them who I was. They each nodded once but at what I wasn't sure, either that I existed or that I knew their son.

No one moved after the introductions and they were decidedly uncurious as to why I was there. In a house like Tate's people had a tendency to look around, see what they could because there was usually a lot to offer in terms of visual stimulation, posters

and clutter and knickknacks and painted designs he thought of on a whim. They just stared at me or the floor with the docile grace of cow's eyes.

“Long drive,” Richard finally offered. “Beautiful country though.”

“It is,” I said. “Please, have a seat.”

Jean, Tate's mom, sat immediately as if commanded, but Richard stood where he had since they first came in. My phone started to vibrate and I wondered if this disturbed them because at no other point in history had there been this much silence. Mother couldn't have chosen a worse time.

“Did you know Tatum well?” Richard asked, ignoring the hushed buzz from my pocket. “Were you close?”

“Yes,” I lied. “We were really good friends. He was great. I mean just great. He knew almost everything there is to know.”

Richard nodded once then looked towards the floor, as if disappointed about something and seemed to shrink even more. This man was so small as to not even be there. It was then that I realized why Tate had lied about their death. He wanted his life to be bigger than what they offered. He believed he needed more so he sought as much as he could, trying to live like the world. His parents were his biggest shame. This is what he didn't want anyone to find. And despite Tate's animal facts, adventure plans, amazing weed, unusualness, book choices, food habits, musical ability, sexual tendencies, expressiveness, jokes, world-seeking mentality, shirt size, I knew absolutely nothing about him.

“Would you happen to know,” Richard began after a few moments of silence, “if Tatum has a suit?”

I didn't, but I pointed them towards the bedroom and suggested that he might have something hanging in the closet. He thanked me then moved for the first time, going in the direction my finger pointed, Jean standing slowly then following behind him.

Of course I'd completely forgotten that Tate's bed was a pile of nearly every single offensive object he owned in this world.

Now I couldn't just run in there and try to explain or justify their dead son's belongings, nor did I have the courage to enumerate the many qualifications I assigned to the selection process to warrant that particular pile, so I just sat on the couch and waited, scratching Moe's tail while I listened to the creaking wooden floors in the other room, hating myself for messing up this one task and imagining that these precise people would not know what to do with what they saw.

After several minutes they came out of the bedroom, first Richard, then Jean, and walked towards the front door, stopping just before they left. He carried a pure black tie made of silk and a pair of black loafers, nothing else. I doubt he had anything to say, but the lines that made his face straight seemed to loosen. He looked to me less rigid, a body that pulsed.

Jean followed directly behind her husband. She turned to me and in her hand was a case I couldn't quite make out.

"I love this movie," she said.

Based on how she looked and how she acted I expected her voice to be flat and weak, breaking apart in the distance between us before it had a chance to reach my ears. This was not so. Her voice was clear, and strong, and moved like honey. Genuine joy fused into the words.

They had seen the ultimate pile of their son's indignity and it didn't matter. They accepted it. They accepted all of it, not just what suited them or what was easiest or what was manageable, but everything, the entire messy, beautiful, shamed, unknowable person that was Tate. They'd seen an approximate entirety of another human being and came out the other side okay. He was their son. That's all.

"I tell me about it," I told her, because I really wanted to know. I wanted to hear her voice describe something she enjoyed, specific scenes, the parts that made her linger over something that she knew inside but had to shape with words. I wanted to know what she thought, and how her day was, and just what drew her to the things in life deemed great. I finally wanted to listen, and I wanted to hear everything.

"Not right now," she said, placing the movie into her purse. "Maybe later."

They smiled small smiles and told me thank you and that they would see me later, walking out the door and leaving me with this:

I would pack the things on Tate's bed and take them to the pawnshop beneath my apartment and sell them for whatever money I could. Tate wouldn't mind and Moe would come with me too, sleeping in my dirty clothes and watching the cars on 38th. From there I would take Mother out to whatever restaurant she chose and we would look at a map bought with Tate's money and point at any place and say "let's go there". My vision was incredibly limited but I felt like I knew the twists and turns of Bangkok, and that if I were to jump from a plane there would be something on my back to glide me down, and if she were to tell me a story I would listen, because the world is an incredibly lonely place, and if she were to call I would answer, thankful for what she told me and not worrying about what she didn't. I would call her too, and if it took a while for her to

answer I wouldn't mind, because I want her to know what I have to say. We would learn about each other, and we would be unafraid.

CHAPTER V
SNAKE MASTER

My buddy Taco had a plan to break into a veterinarian's office to steal medicine and his dog and he needed my help as an animal-handler and full-time pharmaceutical enthusiast...

...but that was in the evening. Earlier that day there were only three distinct images I recall before I was pushed out of a birthday party in a twirl of movement which upset the drugs within me to the point of vomiting.

The first image was the most pleasant. Balloons taped to trees and thin paper streamers hanging willow-soft in the breeze. A crowd of children fan around me wearing bright colors and cone-shaped hats. Their faces are upturned, enthusiastically radiant. The children have strawberry smiles from the homemade punch and cake crumbs freckle their cheeks. When they speak I smell the heavy breath of sugar. Their voices are a coronation. Thanks to the tryptamine this is also part of what I see: neon waves of a honeyed alphabet curling around legs, arms, shoulders, filling the spaces between kids to come bulleting into my brain. They make me immense. I am a hero.

The second image was the turn, the moment when time and people can be seen as simultaneous beings. Everyone at the party is the same person: man, woman, child. Each face kaleidoscoping to include all other faces. There is no individual. All I can see is me, forever, now. This was frightening.

The third reminded me of the joyous first but apparently this wasn't so. The birthday boy is sitting in a metal fold-out chair studded with fat bows. We are eye-level so I must be kneeling, plus I notice everyone's feet. Some people aren't wearing shoes. I've placed my leather fedora on the boy and he's looking at its brim with a magnificent smile. The base of the hat is lined with real alligator teeth but he can't see them. I killed that alligator with four .38 special rounds to the head on a Saturday afternoon last August. It took an hour and a half to die. Anyway the boy seems happy and the people around him must be happy so this makes me happy. This is the moment where I am about to pull out Nadine, my defanged Venezuelan rattler. I've tinkered with the performance for years but it consists of letting the birthday boy hold the snake. The proximity proves he is a man. This is why they have brought me as entertainment, I think. Controlled danger. Usually the pythons are the ones being held but that day I brought Nadine because my son sent a postcard, the first in years. Things were going to be different now so my routine should be different too. I knew the boy could handle Nadine because my courage was his and his loveliness was mine. We shared our grace, like family. That's what I remember just before Nadine came out. He is me, I thought. He is me.

* * *

That night at The Moongoat I showed the postcard to my friend Daddy Melrose, a white-haired legend of the domestic circuit. I trust him because half his blood is venom, to build immunity. He once saved a woman's life and gained the appreciation of an entire town with that poisoned blood. Somewhere in the Carolinas. That sort of planning takes conviction only the blessed enjoy.

He read the card once, sipped from his bourbon, and read it again. Then his face blurred into a colorless void and I couldn't see his mouth anymore.

"How'd he find you?" he asked.

"It came from Phoenix," I said. "One thousand miles away."

He turned the card over and held it close.

"*I have a daughter now,*" he read. "*You're missing out. Just like always.*"

"I bet she's a real sweetheart," I said, blinking away the stars.

"Why is there a photo of someone's front yard?"

"Look at that Arizona grass!" I said. "I'm guessing it takes a lot of work to keep healthy but my son waters it regularly. His neighbors do too. On both sides of him, and across the street. My granddaughter plays in the green grass."

Daddy Melrose flicked me in the face and the inside of The Moongoat expanded back to order. I was thinning out. The dendrotoxin and acid were having their last, great push through my body while my heart felt inflated with an elemental gas that hadn't been discovered yet. Something dynamic and stellar.

"My son hasn't forgotten me," I managed to say once the table stopped pulsing. Daddy Melrose finished his glass then read the card again, handing it over once he was done.

"You mean he hasn't forgiven you."

"For what?" I said.

"For being invisible only when *you* wanted."

That guy! What a philosopher.

I scooted my chair back and told him I was getting a beer.

Most people don't come to The Moongoat. It's on the other side of town, next to an old cheese factory. It used to be a Laundromat. A home grocery. These both closed and a mahogany bar was brought through the front door in sections followed by a long, gray mirror veined with tiny cracks. We hung it on the wall then someone shattered that old thing because he didn't like what he saw. We now stare at the wood paneling and are thankful. A different someone got stabbed but not killed in the side alley, a twenty year old liar with vicious hands. When the police came around everyone who witnessed stayed silent because everyone knew who did it, plus the kid earned every centimeter of that blade. He never came back and we'd already forgotten his name. The Moongoat's that sort of friendly place. For some reason the walls are carpeted, or it feels like carpet. Our mascot is an old three-legged Jack Russell named Sparkplug. He usually slept behind the bar but I hadn't seen him lately. That happens a lot at The Moongoat. People drifting in and out, showing up months or years later with new stories or the same old ones. Only freaks and lowlifes come here. We all know each other by name.

"Taco," I said, "did you see this?" He was sitting at the bar, drooping over a full whiskey. I took a drink his glass then flashed my son's card in his face and those faraway eyes washed over it lazily. He had the bluest irises of any person I'd ever known and I'm not ashamed to say that though he's a man. That's how Taco referred to them: "irises." He had flowers for eyes and when he looked at you it was a special occasion.

"Nice lawn."

"This day has power," I said. "I want it forever."

"I can make it last," he said, "but I need a car," then he closed those blooming petals and crawled away from me into a perpetual night he'd been chasing his entire life.

I usually enjoyed his plans so I shook him awake and steadied him towards the door, past Daddy Melrose who had the royal grace of not shaking his head in disapproval. I handed him the card and I knew Daniel was in safer hands than mine. Daddy Melrose's were cleaner.

Taco walked in jerks, clutching a canvas bag in both arms, and scanned the area around him left to right. The universe was shrieking through his body with the force of a clarinet but we had hours to burn and we both needed the money, plus something infinitely more. I wondered what granddaughters liked to play with.

I was used to following other people's plans though I called them favors. These favors were nothing serious but enough to fill me with importance and enough to remind me that friends make a person less strange in a too strange world. I tallied the favors in a notebook I kept in my back pocket as a sentimental gesture. The Charming Brothers and I occasionally sell manhole covers to a junker two cities away. He slags them unrecognizable and dozens of drivers back home rip axles clear away from their cars in the unsuspecting night. Terri the Goose paid me twenty dollars to smash her boss's apartment for vulgar come-ons at the office. I left a note in my perfect cursive telling him to stop. She got a raise the next day and bought a victory round for the entire bar. Bless her giant heart. Even Daddy Melrose once asked for a favor, though we never talked about it afterwards. I do not have the patience for someone else's grandchildren, especially at an ice-cream parlor.

"I'm driving," Taco said. He kept opening his mouth and running his tongue over whitened teeth. He looked fresher than even a second ago, or I thought he did. I had just squeezed some drops from a homemade cocktail into my eyes and everything started to

wash in haze. There were still fifteen minutes before my nerves jackhammered, but I wanted to be cautious. My family was depending on me.

“Okay,” I said, but he was already sitting behind the wheel with his arm out the window, delicately positioning the mirror.

* * *

So we beat on into the night. Taco found the remainder of the Cutty Sark beneath the seat and we passed it between us empty. Lightning burned my tongue. I tried reading the dictionary I always kept in the glovebox but nothing seemed to focus so I let my head loll against the glass. Streetlamps blurred by, firing like synapses.

Occasionally Taco called out the landmarks of his past like a tour guide or a person returning home after a long absence.

“The owner of that bar let me drink for free the entire night. I think he thought I was someone else.—In that apartment building I found a stash beneath a loose floorboard just before I was about to store my own junk there. Great minds.—Worked as a janitor in that high school.—Took a brick to the clavicle right there, right on that spot.”

I followed his pointing gestures and only saw storefronts I hadn’t heard of and empty lots weeded over from permanent neglect.

“I don’t see it,” I said.

He remained silent after that. I looked to him and attempted to think what he thought but it wasn’t the same as with the birthday boy earlier that day. That child had a lighted future I could almost touch. Taco was slumped with both hands on the wheel and looking very closely at the windshield. The two of us were mirrored halves.

“I have a daughter, you know.”

I didn't know. I didn't even know Taco's real name.

"She studies biology in Michigan," he said.

"What kind?"

"What kind of what?" he said.

"What kind of biology?"

He thought about that for a while. I knew he would never remember and I also knew what she studied. It was coming back to me. Maybe we had talked about this before. One night at The Moongoat when we could barely hold it together, both of us burnt out and nodding over drinks and wondering where we belonged. We were so full of Daddy Melrose's forgiveness on those type of nights that it came bursting out in stories meant to be shared and not kept secret. Stories about our fathers who beat us with bronze belt buckles and our mothers who placed whole bars of soap on our tongues whenever we didn't eat our peas. Stories about wives and girlfriends so good to us we had to throw them away. Stories, so many stories, about our sons and our daughters who suffered our drunken insanities at night then accepted our swollen apologies in the clear-headed day. They always answered our phone calls—we could never say sorry to their faces—telling them this is the last time, promise, I mean it, please forgive me, you forgive me don't you? yes you do, you understand—and we thought they always would. Maybe Taco had told me then.

"I don't know," he finally said. "We haven't spoken in a long time."

She studies human biology. The lungs. And even though I knew, I didn't possess the cruelty to tell him.

"You will," I said, and my optimism made me strong.

* * *

The music had been turned up at some point but now everything we heard was scrambled. The buildings were gone and there were hills and fields and a fortress of trees moving past us in an elongated motion. Nothing looked familiar. An occasional sign flashed by, horrific and angry. I thought I saw my soul shivering in the night beside me but it was just the reflection. For a minute there I was worried.

I turned to Taco and asked what we were doing. He quickly pointed in front of us then gripped the wheel again.

“There,” he said.

All I could see in the headlights was a one-lane road tunneled by tall beech trees and jack pines. Then a hand-painted sheet of plywood rushed out of the night to pass us by. It read “Norman County Animal Clinic.” The letters were bulky and the lines slanted down to the right, as if written by children.

“What is this?” I asked.

We turned onto a dirt road and he laughed a small laugh.

“A bank,” he said.

Next thing I noticed was Taco balancing on a barrel with his arms over his head, twisting a bulb from a makeshift porchlight with a rag. I was standing near a brick building and there were chain-linked fences everywhere. The car was nowhere in sight then it turned completely dark and all I could see were the ripples of Taco’s steps as he crunched the gravel on his way towards me.

“I don’t feel so good,” I said, then bent over to puke for the second time that day.

I always told myself that if my body denied whatever I put into it more than three times within a twenty-four hour period then it was time for a break.

A pair of hands steadied my shoulders and I could sense a face near mine somewhere in all that night.

“Are you with me?” a voice asked. “Can I depend on you? Are you here right now? Can you open your eyes?”

I saw shapes forming themselves out of the dark. Taco’s face came to me like a memory recovered. It was a beautiful sight—the proximity of his friendship—and the fact that I had almost missed it made me cry. Somehow our highs had switched and I didn’t appreciate my new inferiority.

“I’m here,” I said. “I won’t abandon you.”

He nodded his head once then led me through a series of empty kennels to the back of the animal clinic, explaining the situation as we maneuvered.

Taco brought Sparkplug to this very place two weeks ago after he read an article about veterinarians having just as much experience as human doctors. He underlined the part about painkillers.

He decided the area was peaceful. There were no alarms, no cameras. It was a small office with only two staff. Open four days a week but performed a lot of house calls, mainly for dairy cattle on the opposite side of the county. The only damage this property had ever seen was a 4x4 sliding off the road and taking out their sign. His research on this one was enviable.

“You left Sparkplug here for two weeks?” I asked.

“Yep,” he said. “And now we’re busting’em out.”

Taco handed me a flashlight from his canvas bag, took a step back, then kicked in the door like an experienced man. The room became furious with noise—a barking full of sudden anxiety and a desperate need to impress—and we walked into the holding area casually, sweeping our flashlights across the floor and walls and cages that only held three to four dogs, all beagles and shepherds.

The entire inside felt like an unfinished basement. Everything was hard angles and metal, nothing soft, with tall cabinets lining the walls. They were fronted with glass panels and when I shined my light through no lively colors popped out, not even the plastic of a chew toy. All I could smell was dog-food and fear.

Taco walked directly to the last kennel and released Sparkplug. He panted loudly as he pushed past the chain-links and his knicked ears flopped as he galloped over the brown-tinted concrete in awkward steps, his backside dipping a bit from his missing leg. He looked fuller though, and his fur was shinier than it had ever been. His eyes weren't as rheumy.

“What should I be looking for?” Taco asked over the barking.

Apparently this was my contribution. I told him that animal drugs were similar to human ones and that he should look out for pethidine, codeine, and acetaminophen printed on the labels. He knew about Demerol but if he wanted the heavy stuff, ketamine was his prayer.

“What's that?” he asked.

“A liquid in a vial,” I said. “Horse tranquilizers.”

Such things were myths in his world so he whistled to himself in excitement from vaguely remembered stories and the beagles and shepherds stopped their cries,

immediately continuing when they understood the signal wasn't directed towards them. I shined my light and saw Sparkplug standing triumphantly on a stainless-steel table in the middle of the room, lording his newfound freedom over his former allies.

Taco searched with vigor but my heart wasn't in it, I kept getting distracted by the animals around me. Every time I approached a waist-high cage a terrified dog would slink backwards and piss itself a little. I would offer my hand as a friendly sniff but they weren't having it. In a row of boxes mounted to the wall a collection of kittens scrambled over each other to get away. Their tiny hisses broke my heart. A fat tabby took a swipe at my ear as I passed, its paw reaching through the bars to combat an enemy. I shined my light in its face and it was all teeth. In fact I shined my light in all those animal faces and their iridescent disks reflected something they did not enjoy. They were reacting to some hidden truth inside me and their clarity of perception turned me stupid. I didn't want to be what they saw. It was a heavy sort of danger, I think. Not even a pound of psilocybin gives such visions.

The thing that really shook me was a fiberglass box stuck in the corner with the word "contaminated" taped to its door. Inside was a black and tan coonhound that barely blinked in the light and didn't seem to breathe. He was covered with tiny cuts and when he finally raised his head to acknowledge my presence his face was full of blissful surrender. Daniel brought me a dog like that once. A pitbull mutt though. It was old and ratty and tied to our front porch with Daniel's belt, waiting for me to say yes to its place in our home. The mange on its back was shaped like Florida and nearly all its teeth were missing. Daniel pleaded for me to keep him but I told him no, it was too old, too dirty. Why would you want that? Daniel stayed by its side all day until I ordered him to take a

bath. While my son soaped his armpits I injected a dose of pentobarbital into the dog's side. He only needed five milligrams to die. I was doing him a favor.

"Look what I found." It was Taco, holding a palm of vials that glinted like captured stardust. He immediately emptied them into an already overstuffed canvas bag hanging from his shoulder. I followed his movements with the flashlight to make sure something was still real. He scooped up Sparkplug with one hand and smiled. He seemed naturally at ease, full of the satisfaction of having taken something that held meaning for him. He looked justified, and I wanted to feel equally blameless.

"Checkout time," he said. "What did you burgle?"

I swept the light over every animal watching and whimpering in their cages. I bet they would've loved to play in green, lush, freshly watered Arizona grass, watched over by a family that knew how to take care of them, treat them right. A family that understood love was not conditional, merely evident.

"These," I said, pointing to the animals. "We're taking these. All of'em."

Taco narrowed his eyes and didn't say anything while Sparkplug sat benignly in his cradling hand. All was silent save for the panting of dogs behind me somewhere. Though I couldn't guess the mechanisms of Taco's brain, he suddenly smiled and called me a genius and started to reopen cabinets with his free hand.

"We're going to need some leashes," he said.

* * *

I only took a pair of each animal. A few dogs bolted out the kicked-in door after we released them and my hands were shredded from trying to handle the anxious cats. To my surprise I found a whole slithery pile of garters and ribbons in another room but

my beauties back home would feel crowded if I brought in too many outsiders. I only pocketed two. Two was good. Two was enough.

Taco carried the flashlight and a lidded container of kittens while I was stuck with the dogs and a small laundry sack of American shorthairs. He continually darkened the way and laughed to himself when I stumbled and cursed and there were a few times he stood completely still and tried to act invisible. The night's victory had turned him silly. I hated Taco's childishness and I hated the jerking pull of the dogs but my building patience was the sort of good work long absent from my life. When we reached the car I was drenched with sincerity.

"I'm driving," I said.

"I'll man the carnival," he offered, climbing into the backseat, dumping and dragging those terrified creatures on top of him. They were excited and confused and Taco adopted that mindset through sheer closeness.

It dawned on me only after I pulled onto the main road that many of these animals had little experience riding in cars. The dogs crowded the windshield which fogged over with their heavy breath while the cats alternately bunched in the back window or clung to the headrests, lamenting their exposure and swiping hellishly at snouts that came too close. Taco repeatedly told me that he couldn't breathe from the dog farts and I kept getting strung up in loose leashes. Sparkplug watched one of the garters that had apparently found a hole in my pocket. It was coldly snaking its way across my lap and he kept pawing at it. That old familiar feeling of being crowded came back, and I knew I couldn't float these animals on my meager fortitude much longer.

Good thing I didn't have to.

In its confusion and enthusiasm, a blind German shepherd leapt from Taco's lap to mine—gymnastically clearing the space between us and the two front seats without so much as brushing the upholstery—and pressed my leg onto the accelerator, his slobbery mouth smiling the entire time. The engine raged and bucked and dragged us onward. There was nothing else for it to do.

We skidded into a deep-cut bank of dirt and I hit my face square against the steering column. I remember hearing yelps. Either human or animal I couldn't distinguish.

When I awoke I was holding the wheel with both hands and I could see Taco outside patting the ground directly in front of him. The passenger-side window was missing and everything was covered with little bits of cubed glass. Sparkplug stared at me from the next seat, apparently unharmed. He was the only one left, the rest had abandoned ship.

“I lost a tooth,” Taco said. “I had it then I lost it again.”

“What happened?”

“You happened.”

“Me?”

“Don't deny it,” he said. “I saw the whole damn thing.”

“But the dog.”

“He was there too. He has a part in this.”

I thought I heard a meow somewhere close by so I called out and waited but there was only silence and the meow didn't return. I kept repeating—“I'm trying to save you! I'm trying to save you!”—and still I waited and still there was silence. They all ran

away, every one of them. Some sort of supreme injustice had been committed, and it was the action of my goodwill.

Once, I was with my son Daniel in a department store. He couldn't have been more than five and I had him for the day. Must've been a weekend. We were walking through the men's clothing—those expensive racks of polos and cardigans that come to about here but completely swallow anyone shorter than four feet—and he got separated from me, or he thought he did. I could see the top of his head bobbing between the racks, looking from side to side. He was moving in circles. After a few minutes he started calling out—*pawwwpa, pawwwpa*—drawing out the sound like that. Of course I didn't respond. There are only a few times in life someone will desperately speak your name. *PAWWWpa, PAWWWpa*. It was really getting frantic. I saw that he squished his mouth with one hand, forming the lips into a blurry O, while the other pulled at his hair. I remained completely still, and just closed my eyes and listened. His urgent voice was a new type of helium, floating me away, filling me with importance. *PAWWWPA!* *PAWWWPA!* I could hear that voice forever. *PAWWWPA! PAWWWPA!* I pushed over some jackets and found him and held him tight and took him from the store before anyone could recognize what I'd done. Those people would never understand how good the pleas felt. Or maybe they did, with their own children. However, standing in the woods, surrounded by dark, my pockets full of smashed reptiles, I felt like Daniel must've felt, chastised and abandoned and incredibly lonely. Wishing someone would answer our calls.

“Found it,” Taco said. He was holding a two-inch fang up to his eye like a pearl. It looked slick with blood. He wiped it on the front of his jeans then slid it into his

pocket and smiled a smile so massive I collapsed under its weight and heaved and hurled and this time it was an outpouring so immense I thought I would die bent like that, stuck returning everything I'd ever taken or kept for myself. All those small and selfish acts.

“Let’s get outta here,” he said when I finally finished, and I accepted his charity.

* * *

Then it dawned on me that if there was ever a meaning to my story it went something like this:

Only one of the kittens survived. To further shame me the other suffocated in the container I had failed to ventilate properly. I stared at the dead body for a long time and wondered what it meant. Maybe Daddy Melrose could tell me, highlighting the philosophical and moral implications of guilt and death and a living creature’s place in this rotating universe. Maybe he could tell me where a soul belonged, its function. Anyway, one kitten was a survivor while the other was sealed within a freezer bag and placed next to the mixed vegetables. I wanted its sacrifice to have importance, and the pythons would eat anything.

So I nursed the kitten to full strength and took it to the birthday boy, the one from earlier. I didn’t hand it to him regular though. Instead I put the kitten on the doorstep with a card, rang the bell repeatedly, then ran and ran and ran, making myself scarce. If he got it I’ll never know. But I imagine he did. And in my mind—when I see him opening that door and finding another present—I say out loud, so my desperate words can fill the air, reaching whoever has the grace to listen, reaching the ears that should’ve heard my voice all those years ago: I am sorry, and I have brought something good for

you, a life to comfort and nurture and care for. But please, do not think of me. I will not exist for you. My invisibility is your real gift child. Think of it as a favor.

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